



STUDIES

IN
THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS

A Jesuit in the Crucible

Friedrich Spee and the Witchcraft Hysteria in Seventeenth-Century Germany

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THE SEMINAR ON JESUIT SPIRITUALITY

The Seminar is composed of a number of Jesuits appointed from their provinces in the United States.

It concerns itself with topics pertaining to the spiritual doctrine and practice of Jesuits, especially United States Jesuits, and communicates the results to the members of the provinces through its publication, *STUDIES IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS*. This is done in the spirit of Vatican II's recommendation that religious institutes recapture the original inspiration of their founders and adapt it to the circumstances of modern times. The Seminar welcomes reactions or comments in regard to the material that it publishes.

The Seminar focuses its direct attention on the life and work of the Jesuits of the United States. The issues treated may be common also to Jesuits of other regions, to other priests, religious, and laity, to both men and women. Hence, the journal, while meant especially for American Jesuits, is not exclusively for them. Others who may find it helpful are cordially welcome to make use of it.

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A JESUIT IN THE CRUCIBLE

*Friedrich Spee and the Witchcraft Hysteria
in Seventeenth-Century Germany*

Ronald Modras

STUDIES IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS

35/4 · SEPTEMBER 2003

The first word . . .

Jesuits have much in common with Harry Potter. Think about it. Harry is torn from his family at an early age and whisked off to a country boarding school where the only contact with the outside world depends on an owl. The main building boasts corridors and crannies to intimidate all but the most stouthearted, and the odd creatures that populate the grounds and basements are more curious than fearsome. The den mother assigns residences by following the directives of a magic hat. Each day the staff drives poor Harry out into the elements with a broom, and he spends hours learning how to chase a little ball with fluttery wings, which seems just as elusive as the concept of prime matter. With enormous energy, he sets about memorizing rhythmic formulas in a strange language that sounds like a distant cousin of Latin: *nec quid, nec quale*. Several of the faculty seem to suspect each other of being crypto-adversaries. Long hours slaving over a hot alembic prepare him for a future of divining, alchemy, magic potions and necromancy, all key priorities for post-industrial Britain. Author J. K. Rowling called this fantasy world Hogwarts. We called it philosophy.

Whether the whimsical comparison touches experience or not, reality isn't all it's cracked up to be, so most of us enjoy the occasional foray into fantasy worlds. Maybe that's why Harry, Hermione, and the gang at Hogwarts have been dominating the best-seller lists for several years now. On occasion, stray volumes have even been observed on bookshelves in Jesuit residences. Of course the starchiest among us dismiss the series as childish drivel, pure commercialism. Yes, without a doubt Harry's spectacular success is a miracle of modern marketing, and many people in the publishing industry are driving disposable Bentleys as a result of it. Still, even though I ended my childhood around the time Harry Truman went back to Independence and have been a certified grouch since Jimmy Carter first left his peanut ranch, I still enjoy smuggling a Potter (in plain-paper wrapper—my reputation!) past those who harrumph even more loudly than I. These poor Muggles don't know what they're missing. When the front page of *The New York Times* makes me want to give up on reality altogether, there is always the fantasy of waving a magic wand and making the world work the way I want it to. Poof! The undergrad in the baseball cap who dares to sneak a sandwich during one of my scintillating lectures is now a green, slimy toad. The spell will last only for a time, of course, but enough to teach him a lesson. In my daydreams, being a wizard is great fun.

History puts the lie to magical daydreams, however. Sometimes belief in magic can have terrible consequences. In troubled times much like our own, when events plunge out of control, some people have been all too eager to believe in otherworldly, diabolical forces. If they didn't have the power to make the world better themselves, they blamed others for using their dark resources to make things worse. Scapegoats provide simple solutions to complicated situations. As Ron Modras, the author of this issue of *STUDIES*, shows so poignantly, when a region is torn by plague, war and religious controversy, many zealots are all too eager to conclude that the devil must be afoot using his human collaborators to work mischief. It then becomes the duty of God-fearing citizens to root out the evil by whatever means necessary. Sadly civil and religious authorities alike become caught up in the hysteria by condoning if not encouraging unspeakable atrocities. In this frenzy, one can rely on that old, slippery adage "error has no rights," to justify mob rule, torture, and execution in the name of reasonable self-defense.

The history of the period provokes embarrassment and revulsion, but as Ron suggests at one point, we should be careful about assuming a sense of moral superiority as we look back at Europe clawing its way toward modernity. Every year in one of my film history classes, we go over the bad old days of HUAC (the House Un-American Activities Committee) investigation of Hollywood, *Red Channels*, and the blacklists that led otherwise sensible people to denounce and destroy one another in order to protect the American way of life. Twenty-year-olds express shock and outrage at the excesses of that long past era. Fair enough. Most college students have only the vaguest knowledge of the Berlin Wall, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the Korean War and Sputnik, if they have heard of them at all. They simply cannot imagine that our fear of the Red Menace could so easily cross over into McCarthyism, John Birch Societies and other forms of mass hysteria, even in California. But the threat was real, or so it seemed at the time. As was the fear of Japanese-Americans that led to internment camps after Pearl Harbor, and the hatred of Germans a generation earlier that had patriots rename sauerkraut "liberty cabbage." Silly? Think of "freedom fries" after the French dared denounce American policy on Iraq. Venting our rage against a vegetable is harmless enough, but at least this time we haven't interned citizens because of their country of origin, say we. Hmmm, say some Arab-Americans.

Reading over the typescript of this issue, I couldn't help finding a similarity to the last, Doug Marcouiller's monograph on Archbishop Oscar Romero. Overwhelming fear of godless Communism and socialist revolution led to a period of brutal repression in El Salvador. The story took many twists, but as Doug points out, Archbishop Romero saw with his own eyes what was happening to his people in the streets of the city and

on the farms of the countryside, and because of his commitment to the Gospel, he could not remain silent. As we know, he paid a terrible price for his honesty.

Friedrich Spee would have understood Archbishop Romero. While theologians, some of them his brother Jesuits, wrote learned treatises about witchcraft, he went into the prisons to minister to terrified women awaiting torture and burning at the stake on charges that must have seemed as ludicrous to the victims then and they do to us now. While superiors feared his ideas and denied permission to publish, he went ahead and thanks to an imprudent error of judgment by a friend—so he claimed—his reasoned but impassioned critique of the witchcraft trials leaked out and received a wide readership. Like Romero he paid a price at a time when questioning church authority, even on a matter like torture, was sufficient to raise suspicion of Protestant sympathies.

The Seminar is grateful to Ron Modras for bringing this story to our attention and making it available to American Jesuits through STUDIES. Although we've grown accustomed to non-Jesuit retreat directors, campus ministers and especially teachers and administrators in our schools, still we often unwittingly think of collaboration with lay men and women as our assisting them understand the Ignatian charism as it applies to the work. True collaboration has to go all the way. It means working together, and pooling our talents, knowledge and experience as peers. In this instance, Ron has placed his considerable skills as a historian at the service of Jesuits to help us understand more of our own tradition and spirituality. The full title of this journal is STUDIES IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS. It does not imply exclusivity. The "spirituality of Jesuits" has always been open to everyone. That's the whole point. Ron has been around St. Louis University for a long time, he's done the 19th Annotation Retreat, and he has participated as a valuable colleague in every aspect of the meetings of the Seminar while this essay was in progress. As a scholar and author, he is a collaborator in our spiritual ministry in every sense of the term, and I only hope more of our non-Jesuit colleagues will use this journal to help us together learn more about our common Ignatian heritage.

Despite my enthusiasm for enlisting non-Jesuit colleagues, let me assure readers that the Jesuits are not about to withdraw from this ministry. Each fall we thank those Jesuits who have completed their three-year term on the Seminar and welcome our new members. On behalf of our readers, let me thank Tom O'Malley and Doug Marcouiller from Boston College and Jim Keenan from Weston Jesuit School of Theology, recently appointed Gasson Professor at Boston College, and Bill Rehg from St. Louis University for their many contributions, which included writing, reading manuscripts, offering editorial suggestions, and most importantly

trying to keep the editor from doing anything particularly stupid in his first year on the job.

Let me introduce the newcomers, who begin their three-year terms with this issue. Kevin Burke of the Missouri Province teaches systematic theology at Weston School of Theology and has a special interest in the theology of Ignacio Ellacuría and Catholic social thought in a Central American context. Greg Chisholm, originally of the New England Province, taught engineering at the University of Detroit Mercy before becoming pastor of Holy Name of Jesus Parish in Los Angeles. He has recently been engaged in issues of faith and culture, especially as it bears upon the African-American lay leadership. Dennis Smolarski of the California Province teaches mathematics and computer science at Santa Clara University. He brings to the Seminar an extensive background in liturgy and the Byzantine rite. Thanks for your generosity in accepting this appointment from the Jesuit Conference and welcome to our merrie band of rogues and scholars.

Two final notes. Since its founding *STUDIES* has appeared five times a year, making it, I suppose, a “quinterly.” Over the last year, we discussed the question of going to a more orthodox quarterly schedule. Five may be a bit too much of a good thing for our busy readers. As I tried to read between the lines in the first issue, September 1969, it seems that in the early days, each of the ten provincials appointed a province representative to the Seminar. In a neat two-year cycle it was understood that each member would produce an issue. For the past several years, the process has been reversed. The Seminar presents a slate of names to the Provincials who then authorize (or not) us to contact the nominees. We aim for a cross-section of age, experience, academic interests, ministries and region, but without explicit reference to Province. The decimal imperative no longer holds. Five weekend meetings each year is a heavy burden to carry, especially if a man serves on a board of trustees or two, and some have had to decline the invitation to join us. With amazingly little dissent, we felt that we should become a quarterly, and the provincials agreed.

House librarians can note that the next two issues will complete the five issues of volume 35. With volume 36, starting next year, *STUDIES* will be a quarterly. Paying subscribers, all three of them, will receive a fifth issue for their present yearly subscription, and then receive four per year. Our business office in St. Louis will try to make the switch with a minimum of confusion.irate letters from outraged subscribers should be addressed there. I expect to be busy enough handling irate letters from philosophy professors.

Second, after several delays that you don't want to know about, we are starting to make progress on our web site, which is being set up in

conjunction with our parent organization, the Jesuit Conference. It can be accessed through the Conference's own web site. We plan to put back issues on line to make them available to a wider readership, eventually. We hope to have it up and running for the November issue, which will be an essay about the uses of several key Jesuit images by Tom Lucas of the University of San Francisco. If everything works out, Tom will be able to post several of these on-line as a companion to the printed text. Now that we have an engineer and a computer scientist joining our ranks, my dark trepidation in dealing with computers is tinged with optimism. In matters technical, however, I follow the adage ascribed to the stern Irish monks of yore: Always expect the worst, then you'll never be disappointed.

Richard A. Blake, S.J.

Editor

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Friedrich Spee, S.J.

Ronald Modras received his doctorate from the faculty of Catholic Theology at Tübingen and has been Professor of Theological Studies at Saint Louis University since 1979. His book *The Catholic Church and Anti-Semitism: Poland, 1933-1939* was recognized as Book of the Year by the College Theology Society. He has served as adviser to the Secretariat for Catholic Jewish Relations of the National Council of Catholic Bishops. His latest book, *Ignatian Humanism: A Spirituality for the 21st Century* is forthcoming from Loyala Press.

A JESUIT IN THE CRUCIBLE:

Friedrich Spee and the Witchcraft Hysteria in Seventeenth-Century Germany

In the social turmoil of the Thirty Years War and the Reformation, some segments of German society directed their fears toward defenseless women, whom they accused of being in league with Satan. Sadly, civil and ecclesiastical authorities alike condoned and even collaborated in the torture and executions. Friedrich Spee visited the prisons, heard confessions and accompanied the condemned in their final hours. At the risk of being denounced as a heretic himself, he defied superiors and published a scholarly polemic defending their right to a fair trial. His other writings, intended as devotional works for ordinary people, reveal the sources of his compassion and courage.

Introduction

Back in the mid-1990s, I was reading Karl Rahner's "Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit" for a second time, when I came to a line in which Rahner compares Spee to Peter Claver and Francis Regis as a role model of Christian discipleship. There Rahner describes Spee as someone "who stood by the witches in danger of his life and of exclusion from the Order."¹

¹Karl Rahner, S.J., *Ignatius of Loyola*, with an introduction by Paul Imhof, S.J. Translated by Rosaleen Ockenden (London: Collins, 1979), 24. The essay is one of those rare gems that merit rereading by anyone drawn to Ignatian spirituality.

In that era before internet search engines, I was about to put in a pencil check in the margin to remind myself to look Spee up someday, when I noticed a check mark already there from the first time I read Rahner's essay. Disinclined to commit the same fault twice, I set the book down and headed for our Saint Louis University library, where I found several volumes by and about Spee, at

When he accompanied [accused witches] to their deaths by fire, what did he say to keep them from despair?

that time all in German.² I began reading everything I could find about him. Improvising on the Ancient Mariner, I began stopping one unsuspecting Jesuit in three to ask if he was at all familiar with the name of Friedrich Spee. One respondent wondered if he had anything to do with a battleship.

Most simply said no, they never heard of him. I brought my unscientific survey to a close when I finally did find a Jesuit who knew Spee's identity, not surprisingly, the historian-polymath former editor of this journal, John Padberg.³

Since that time I have made it one of my modest aims in life to acquaint American Jesuits with one of the most remarkable figures the Society of Jesus ever produced.⁴ Having made the 19th annotation spiritual exercises several years ago and being involved in Jesuit educational apostolates since 1979, I presume to claim membership in the "extended Ignatian family" and so regard Spee with a certain proprietary affinity.⁵ Even though we live at a four-hundred years

²Happily, this is no longer the case, thanks to the Marcus Hellyer translation of Spee's *Cautio Criminalis*, published by the University of Virginia Press in 2003.

³I would like to express my appreciation to John Padberg here; his bringing my work on Spee to the attention of the Seminar resulted in the invitation to do this essay.

⁴I have devoted a chapter to Spee in a larger work aimed at a wider as well as Jesuit readership, *Ignatian Humanism: A Spirituality for the 21st Century* (Chicago: Loyola Press) due to appear in spring, 2004. Substantial portions of that material are included in this article.

⁵*Documents of the Thirty-Fourth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1995), 175 [# 370]. GC 34 uses the term "extended Ignatian family" to describe religious congregations of women who have adopted the Spiritual Exercises and Constitutions as the basis for their own spirituality and governance. I take the liberty of broadening the concept.

remove from him, he exemplifies the trust and courage it takes to live out the principles of Ignatian spirituality in our challenging, faith-testing times.

Spee lived in his own challenging times. And if many (most?) non-German Jesuits have never heard of him, his obscurity is not without reason. His name is linked to one of the darkest periods in the history of the church and Western civilization. In 1631 Spee authored a Latin treatise entitled *Cautio Criminalis*, denouncing the witch trials of his day. Reading the *Cautio* the first time, I was caught up short by passages like this:

If the reader allows me to say something here, I confess that I myself have accompanied several women to their deaths in various places over the preceding years whose innocence even now I am so sure of that there could never be any effort and diligence too great that I would not undertake it in order to reveal this truth. . . . One can easily guess what feelings were in my soul when I was present at such miserable deaths.⁶

Along with teaching, Spee had been assigned to hearing the confessions of women accused of witchcraft. He relates how he visited them in their dungeons, examined the evidence against them, and questioned the judges. He learned how these women had been subjected to torture and forced to lie, confirming their inquisitors' descriptions of the so-called "witches' Sabbath" and falsely incriminating others.

Having admitted their guilt, the accused women knew they had no chance of escaping death. But would they go to hell for lying about the others? The priest tried to comfort them and to find words that would assure them of God's mercy. We can only imagine what it was like for him to accompany the victims to the town square, where the stakes, straw, and jeering crowds waited. Imagine too how the victim's screams as they were burned alive echoed in his ears later those sleepless nights, convinced as he was that these women were innocent.

As one learns about Spee's life and times, reads the *Cautio*, and realizes the risks involved, one cannot help but wonder where he

⁶Friedrich Spee von Langenfeld, *Cautio Criminalis, or a Book on Witch Trials*. Translated by Marcus Hellyer (Charlottesville / London: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 39.

got the courage to write it. And what did he say to the accused women when he heard their confessions in those dungeons and saw the wounds left by the torture? When he accompanied them to their deaths by fire, what did he say to keep them from despair? This essay will attempt to answer these questions by arguing that they are all to be found in Spee's Ignatian spirituality.

The complete title of Spee's *Cautio* is fulsome to our tastes but was typical for its times. It translates as—"Cautio Criminalis, or A Book on Witch Trials, Currently Necessary for the Rulers of Germany, but also very useful for the Princes' Counselors and Confessors, Inquisitors, Judges, Lawyers, Prisoners' Confessors, Preachers, and Others to read. By an Unknown Roman Theologian."

The most recent archival re-search estimates the total number of trials at 110,000 and the number of persons executed at 60,000. About half of those executions took place within the Holy Roman Empire.

But the author did not remain anonymous for long, at least not within the inner ecclesiastical circles of Rhineland, Germany. Only a month after the book's 1631 appearance, Auxiliary Bishop Johannes Pelcking of Paderborn, wrote a letter to a fellow bishop about a *liber pestilentissimus* ("most

poisonous book"), authored by one Father Friedrich Spee. This book, wrote the bishop, was filled with slanderous accusations against the authorities and had the audacity to compare witches to the early Christian martyrs. Unfortunately, so many copies had already been sold that repairing the damage would be most difficult.⁷

Bishop Pelcking was sure Spee had authored the *Cautio*, and Spee's Jesuit confreres knew it for a fact, but the public at large did not learn the mystery author's identity until early in the next century, when German philosopher, G.W. Leibnitz, divulged the secret to his readers. Leibnitz paid Spee lavish tribute, both as a critic of the witch trials and the author of a "godly" book on the virtues. Leibnitz's praise notwithstanding, Spee received scant attention in Germany until 1980, when his grave was rediscovered in a crypt beneath the Jesuit church in Trier. Outside Germany, Spee still

⁷ Joachim-Friedrich Ritter, *Friedrich von Spee, 1591–1635: Ein Edelmann, Mahner und Dichter* (Trier: Spee-Verlag, 1977), 68.

remains relatively unknown. Until the first-ever English translation of the *Cautio* which has just appeared, the most one could find in English were short articles and passing references to him in works on witchcraft or Baroque German poetry.

There are reasons for the neglect. Clerical church historians have been professionally disinclined to pay much attention to the matter of witchcraft. The subject is an embarrassment to the church, deemed best forgotten or treated only in passing. Secular scholarship does not do much better in surveys of Western civilization. There has been a rise of scholarly interest in witchcraft studies in recent decades, and archival research has led to a sizeable literature.⁸ But the results of that specialized research have yet to find their way into general histories. With notable exceptions (like Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and recurrent dramatic presentations on the life of Joan of Arc), popular culture tends to regard witches as the stuff of Halloween parties and children's stories. The wicked witches are no match for Hansel and Gretel in the brothers Grimm or Dorothy in the land of Oz. For us of a certain age, the music of Paul Dukas's *Sorcerer's Apprentice* conjures up images of Mickey Mouse struggling with a bewitched broom in *Fantasia*, and today young readers devour the adventures of ace-wizard Harry Potter. But none of these cultural icons invokes the name of the devil, and for that decisive reason our language has lost any sense of peril once associated with words like *entrancing*, *charming*, or *bewitching*.

Friedrich Spee (1591–1635) knew the peril first hand. He lived most of his life in one of the epicenters of witch-hunting, not by chance also a time of epidemics and the Thirty Years' War. And yet Spee wrote poetry about the splendor of creation and hymns that are still sung in German churches today. In a culture of unmitigated patriarchy, he described God in feminine metaphors and wrote a book of spirituality intended primarily for women. But it is the

⁸ Current interest goes back to the book by Julio Caro Baroja, *The World of the Witches* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1965) and the essay by H.R. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, and Other Essays* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969). The latter essay led to "witch-craze" becoming the most common term employed to describe this phenomenon, but implies that the prosecution of witches was somehow the product of a collective psychosis or mental disorder, and this is certainly not the case. For one of the most reliable and authoritative works on the subject, see Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (London/ New York: Longman, 1987), 2.

Cautio Criminalis that most sets Spee apart from his contemporaries, a light whose intensity can be gauged only by contrast to the darkness that surrounded it.

Historical Context

Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe

For most of human history and in all cultures, people have believed in magic—in the superhuman powers of certain individuals to heal and help others (so-called “white-magic”), or to do harm (“black magic”). The shaman was integral to primitive cultures, revered as a holy person in touch with the spirit world. Ancient Greece and Rome bequeathed Western civilization a literature filled with stories about magic spells, amulets, and witches who had the power to change themselves and others into animals.⁹

The Bible too makes references to people communing with spirits. Though Mosaic law forbade divination to learn the future (Lev. 19:31), Isaiah relates that Israel was filled with soothsayers (Isa. 2:6). Magic was part of the Bible’s cultural landscape. The narratives tell of Moses and Aaron getting the better of Pharaoh’s magicians and their “secret arts” (Exod. 7:8–12). The Bible declares magic to be powerless against God but does not deny that its practitioners can be effective.

Though neither testament declares magic to be bogus, both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures prohibit sorcery as tantamount to idolatry (1 Sam. 15:23; Gal. 5:20). Witchcraft was declared one of the sins for which God had destroyed Israel (2 Kings 17:17). Any God-fearing society wary of the same fate was advised to heed the explicit biblical command, “You shall not permit a witch to live” (Exod. 22:17).

Under the questionable assumption that modernity equates with moral progress, most of us tend to associate witch trials with the supposedly dark Middle Ages. We think of them as conducted by priest-inquisitors doing the work of the church. As a matter of fact, it was the Roman Inquisition that carried out the first trial and

⁹Baroja, *The World of Witches*, 17–40. The most celebrated classic source is Apuleius, *Metamorphosis*.

execution for witchcraft in Toulouse, France, in 1275. And in the 1400s, especially in France, church inquisitors were responsible for a number of women being executed as witches, most famously Joan of Arc. But the greatest number of witch trials and executions by far took place between 1550 and 1650, and most of those, more narrowly, between 1580 and 1630. In other words, they occurred not in the Middle Ages, but early modernity, at the dawn of a time associated with genius and Enlightenment. And in the main those trials and executions were in the hands of secular courts. When Spee wrote of inquisitors in his *Cautio*, he was referring to laymen.

Much is still unclear about the waves of witchcraft trials that plagued early modern Europe. For one, we can only estimate how many people were executed. Records have been lost or destroyed, and many cases were never recorded at all because the accused were lynched, committed suicide or died under torture. The most recent archival research estimates the total number of trials at 110,000 and the number of persons executed at 60,000. About half of those executions took place within the Holy Roman Empire.¹⁰

Because they were not evenly spread over time and space, open questions still remain about why witch-hunts broke out at all, and why they occurred when and where they did. After Germany, where trials numbered some fifty-thousand, witch-hunting ravaged the British Isles (five-thousand, more than half in Scotland); the Scandinavian counties (five-thousand); and tiny Switzerland (nine-thousand). In Italy and Spain, despite numerous investigations, very few prosecutions resulted in execution. The Spanish and Roman Inquisitions were generally skeptical of the accusations. In Rome only one execution is recorded for witchcraft.¹¹

At a time when Catholics and Protestants accentuated their disagreements with one another, both churches were in accord about the dangers of witchcraft. Martin Luther harbored no doubts that witches existed, raised up storms, and rode through the air.

¹⁰ Levack, *Witch-Hunt*, 19–21.

¹¹ See Herbert Haag, *Teufelsglaube* (Tübingen: Katzmann, 1974), 442; Anne Llewellyn Barstow, *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts* (San Francisco, CA: Pandora, 1994), 181; Levack, *Witch-Hunt*, 20–21.

It's debated why the greatest numbers of witch trials and executions took place in German lands and those immediately adjacent to them. The scholarly consensus is that no single factor provides the solution. War, famine, and epidemics certainly promoted widespread anxiety and a collective sense of being delivered over to mysterious evil powers. Economics, patriarchy, and social control of the masses have also been named as contributing factors. Not, however, confessional differences among churches.

At a time when Catholics and Protestants accentuated their disagreements with each other, both churches were in accord about the dangers of witchcraft. Martin Luther harbored no doubts that witches existed, raised up storms, and rode through the air. They were the *Teufelshuren* ("devil's whores"), he said, and should be

exterminated. Luther himself excommunicated several witches in 1529. In 1540, when there were still relatively few witch-burnings in Germany, there were four executions in his hometown of Wittenberg.¹²

Neither should one assume that all the suspects prosecuted for witchcraft were innocent of trying. Artifacts and tools of the trade provide ample evidence that, in various historical periods, some individuals did in fact practice both white and black magic, and still do.

Catholic principalities like Cologne, Trier, Bamberg, and Würzburg were major centers for witch trials, all of them ruled by prince-bishops. An eye-witness account of the 1581–1593 persecutions in Trier speaks of civil leaders and clerics in the city being

executed for witchcraft—two burgomasters, a judge, two associate judges, monsignorial canons, parish priests, and rural deans.¹³ In 1628 the burgomaster of Bamberg was tried and executed for witchcraft. The following year in Würzburg the prince-bishop's chancellor wrote in a letter to a friend about the accusations of witchcraft being leveled against "four hundred in the city, high and low, of every rank and sex . . . clerics, electoral councilors and doctors, city officials, court assessors. . . ." Also accused were law students, thirteen

¹² Haag, *Teufelsglaube*, 469.

¹³ Alan C. Kors and Edward Peters (eds.), *Witchcraft in Europe, 1100–1700: A Documentary History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1972), 217.

or fourteen students soon to be ordained priests, and some three-hundred “children of three and four years.”¹⁴

Records like these can give the false impression that the witch-hunts were indiscriminate and struck men and women, rich and poor alike. But such was not the case. “The most well-documented characteristic of those persons who were prosecuted for witchcraft is that they were predominantly, if not overwhelmingly, female.”¹⁵ In most regions of Europe, the numbers of women prosecuted exceeded seventy-five percent, in some areas over ninety percent. Why this was the case is also not altogether clear.

A common feminist reading of this gender imbalance is that the witch-hunts were a means of maintaining male domination in a changing society, that they were intended to make women feel guilty about their sexuality and to keep them in their place.¹⁶ Critics of this particular interpretation point out that it does not explain why so many women accused other women. But it is, of course, a widely noted phenomenon that members of an oppressed group commonly identify with the prejudicial attitudes of their oppressors and ill-treat their own kind.

Another, more compelling explanation for the gender imbalance looks to the influence of stereotypes on attitudes and expectations. The misfortunes blamed on witchcraft more often than not related to women’s areas of responsibility. There was nothing in the definition of a witch that excluded males. Just as in the original 16th-century Faust legend re-worked by Goethe, a man could just as

Another common misconception is that benighted clerics and judges initiated the witch-hunts from on high upon the hapless masses. But more recent research indicates to the contrary that the desire to track down witches often arose from below, that the common folk pressured authorities to take action.

¹⁴ Kors and Peters, *Witchcraft in Europe*, 251–253.

¹⁵ Levack, *Witch-Hunt*, 124. See also Barstow, *Witchcraze*, 25; and Wolfgang Behringer on recent witchcraft studies in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland in Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester, and Gareth Roberts (eds.), *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Culture and Belief* (Cambridge University, 1996), 93.

¹⁶ Barstow, *Witchcraze*, 147–165.

easily make a pact with the devil and practice harmful magic. But the stereotype of the witch that came down from classical and medieval literature was routinely female and made women the more natural suspects.

Women in early modern Europe typically functioned as cooks, midwives, and healers, in occupations that made them particularly vulnerable to accusations of sorcery.¹⁷ Women, not men, tended gardens and knew the qualities of herbs for cooking and healing. The idea of a man standing over a boiling cauldron was at the very least improbable.¹⁸ Likewise, the image of a witch was one of being morally weak and driven by carnal lust, qualities that the period in question—especially its treatises on witchcraft—attributed to women.

Alarmed by the priests' report, the Pope issued the fateful document in which he expressed alarm at the allegations that certain persons in Germany were entering into relations with the devil and practicing black magic.

If contemporary research on witch-hunts reveals anything, it is that no one interpretation of the phenomenon explains all, not politics, religion, economics, or misogyny. But if no one explanation

fits all, neither is the number of typical cases unlimited. There are patterns, like that of the crone, the old single woman, so poor that she is dependent on her neighbors to stave off starvation. Very often a scold, she could well be expected to curse those who denied her plea for alms. And those who turned her down could be expected to feel guilty, until some misfortune later occurred and they remembered her curse.¹⁹

¹⁷With the rise of medicine as a profession in Europe, the male medical establishment joined with witch-hunters to discredit the activities of midwives and thus marginalize women not only in obstetrics but also in all areas of medicine. See Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Women Born: Representations of Caesarean Birth in Medieval and Renaissance Culture* (Ithaca / London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 91–119.

¹⁸Levack, *Witch-Hunt*, 126–127; Behringer in Barry, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, 94.

¹⁹Barstow, *Witchcraze*, 26.

Neither should one assume that all the suspects prosecuted for witchcraft were innocent of trying. Artifacts and tools of the trade provide ample evidence that, in various historical periods, some individuals did in fact practice both white and black magic, and still do. Hence, not surprisingly, in early modern Europe too there were cases, “at most only a few,” where the accused sincerely believed that the devil had granted their wishes.²⁰

Another common misconception is that benighted clerics and judges initiated the witch-hunts from on high upon the hapless masses. But more recent research indicates to the contrary that the desire to track down witches often arose from below, that the common folk pressured authorities to take action. Village witch-hunting committees existed in Germany, where, especially in small states, authorities often faced open rebellion if they did not comply with the people’s wishes. The gullibility and superstition of the masses were major factors in the popular desire to prosecute witches, as was a “gloomy world view” that could become almost apocalyptic. Under a sense of impending urgency, “exceptional crimes” called for exceptional measures.²¹

The view of witchcraft as an “exceptional crime” was embedded in the 1532 criminal code enacted for the Holy Roman Empire by Emperor Charles V. The code called for secular courts to investigate and prosecute persons for witchcraft, whether they had injured others or not. The punishment for injurious witchcraft was burning at the stake; at the judge’s discretion, that for harmless witchcraft could be milder, like confiscation of property or exile. In practice, the distinction was moot, thanks to the legal reasoning of Lutheran jurist, Benedict Carpzov (1595–1666), for whom Exodus 22:18 trumped the imperial legislation. If the Bible did not allow witches to live, neither should the German courts.²²

The exceptional nature of the crime also explains how the Middle Ages and imperial code justified the use of torture. From the Roman Empire to the late 18th century, torture was a routine component of Europe’s judicial procedure. Today, even when legally prohibited, torture in various forms is standard practice in any

²⁰ Barry, *Witchcraft*, 39.

²¹ Behringer in Barry, *Witchcraft*, 87.

²² Haag, *Teufelsglaube*, 457.

number of countries around the globe, though it may be disguised under the euphemism of aggressive police interrogation. One need only consult agencies like Amnesty International for documentation.

Even in the United States, in the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks of 9/11, legal experts have begun to think the unthinkable and regard the use of non-lethal torture as a matter meriting serious discussion. Generalized alarm about international networks of evildoers conspiring to unleash widespread destruction on innocent victims has put judicial use of torture in a different light. Only the benefit of hindsight allows us to view twenty-first-century anxieties about terrorists as justified and those of centuries past about witches as not.

The civil and religious authorities of medieval and early modern Europe did not have that benefit. So we have little reason to be appalled that in 1252, Pope Innocent IV allowed the use of torture to uncover heretics, who like highway robbers and murderers, were viewed as a menace to society. The same reasoning allowed the license for judicial torture to be extended to persons suspected of witchcraft. Surprising, perhaps, is that a justification for using torture was to protect not only society but innocent suspects as well. The idea was to learn some fact under torture that only the guilty party could know and to obtain a confession from the real culprit.²³

Though clearly not comparable to modern Western judicial systems, even in the Middle Ages there were regulations intended to prevent judges from using torture arbitrarily. But in the case of suspected witchcraft, the danger posed to society was seen as warranting disregard of the usual judicial restraints. Judges could apply and repeat torture without qualms and did so with the approval of jurists and theologians alike. Whereas the Middle Ages viewed witchcraft primarily in terms of magic, by the sixteenth-century century witches were regarded as engaged in an anti-Christian, anti-

²³ Recent studies indicate that another motive for inflicting torture is to demonstrate the power and authority of the torturer over the victim. See Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York /Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 27–59.

social conspiracy with Satan. The point of the torture was not to punish the crime but to uncover the conspiracy.²⁴

If the general public raised calls for hunting and prosecuting witches, one cannot ignore the complementary role played by the educated elites. The intellectuals were responsible for introducing the idea of the demonic into the issue in the first place. Illiterate commoners had no difficulty in accepting the effectiveness of magic alongside natural causality. They viewed magic as able to work directly, without any outside agency. But for intellectuals educated in the Aristotelian tradition, magic could have no reality without the participation of the spirit world.²⁵ To produce their extraordinary feats of magic, sorcerers and witches had to be in a conspiracy with the devil. It was that concept of witchcraft that made the fatal difference between Spee's day and ages past.

Demonologists and the Devil

Belief in the devil has been part of Christian tradition from its beginnings, part of its biblical heritage. But when it came to the idea of witches, official church opinion was more skeptical the first thousand years than in the second. The so-called Bishop's Canon (circa 900) referred to "some wicked women" who sought the aid of the devil and sincerely believed that they traveled great distances and gathered in a crowd with others like themselves. The canon described these women as "seduced by illusions," and anyone who believed them was "stupid and foolish." The Bishop's Canon eventually found its way into Gratian's Decretals, the most authoritative collection of medieval church law.²⁶

But some fifteenth-century authors began raising doubts about the authenticity of the Bishop's Canon, thanks in part to the opinions of the church's two most influential theologians. When Saint Augustine considered the obscure biblical passage about the "sons of God" marrying the "daughters of men" (Gen. 6:1), he wrote of "a

²⁴ Michele Battafarano (ed.), *Friedrich von Spee: Dichter, Theologe und Bekämpfer der Hexenprozesse* (Trent: Juigi Reverdito, 1988), 224–226.

²⁵ Richard Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials: Their Foundation in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300–1500* (Berkeley: University of California, 1976), 78–80.

²⁶ Rosemary Ellen Guiley, *The Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft* (New York/Oxford: Facts on File, 1987), 52.

very general rumor" that "certain devils" are constantly attempting to have sexual relations with women. This opinion, Augustine decided, was "so generally affirmed" that it would be *impudentia* ("shamelessness") to deny it (*City of God*, 15,23).

Elaborating on Augustine, Thomas Aquinas pondered how a spirit and a human being could possibly have sexual intercourse and concluded that, as a matter of fact, "some are occasionally begotten from demons" (*Summa Theologiæ*, I, Q.51, art. 3, reply 6). Though he focused more on angels than demons, Aquinas wrote on the latter as well, teaching that it was unlawful to invoke them, consult them about the future, or use their help. Such acts were sinful precisely because they involved either a tacit or explicit compact with the devil (*Summa Theologiæ*, II-II, Q. 90, art. 3; Q.92, art. 2; Q. 95, art. 6).

With its affirmation of faith in God's victory over evil, the Bible relegates the devil to the margins of salvation history. When one considers the massive literary output of Augustine and Aquinas, their allusions to the demonic are few and scattered at best. But there were enough of these references for speculative intellects in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to create a full-blown demonology. And that literature had an influence on church authorities. In 1325 Pope John XXII issued a papal bull (*Super illius specula*) in which he lamented the news he had received about Christians making pacts with the devil and worshipping him.²⁷

More consequential, however, was the 1484 papal bull of Pope Innocent VIII (*Summis desiderantes affectibus*), occasioned by Dominican priests Jacob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer, who complained to the Pope that high-ranking churchmen and laity were hindering their attempts to root out witchcraft in Germany. Alarmed by the priests' report, the Pope issued the fateful document in which he expressed alarm at the allegations that certain persons in Germany were entering into relations with the devil and practicing black magic. Among their crimes were damaging harvests, crops, and vineyards; slaying infants in their mothers' wombs; preventing women from conceiving; and preventing men from performing sexually. The Pope put his full apostolic authority behind the two

²⁷ Haag, *Teufelsglaube*, 452.

Dominicans. Anyone who would hinder their work was liable to excommunication, suspension, and “yet more terrible penalties.”²⁸

This papal bull, it can be argued, became the proximate cause for the outbreak of witch trials and executions in Germany. There had been no systematic program for prosecuting witches before the bull, and no reason to believe that Germany and its adjacent territories would become the locus for the great majority of subsequent witch trials.²⁹ The fact it did was due in large measure to a book whose consequences cannot be underestimated. Lest anyone forget or neglect the papal bull they had instigated, Sprenger and Kramer went on to write a practical commentary on it, the *Malleus Maleficarum* (*Hammer of Witches*), with the bull invariably appended as a papal seal of approval.

The *Malleus* opens with the argument that witches exist and any Christian who would dare deny it was “gravely suspect” of heresy.³⁰ With God’s permission, witches do their harmful magic in virtue of their pact with the devil. Sexual intercourse with the devil is presumed rather than argued, with an appeal to the authority of Thomas Aquinas. The second part of the book deals with the various magical and evil deeds witches perform and the remedies against them. Here we read about matters like the way one makes a formal pact with the devil and how witches are transported from place to place. The third part of the *Malleus* comprises a handbook for prosecutors, detailing instructions on proper judicial procedure: how judges can recognize witches, protect themselves against their magic, and apply torture to obtain confessions.

Unlike other demonologists, Delrio favored allowing legal counsel for the accused. Only after sufficient evidence should judges apply torture and then only with “prudence and fairness.” Children under fourteen should not be tortured, nor should pregnant women, until they give birth.

²⁸The full text of the papal bull in English translation is found in Montague Summers (trans.), *Malleus Maleficarum* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1928), xliii-xlv.

²⁹Haag, *Teufelsglaube*, 453.

³⁰Summers, *Malleus*, 9.

Sprenger and Kramer filled their book with long expositions and arguments in the style of the scholastic manuals and *summas*. With copious references to the Bible, church fathers, and medieval theologians, the *Malleus* pretends to be a work of serious scholarship. Behind its scholarly façade, however, lies a deep-seated hatred for women, whom it describes as “sluts” and “incomplete animals” whose evil deeds bring suffering into the world.

Although men were capable of entering into a conspiracy with the devil, the possessive genitive of the title (*Maleficarum*) renders the subject of the *Malleus* exclusively feminine. The authors claim that women are more susceptible to witchcraft than men, since the very word *femina* comes from *fe* (faith) and *mina* (less), implying that women have weaker faith.³¹ Page after page the *Malleus* betrays an obsession with the idea of sexual intercourse with the devil, going on at length on how witches deprive men of their sexual organs. Along with a profound misogyny, a psychological reading of the book suggests that we are dealing here with two sexually-fixated psychopaths.³² Whatever one may think of its authors’ fantasies, the *Malleus* was an enormous publishing success, going through twenty-nine editions from its appearance well into the next century. But it did not remain the last word on the topic.

French jurist Jean Bodin (1530–1596), a founding father of political science, was an advocate of Catholic-Protestant co-existence, but when it came to women, liberality gave way to pathology. Together with the *Malleus*, his book, *De la Demonomanie des sorciers* (1580), became the basic text for witch-hunters. In it Bodin cites Plato to the effect that women stand midway between men and animals. Women are more susceptible to the devil than men, not because of their weakness but the “force of animal desire” that drives them. Bodin catalogues fifty different magic knots by which women render men impotent, and doing so inadvertently suggests a likely explanation for his misogyny. Bodin allowed for the burning of children and cripples as witches and counseled that the fire be kept low, so the victims would suffer at least a half-hour in preparation for hell.³³

³¹ Summers, *Malleus*, 44.

³² Haag, *Teufelsglaube*, 454.

³³ Haag, *Teufelsglaube*, 456.

Kramer, Sprenger, and Bodin, were joined by any number of other scholarly “experts” in demonology and witchcraft. Even in those early days of publishing, sex, violence, and occult conspiracies were the makings of bestsellers. But one more author deserves attention here precisely because he was a member of the Society of Jesus.

Martin Delrio (1551–1608) was regarded as a universal genius both during and well after his lifetime. Today he is best remembered for his 1599 *Disquisitionum Magicarum*, a virtual encyclopedia on witchcraft that went through some twenty editions and became as renowned in its day as the *Malleus*.³⁴ Citing classic and Hebrew references, Delrio discussed such things as real and false apparitions, explained why God allows witches to commit their crimes, and assured his readers that devils obey witches not under compulsion but because of their pact (lib.2, q.30, sec.2). He warned judges of their heavy responsibility to root out witchcraft, because this “most enormous, grave, and atrocious crime” involves apostasy, heresy, sacrilege, blasphemy, homicide, and sins against nature (lib. 5, sec. 1).

Unlike other demonologists, Delrio favored allowing legal counsel for the accused. Only after sufficient evidence should judges apply torture and then only with “prudence and fairness.” Children under fourteen should not be tortured, nor should pregnant women, until they give birth (lib.5, sec.6). To the question why the devil does not help witches to escape, he answered that God simply does not allow it. It would be a scandal if witches, the devil’s servants, were seen as more powerful than judges, who were God’s servants (lib.5, sec.7).

In the name of inerrant church authority, Delrio sanctioned the witch trials and raised his suspicions against critics and their motives.

Delrio wrote with assurance about what God does and does not permit and what most pleases and displeases the devil. He had no doubts that witches rode through the air to their meetings, for there was “well founded” eyewitness testimony. He trusted completely the descriptions (confirmed under torture) of how witches

³⁴Russell Hope Robbins, *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology* (New York: Crown, 1959), 121.

worshiped Satan in orgies of song and dance. Were these only old wives' tales or the delusions of delirious women? Delrio knew the critics' arguments. He knew the stories of women accused of witchcraft whose husbands swore under oath that their wives had never left their sides all night. He explained how it was possible for witches to deceive their husbands and gather with their cohorts even while appearing to remain at home in bed (lib. 2, quest. 16, pp. 167–168).

Delrio warned those critics who doubted descriptions of the witches' Sabbath that they were treading on dangerous ground:

Those who argue that [these descriptions] are dreams or ridiculous tales certainly sin against the reverence which is owed to Mother Church. For the Catholic Church does not punish crimes, unless they are certain and evident; it does not treat persons as heretics unless they have been caught in heresy by the evidence. For many years already, the Church has considered witches to be heretics and has commanded that they be punished by the inquisitors and handed over to the secular arm. . . . Therefore, either the Church is in error or these skeptics are in error. Whoever says that the Church errs in a matter that pertains to faith, let that person be anathema.³⁵

Here, remarkably enough, is an early claim for the church's ordinary magisterium being inerrant, raised almost three hundred years before the First Vatican Council. And in tying that claim to the prosecution of witches, Delrio provides a rationale for why the trials and executions lasted so many years, well into the "age of reason." The alternative to believing in witchcraft and its prosecution was that the church and state had perpetrated monumental injustice through their respective judiciaries. The alternative was to conceive that the two institutions ordained by God to preserve order and justice, had put tens of thousands of innocent people to death.

For Delrio and those like him, so sure of what God does and does not permit, contemplating that alternative was intolerable. What would one do with the Bible's warnings against witchcraft? What would it mean for the legal and judicial systems? How could one ever again trust the institutions that stood at the very foundation of social order?

³⁵ Martin Delrio, S.J., *Disquisitionum Magicarum Libri Sex* (1617), Lib. 11, q. 6, p.182. Author's translation.

In the name of inerrant church authority, Delrio sanctioned the witch trials and raised his suspicions against critics and their motives. And if ridiculing notions of a witches' Sabbath raised suspicions of heresy, finding fault with the witch trials could well be a clue that one was guilty of witchcraft:

Judges are bound under pain of mortal sin to condemn witches to death who have confessed their crimes; anyone who pronounced against the death sentence is reasonably suspected of secret complicity; no one is to urge the judges to desist from the prosecution; nay, it is an *indicium* of witchcraft to defend witches, or to affirm that witch stories which are told as certain are mere deceptions or illusions.³⁶

Such were the learned opinions prevalent in early seventeenth-century Europe and respected by Catholic and Protestant elites alike. Only in light of such beliefs can one appreciate the courage it took for Spee to write a book against the witch trials of his day. Not only was he going against what was still mainstream scholarly and public opinion, he was exposing himself to suspicions of heresy and witchcraft and quite possibly risking his life.

Spee and the *Cautio Criminalis*

Life and Career

The name Spee, if known at all, is associated in modern memory with the 1939 sinking of a German warship. The family, which goes back to the twelfth century, belonged to the minor nobility and was raised in the eighteenth century to the rank of Graf, the German equivalent of an earl or count. When Friedrich was born in 1591, that grand-sounding title was still in the family's future. But even without it Spee seems to have had a certain awareness of the rank that came with his full name, Friedrich Spee von Langenfeld.³⁷

The documents give us only the broadest outlines of Spee's life, most often without the details that might explain why he

³⁶ Cited in Robbins, *Encyclopedia*, 123.

³⁷ Even though early on his name appeared as Friedrich von Spee, the correct form, followed here, is Friedrich Spee von Langenfeld.

thought and acted as he did.³⁸ And not without reason. No one expected him to be remembered years later, least of all Spee himself. From all appearances he died thinking himself a failure. Despite ambitions to do great things with his life, he kept meeting setbacks and failures.

He was born February 25, 1591, in the Rhineland, in the medieval town of Kaiserswerth, now part of metropolitan Düsseldorf. One of five children born to Peter and Mechtel Spee, he was apparently the oldest son, since he was given his grandfather's name and title. His father worked in the service of the Prince Bishop-elect of Cologne, where at the age of ten Friedrich began studies at the Jesuit Tricoronatum (Three Kings) College. There he became first a member, then an officer in the school's sodality.

Spee apparently related well to laity, youth and adults alike, since at this time he brought a number of Protestant nobles into the Catholic fold.

At age nineteen Friedrich quit the career path of his father and grandfather and entered the Society of Jesus. Why he did so is suggested in a letter he sent seven years later to the superior general, Mutius Vitelleschi. Spee wanted to

become a missionary. "India, my father, and those distant lands have wounded my heart." Several months later Spee was informed that his request could not be granted. Several German Jesuits had already been sent to the Far East missions, and his labors were needed in Germany.³⁹ The general's decision was a disappointment for Spee, but only the first of many.

Spee had joined the Society's Rhineland province and entered the novitiate at Trier. There, on the Mosel River bordering France, he

³⁸ All book-length biographies of Spee at this time are in German. Among the most helpful for its extended documentation is Joachim-Friedrich Ritter, *Friedrich von Spee, 1591–1635: Ein Edelmann, Mahner und Dichter* (Trier: Spee-Verlag, 1977). More dated is Emmy Rosenfeld, *Friedrich Spee von Langenfeld: Eine Stimme in der Wüste* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1958). Others are Karl-Jürgen Miesen, *Friedrich Spee: Pater, Dichter, Hexen-Anwalt* (Düsseldorf: Dost, 1987); Karl Keller, *Friedrich Spee von Langenfeld (1591–1635): Leben und Werk des Seelsorgers und Dichters* (Geldern: Keuck, 1990); and Walter Nigg, *Friedrich von Spee: Ein Jesuit kämpft gegen den Hexenwahn* (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 1991).

³⁹ Ritter, *Friedrich von Spee*, 13–14.

doubtlessly learned of the hundreds of executions for witchcraft in the region twenty years earlier. Peter Binsfeld, Trier's suffragan bishop, had written a book on the detection and prosecution of witches and saw to it that his theories were put into practice.⁴⁰ By the time Spee arrived, Binsfeld had died and the spate of witch-hunts subsided, but it was only a pause between storms.

An outbreak of the plague forced the Jesuits at Trier to leave for Fulda, where in 1612 Spee took his first vows and began the standard program of study and formation: three years of philosophy at Würzburg, then three years teaching Latin at Speyer and Worms. In 1618 at Worms, Spee learned that he would spend his life in Germany, not the Far East. What he couldn't know was that an assassination attempt followed by an uprising in Prague a month later would envelope the rest of his life with the Thirty Years War.

After his stint in the classroom as a scholastic, Spee went to the Academy of Mainz, where he studied theology the next five years and, in his free time, tried his hand at writing verse. A letter dated 1621 from the general, in response to Spee's request for permission to have some of his poems published, gently admonishes him not to rush into print, to wait until he completed his studies. Greater maturity might lead him to express himself differently.⁴¹ Good advice, but still disappointing.

In March 1622 Spee was ordained a priest and, after another year of studies, assigned to teach philosophy (logic, physics, and metaphysics) at the Jesuit College in Paderborn. As was the custom, he also began teaching catechism to children at a parish church, which seems to have led to his writing devotional songs and poems. Spee apparently related well to laity, youth and adults alike, since at this time he brought a number of Protestant nobles into the Catholic fold.

But Spee's charm did not extend to his immediate superior, Hermann Baving, rector of the college and evidently an able administrator but also an autocrat. Their relationship did not improve when Baving was made provincial. After three years of teaching, Spee was due to make his tertianship. Because of the war German

⁴⁰Records from this period (1587–1593) indicate that 368 people in and around Trier were burned as witches. Cf. Barstow, *Witchcraze*, 59.

⁴¹Ritter, *Friedrich von Spee*, 155.

hospitals were filled with foreign soldiers. Spee wrote the general requesting permission to do his tertianship in Milan, where he could study Italian and be of more use ministering to the wounded troops. The general granted the permission, so long as Spee's provincial agreed. But Baving did not. Frustrated once again, Spee made his tertianship in Speyer.

In late 1627, one of the Jesuits at Cologne became too ill to complete his course for the graduating senior class. Spee was assigned in midterm to fill in at his old alma mater. In their closing ceremonies the following January the departing graduates composed a Latin doggerel as a farewell tribute to their schoolmates and teachers, including Spee. They played on his name and the Latin for hope: *In Spe spes fuerat, spes Fridericus erat* ("In Spee they placed hope, Friedrich was their hope").⁴² It was probably neither the first nor certainly the last time that the linkage would be made.

The rest of 1628 did not go well for Spee. A letter to him from the general indicates that he had requested permission to publish a

Dealing with difficult ethical issues had become a specialty for Jesuits like Spee, who became quite popular with his students.

small book "on praising God constantly." The general reminded Spee that standard procedure called for him to go first with such requests to his provincial, Hermann Baving. In another letter that year, the general asked Baving to clarify his complaints that Spee "harbors misguided opinions about poverty in the Order and

about other things."⁴³ What those "other things" were is unclear, but it is likely that Spee had begun hearing the confessions of accused witches.

As if his relationship with the provincial was not bad enough, Spee suffered a further rebuff, when efforts to have him appointed to the college's regular faculty came to naught. His colleagues did not honor his master of arts degree because it came from Würzburg. This was all the excuse Baving needed to get Spee out of Cologne and into the hinterlands. Cologne's prince-bishop had asked the

⁴² Rosenfeld, *Friedrich Spee*, 41.

⁴³ Ritter, *Friedrich von Spee*, 20.

Jesuits for a priest to work in the town of Peine, formerly Protestant territory but now back in Catholic hands. Baving promptly assigned Spee.

Protestants and Catholics alike at that time accepted the axiom that princes had the right to determine their subjects' religion (*cuius regio, eius religio*). As a consequence of that principle and the fortunes of war, whole towns were often compelled to reconsider their religious affiliation. Families had to choose between their churches and their homes and lands. Spee was sent to pastor the country folk at Peine with the task of winning their hearts over to the old time religion. The farmers just worried that the new pastor might require a higher church tax for marriages and baptisms. Spee informed them that he did not want any money from them at all.⁴⁴

After several months the Jesuit rector of a neighboring school reported to the general that Spee was encountering considerable success in winning over the loyalty and affection of his new parishioners. We can surmise from his writings, that Spee knew how to relate warmly with people in all walks of life. But there are always exceptions like Hermann Baving, and on a Sunday in April, 1629, Spee met another.

An early morning fog hung thick over the fields, as Spee rode horseback on his way to Sunday Mass in a small village near Peine. On a narrow path, in a small woods, he was suddenly confronted by a would-be assassin who first shot at him with a pistol and then, when Spee tried to get away, struck him several times with a dagger. Spee escaped with a gallop and rode to the village church where the faithful were already gathered. Staggering into the church bleeding, too weak and wounded to celebrate Mass, he led the gathered faithful in singing "Holy God, we praise thy name."⁴⁵ Despite considerable efforts, the identity of the would-be assassin was never discovered.

Spee's injuries required convalescence, and he was assigned a residence in a quiet rural setting. There, surrounded by the natural beauties of summer in the country, he indulged in his favorite pastime, writing poetry. But a sudden vacancy at the Jesuit college

⁴⁴ Rosenfeld, *Friedrich Spee*, 50.

⁴⁵ Ritter, *Friedrich von Spee*, 23–24.

in Paderborn cut his leisure short. Having taught philosophy there as a young priest, Spee now returned to teach moral theology.

Dealing with difficult ethical issues had become a specialty for Jesuits like Spee, who became quite popular with his students. Among those students was Hermann Busenbaum, who twenty years later would write what would become the standard textbook on moral theology for generations to come. In it Busenbaum gratefully acknowledged Spee's contributions to his theological thinking.

But, once again, not everyone was gratified by Spee's ideas. Christian Lennep, the college rector, wrote to the general complaining that Spee was having an adverse effect on the young Jesuits by openly raising doubts about the conduct of the witch trials. This, we may presume, was not only in conversations but also in the classroom, since Lennep asked for Spee to be removed from the faculty. The general agreed to an investigation but in the end decided to leave Spee at his post with only an admonition to be more prudent.

Early in 1631, Baving completed his tenure as provincial and was replaced by Goswin Nickel, a different personality type altogether. That was good news for Spee, but it came in tandem with the bad news that Baving was becoming the new rector at Paderborn. Almost immediately, Baving fired Spee from his teaching position. The dismissal was particularly humiliating in that it came in the middle of the school year. Spee protested to the general, but, before that squall could blow over, clouds rolled in auguring a more violent storm. Bookstands that April began selling the first edition of a new book entitled *Cautio Criminalis* by an "unknown Roman theologian."

The Jesuits at Paderborn knew that Spee had authored the *Cautio* and had not received permission for its publication. That was a breach of the Society's constitutions and by all appearances a deliberate act of disobedience.⁴⁶ Nickel, the new provincial, investigated the matter and wrote the general explaining that, yes, Spee had written the *Cautio* but was not responsible for its publication. He had given the manuscript to an acquaintance for an evaluation. It was that unidentified other party who had taken it to a publisher as a "pious theft." The general was satisfied with Nickel's explanation,

⁴⁶ Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, trans. George E. Ganss, S.J. (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970), part 7, ch. 4, [653].

but admonished Spee to take better care to safeguard his manuscripts in the future. Spee was reassigned to teaching moral theology at Cologne.

His return to Cologne was not easy for Spee. The city continued to be a center for witch trials, and Jesuits were on both sides of the issue. Although some of his colleagues shared Spee's ideas, others took strong exception. Three of them, including the college rector, wrote the general asking him to have the *Cautio* put on the Index of Forbidden Books. The general rejected their request, but Spee still had reason to be exasperated. Weary of the constant harassment, he petitioned the general for transfer to a different province. It would seem that Spee's living situation could not become worse. But it could and did. In June 1632 a second edition of the *Cautio* appeared, with some minor textual additions and corrections of typographical errors. This time Spee did not disclaim responsibility.

From all appearances Spee was a maverick who disregarded the Order's constitutions. His reckless actions aroused controversy and provoked criticism of the Society as well as himself.

One can only imagine the animosity Spee had to endure in his own community. We have no direct reports, but a letter from the general to Nickel questions whether Spee should be allowed to remain in the Society. The General had reason to be concerned. From all appearances Spee was a maverick who disregarded the order's constitutions. His reckless actions aroused controversy and provoked criticism of the Society as well as himself.

Spee's situation was certainly grave. If he were dismissed from the Society and discovered to be the author of the *Cautio*, what were the chances of his getting out alive? Deprived of the order's protection, he might well have to face the prospect of being tried for sorcery. As noted above, it was a widespread opinion that criticizing the witch trials was itself an indication that one was practicing witchcraft. But then something happened that still eludes any easy explanation. Spee was neither suspended nor disciplined but assigned instead to teach moral theology at the Jesuit college in Trier.

Scholars can only conjecture at the events behind the records. Certainly Spee had a friend and protector in Goswin Nickel. And it seems that the provincial shared Spee's opinions about the way in which the witch trials were being conducted. One plausible explanation why Spee was not disciplined for the second edition of the *Cautio* is that Nickel had authorized it.⁴⁷ Another hypothesis is that Nickel respected Spee's conscience. Certainly Spee was not bound to observe a rule if in his conscience it meant committing serious sin. Spee may have thought that trying to save innocent women from torture and execution justified this particular breach of the Society's legislation.⁴⁸

In Trier Spee found himself among friends who valued him as a colleague and shared his views. A report by the college rector there describes the *Cautio* as a "most useful and highly acclaimed book" and Spee as a priest "outstanding in piety and learning."⁴⁹ Here Spee was free to work in peace, to teach his classes, and to devote his spare time to writing the verses that had become his favorite pastime. Two manuscripts of Spee's poetry come down to us from this period, each written in his own hand.

But peace in Trier was short-lived. The city was a political football. Lying on the boundary between Germany and France, it had been occupied first by the emperor's Spanish troops and then taken over by the French, who were allied with the Swedish and German Protestants. The chronicles relate how on March 26, 1635, at 4 a.m., some townsfolk opened the city gates to the imperial forces. For four hours the streets ran with the blood of French and imperial soldiers, engaged in hand-to-hand combat. In the midst of it all, Spee administered the last rites, carried away the wounded, and comforted the dying. By 8 a.m. the emperor's army won the day; five-hundred French soldiers were killed, another five-hundred captured.

At a time when the devil claimed a high profile in popular culture, Spee did not demonize the enemy. Records tell us that he

⁴⁷ Gunther Franz, "Friedrich Spee und die Bücherzensur," in Gunther Franz (ed.), *Friedrich Spee zum 400. Geburtsag: Kolloquium der Friedrich-Spee-Gesellschaft Trier* (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 1995), 94.

⁴⁸ Marcus Hellyer, "Translator's Introduction" in Spee, *Cautio Criminalis*, xiv.

⁴⁹ Ritter, *Friedrich Spee*, 82.

collected food and clothing for the French prisoners of war. He even went to the imperial commander and pleaded that he treat the prisoners with respect and allow them to return home. In the months that followed, Spee regularly visited the military hospitals, overrun with the wounded.

One should not confuse the conditions in those hospitals with those of today. Spee himself had written earlier of the conditions that prevailed in his day, still centuries before anesthesia and anti-sepsis: the infected wounds, foul smells, and screams of pain.⁵⁰ It was an exceptionally hot summer that year, and an epidemic broke out. In spite of the danger it posed for him, Spee continued to visit the wounded soldiers, until he himself became infected. The records state simply that he died at 1 p.m. on August 7, 1635, and was buried the same day.⁵¹ He was forty-four years old.

The *Cautio Criminalis*

Spee died leaving two unpublished manuscripts behind: one a *Güldenes Tugend-Buch* (Golden Book of Virtues) and a collection of verses entitled *Trutz-Nachtigall* (The Rival Nightingale).⁵² Both works first appeared in print fourteen years after his death in 1649. The only works published during his lifetime, the *Cautio* and a number of hymns, appeared anonymously. His thinking in moral theology would appear in the work of his more celebrated student, Hermann Busenbaum. Spee never saw any of his writings published under his own name. Still he ranks among the most important authors of his time—a claim that needs no further warrant than the *Cautio*, which was one of the first sustained, detailed attacks of its kind against the witch trials and use of torture.⁵³

⁵⁰ Friedrich Spee, *Güldenes Tugend-Buch*, edited by Theo G.M. van Oorshot (Munich: Kösel, 1968), 355–356.

⁵¹ Ritter, *Friedrich Spee*, 132.

⁵² I wish to express my gratitude to G. Ronald Murphy, S.J. (Georgetown University), for his assistance in coming up with an appropriate English translation of this peculiar use of the German “Trutz.”

⁵³ Battafarano, *Friedrich von Spee*, 229–230. Well over half a century before Spee (1563), Protestant court physician Johannes Weyer attacked belief in witches and the idea of a pact with the devil.

In his preface Spee explains with some irony that he wrote the *Cautio* for the authorities involved in prosecuting witches, especially those who would not care to read it [7].⁵⁴ His likely readers are already conscientious in their duties and don't need to. Those disinclined to read the entire book should at least look at the last chapter with its overview of how the witch trials were being conducted. This is the point on which Spee focused his attack, not the fact of the witch trials but the how.

Each chapter of the *Cautio* is framed as a query. The first begins with the straight-forward question, do witches and sorcerers

Spee did not question the existence of witches but whether all those accused and executed were really guilty. Precisely because of the way the authorities conducted the trials, innocent women were being executed. Nothing is more uncertain, he argues, than the number of witches in Germany.

exist? Spee responds, "I answer, yes." The question is a theoretical one, and Spee, without dwelling on it, gives a perfunctory answer. He goes on instead to the second, more practical question, whether Germany has more witches than any place else. It would seem so, he answers, since it burns more. But the reasons are the ignorance and superstition of people who immediately attribute a storm or sick animal to witchcraft. Spee did not question the existence of witches but whether all those accused and executed were really

guilty. Precisely because of the way the authorities conducted the trials, innocent women were being executed. Nothing is more uncertain, he argues, than the number of witches in Germany [16–18].

Was Spee being disingenuous? Did he really disbelieve witches existed but refuse to say so to put authorities off the track? There is no reason to think so.⁵⁵ Spee was not a post-Enlightenment skeptic when it came to reading the Bible. With Augustine and Aquinas, he was willing to grant that witches exist. But, against experts like Binsfeld and Delrio, he argued that their numbers were small. He

⁵⁴ Bracketed references in the text will be to Hellyer's English translation of the *Cautio*.

⁵⁵ Pamela Reilly, "Friedrich von Spee's Belief in Witchcraft: Some Deductions from the 'Cautio Criminalis,'" *Modern Language Review* 54 (1959): 51–55.

never met a witch himself, he wrote. But there have been judges, known for being ruthless to their victims, who were later accused themselves and under torture confessed to sorcery. In light of such diabolical behavior, Spee could well believe that they were guilty of conspiring with the devil [51].

Some seventy years earlier in 1563, Johannes Weyer had criticized the theory behind the witch-hunts (the very idea of a pact with the devil), but had little or no influence over Catholics, who generally dismissed him as a heretic. Spee took another more tactical (jesuitical?) approach by criticizing not the theory but the practice. The key to saving innocent lives, as he saw it, lay in reforming the judicial procedure. Analogously, death penalty opponents in the U.S. have proven unable to muster widespread support for abolishing the laws sanctioning capital punishment. They have had more success convincing government officials and the general public of the need for a moratorium on the death penalty until such time as the fair application of the laws can be guaranteed.

Because of the manner in which witch trials are conducted, innocent people are being tortured and killed, and Spee does not mince words in allotting responsibility. Without mentioning names, he singles out four groups as particularly at fault for inciting the princes to take measures against witchcraft. The first group consists of theologians and prelates, who sit peacefully in their comfortable studies, busy with their thoughts soaring in the clouds. "Experience has taught them nothing of events outside, of the squalor of the dungeons, of the weight of the chains, of the instruments of torture, of the lamentations of the poor. To visit the prisons, to speak with beggars, to turn an ear to the complaints of the poor is beneath their dignity and duty to study" [49].

The Cautio is not a calmly argued essay on jurisprudence. It is a shrill cry to stop a travesty of justice.

Reading between the lines, one can imagine Spee muttering the names of Delrio and Binsfeld. Some of his Jesuit colleagues probably came to mind, when Spee included in this same category the "saintly and religious men who are completely inexperienced in the affairs and wickedness of men. As they are themselves simple and holy, they think all judges and inquisitors in these matters are

like them and consider it to be the greatest crime if we do not revere all public courts as sacrosanct and incapable of error" [49].

The second group Spee indicts is comprised of lawyers for whom prosecuting witches has become a lucrative business. With fervent demonstrations of piety, they apply for the job of inquisitor, telling the princes of the grave dangers the witches pose and how measures must be taken to stop them. In the third group are the ignorant commoners who take revenge on their enemies by defaming them with slanders. If every silly rumor is not investigated at once, they threaten to go after the officials themselves and their families. Finally there are the inquisitors who do the devil's work and turn out themselves to be sorcerers, as a number of them, after being accused and tortured, have confessed [50–51].

As one can tell from the foregoing, the *Cautio* is not a calmly argued essay on jurisprudence. It is a shrill cry to stop a travesty of

Delrio never went into the dungeons or spoke with the accused. He never experienced first hand what the inquisitors meant by first, second, and third degrees of torture.

justice, and toward that end Spee used every rhetorical device he ever learned, especially when it came to torture. "It is incredible," he writes, "what people say under the compulsion of torture, and how many lies they will tell about themselves and about others; in the end whatever the torturers want to be true is true" [83]. Spee describes the use of an iron press on the shinbone of the leg, how

the press squeezes the flesh like "cake" with blood spurting out from both sides [77]. And this is only the first degree.

"It makes my blood boil," Spee writes, when he recalls speaking to two inquisitors about Jesuit theologian Adam Tanner. Tanner too had raised questions about the inquisitors' conduct.⁵⁶ Spee was

⁵⁶ Bavarian Jesuit Adam Tanner devoted a number of pages to questioning the conduct of the witch trials in his four volume (1627) *Theologia Scholastica*. Tanner considerably influenced Spee, who cites him several times in the *Cautio*. At least in Bavaria, Tanner seems to have made a greater impact on Catholics than Spee's anonymous work. See Wolfgang Behringer, *Witchcraft Persecutions in Bavaria: Popular Magic, Religious Zealotry, and Reason of State in Early Modern Europe*. Trans. by J.C. Grayson and David Lederer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

not the first to express doubts about the witch trials, but the first to voice them so loudly and at length. The inquisitors told Spee how, if they got the chance, they would put Tanner on the rack [131]. Make me an inquisitor, Spee fumes, and I'll wring confessions out of all the priests and prelates in Germany [132]. Arrest and torture the Capuchins, Jesuits, and all the other religious clergy. They will confess. If any should deny it, repeat it three or four times. They will confess [85]. He tells of an inquisitor who after a few drinks boasted how he could wring a confession out of the pope himself [193].

Spee spoke the truth to power. He reproached bishops, religious superiors, respected academics, his fellow Jesuits, and virtually the entire legal profession. Not even the emperor was spared. But the princes were the primary target of his criticisms for their negligence, tolerating this gross injustice by leaving these matters to underlings. "They are ravaging their lands worse than any war could" [21].

Those in power should know how torture is being applied repeatedly without legal restraint. Spee appealed to their sense of decency. "Certainly there is not a single German nobleman who could bear to see his hunting dog mangled like this. Who then can bear it if a person is mutilated so many times" [87]? No longer can those with ultimate authority plead ignorance of the judicial criminality. Spee compares himself to a bellowing watchdog in the night, waking the household to imminent danger [138].

Spee's barking was not all oratory. He knew the literature produced by "experts" like Binsfeld and Delrio. But Spee had studied and taught logic, and he used it relentlessly to demolish the arguments of the demonologists. Time and again he shows the circularity of their reasoning: A is true because of B, and B is true because of A. One of the reasons the *Cautio* still attracts readers is its lively disputation format. Spee's most recent translator puts it aptly: "Disputations in which students argued opposing sides of a particular thesis were a fundamental part of Jesuit pedagogy, and Spee shows himself here to be a master of the art. The cut and thrust of argument and counterargument elevates the work above a dry, textbook discussion."⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Marcus Hellyer, "Translator's Introduction," *Cautio Criminalis*, xxix-xxx.

To give just one example: a monk was accused of being at a witches' Sabbath at the same time when the entire monastery swore he was chanting his prayers with the other monks in choir. Was it really the accused monk or an apparition of the devil? Would God allow the devil to assume the form of an innocent person? Delrio wrote that he had never read or heard of God allowing such a thing. The argument proves too much and thus nothing at all, Spee retorts. Any number of things have truly happened that Delrio never read or heard of [187, 189]. Spee derides Delrio and those like him, who claim to know what God would and would not permit. God allowed the deaths of Christian martyrs and innocent children. Why not innocent people accused of witchcraft?

Delrio never went into the dungeons or spoke with the accused. He never experienced first hand what the inquisitors meant by first, second, and third degrees of torture. Spee did and in the *Cautio* describes his experience in detail. In a final chapter for readers who want only the bottom line, Spee summed up the "usual procedure" of the witch trials in a "brief overview." Strikingly Spee's summary corresponds to the findings of the most recent scholarship, particularly regarding the complicity of the general public.

It all begins with superstition, envy, and calumnies. Something goes amiss, and people clamor for an inquisition. All the divine punishments described in the Bible now come from witches. God and nature are no longer responsible for any mishap; witches do it all. The princes tell judges to investigate but they don't have any evidence and don't know where to begin. People start saying such delays are suspicious [214–15].

A specially commissioned inquisitor may be brought in, someone ignorant and unskilled or an indigent greedy man with a large family, who is paid a fee for every witch he burns. On the basis of a malicious rumor, a charge is brought against some poor old woman. An investigation is made into her life. If it has been evil, one may assume further malice; if it has been virtuous, that also is evidence, for witches regularly conceal themselves under the appearance of virtue.

The old woman is ordered into prison, where she either shows fear or does not. If she shows fear (for she has heard about the torture), that is evidence of her bad conscience. If she shows no fear (trusting in her innocence), that too is evidence, for witches are said

to present themselves with heads held high. Because this is an “exceptional crime,” the old woman is not provided defense counsel. Those who criticize this are called “witch-lovers” (*sagarum patronos*).

To give some appearance of a fair trial, the old woman is read the evidence and given a hearing. If she defends herself well, this is taken as new evidence. If she were not a witch, she would not be so eloquent. As if she had not answered the accusations, the decree of torture is read. The old woman is then stripped and shaved of all her hair, including pubic hair, lest she have something hidden to prevent feeling the pain. Then she is tortured until she tells the truth, that is, until she confesses her guilt, since nothing else is accepted as true.

Inquisitors begin applying the first degree of torture, which in reality is quite horrible and milder only in comparison to the higher degrees.

Inquisitors begin applying the first degree of torture, which in reality is quite horrible and milder only in comparison to the higher degrees. If she confesses, the records say it was without torture. Why shouldn't the princes and people believe these confessions, when they were extracted without torture? If she does not confess, she can be tortured repeatedly, since there are no restrictions when it comes to “exceptional crimes.” If she dies under the torture, they say that the devil broke her neck, and the executioner buries her body beneath the gallows.

If the old woman still refuses to confess, the judges may have her imprisoned for as long as a year. Contrary to the law, she cannot prove her innocence by withstanding the torture, since that would embarrass the inquisitors. She must be found guilty at any cost. Judges are reluctant to execute anyone for witchcraft without a confession, but if they have to, they will. At this point, Spee interrupts his detailed narrative with a rhetorical appeal: for the love of God, if she must die, whether she confesses or not, how can any innocent person escape?

You miserable woman! What are you hoping for? Why did you not declare yourself guilty when you first entered the prison? Why, you foolish and insane woman, do you wish to die many times when you can do it just once? Follow my advice, and before any torture

just say that you are guilty and die. You will not escape, for this, after all, is the catastrophe of Germany's zeal [219].

Once the accused confesses her guilt, she is forced to denounce other witches. Often the inquisitor will suggest names. Sometimes word leaks out, but that too has its advantages.

If the persons denounced flee, it is evidence of a guilty conscience. If they do not, it is evidence that the devil is holding them fast. If they defend themselves to the inquisitors, this is taken as indicative of a bad conscience. The same thing happens when an enemy calumniates you. To keep still is evidence you are guilty. To protest your innocence is to arouse suspicion, and the calumny spreads wider. No matter what your sex or station, no matter how much wealth and honor you have, if you have an enemy who suspects you of practicing magic, you are not safe.

Spee closes the *Cautio* with a final appeal to the princes. Their immortal souls are in danger for countenancing the death of innocent people through their neglect. God will demand an accounting. Spee admits he has spoken out with passion. But he will not be numbered among those the Bible describes as dogs that will not bark (Isa. 56:10).

Despite the howls of his critics, Spee's bark was heard. Johann Philipp von Schönborn had met Spee and read the *Cautio*; as Prince Bishop of Würzburg (1642) and then Mainz (1647), he put an end to

the witch trials in his territories.⁵⁸

Spee helped bring an end to a shameful conjunction of religious superstition and legally countenanced injustice, and for this alone he deserves to be remembered.

But Spee seems to have influenced Protestants more than Catholics. In the same year Spee died (1635), Lutheran theologian Johann Meyfart made the first partial German translation. The first complete German translation (1647) is credited with influencing Queen Christina of Sweden to put a halt to the witch trials in her domains. Subse-

quent translations were made in Dutch, French, and Polish. At the turn of the century, Protestant jurist, Christian Thomasius (1655–1728), is credited with overcoming the witch-hunts in Prussia. He

⁵⁸ Van Oorschot, *Cautio Criminalis*, 632.

wrote how, after being fully convinced that witches existed, the scales fell from his eyes while reading the *Cautio*.

Spee was not the only critic of the way witch trials were being conducted, but his was the most sustained and articulate critique, capable of gripping readers even today, nearly four-hundred years later. Spee helped bring an end to a shameful conjunction of religious superstition and legally countenanced injustice, and for this alone he deserves to be remembered. But his life and work are not limited to mere historical interest, if we look to the man behind the *Cautio* and to the spirituality that sustained him. Our age may be less superstitious than his, but it is no less fraught with the kind of systemic social injustice that calls for watchdogs like Spee.

In many ways Spee's poems and book of virtues resemble the paintings and decor that embellished the churches typical of his day.

Spee's Jesuit Spirituality

Ignatian Spirituality in a Baroque Mode

At this point it warrants reiterating the questions posed at the onset of this essay. The foregoing account of Spee and his times cannot help but pique our curiosity. Where did Spee get the courage to risk his life and exclusion from the Society by speaking out on behalf of the women accused of witchcraft? What did he say to them in those dungeons when he heard their confessions, when he saw the results of the torture? How did he try to save them from despair as he accompanied them to their deaths by fire?

Answers to questions like these are not found in the *Cautio*. But they are insinuated in Spee's other writings, where we can see that his own courage and the comfort he tried to impart to the accused witches were rooted, to no surprise, in his Ignatian spirituality. What is surprising, though, is that, despite some very real problems posed for us moderns by its seventeenth-century articulation, Spee's reading of Jesuit spirituality is remarkably appropriate to

our day. He has something to say to anyone serious about the Gospel and Ignatian spirituality for our times.

We find Spee's spirituality in his posthumously published *Güldenes Tugend-Buch* on the virtues and the verses in his *Trutz-Nachtigall*. Unlike the *Cautio*, which he wrote in Latin for an educated elite, these were books Spee wrote in German for lay people. And therein lies the problem for today's readers and the reason neither book is likely to find an English translation. More than the *Cautio*, both his poetry and book of virtues bear the marks of their Baroque origins.

In many ways Spee's poems and book of virtues resemble the paintings and decor that embellished the churches typical of his day. Both are unrestrained in their exuberance of imagery, color, and detail. Before long we want to say enough already. Though most of us still visit those Baroque churches and may even admire their artistry and execution, we tend to find them excessive. Our aesthetic sensibilities prefer more subtlety.

Modern readers tend to have the same reaction reading Spee's book of virtues with their seventy songs intended to "ignite all the hearts in the whole wide world." Even more so with the fifty-one poems of the "Rival Nightingale: A Poetic Spiritual Pleasure-Garden."⁵⁹ The peculiar title seems to come from Spee's resolve to prove himself a match for Martin Luther, whom his admirers had crowned the "Wittenberg Nightingale." In that age of confessional one-upmanship, Spee was a Counter-Reformation Catholic determined to prove that Protestants were not the only ones who knew how to write good hymns in their native tongue. Catholics could praise God in German too, and Spee was bent on giving them the words to do it.

Spee intended his verses to be sung, and some he set to music himself. He had been writing in this genre since his earliest years as a Jesuit, when he wrote songs for his catechism classes. Hymns were his first works to be published and were to be found in various collections, although without attribution, so that it is not always easy today to determine which ones are genuinely his. Several hymns known with certainty to be Spee's are still sung today in German

⁵⁹ Friedrich Spee, *Trutz-Nachtigall*, edited by Theo G.M. van Oorschot, (Bern: Francke, 1985).

Catholic and Protestant churches, and one of his poems was set to music by Johannes Brahms.⁶⁰

Setting the tone for the entire book, Spee describes himself in the first poem as a “rival nightingale,” wounded by the “sweet arrow” of love for Jesus. Spee’s ardor can become cloying with his regular recourse to diminutives like “little flame” and “little flower.” Equally alien to our tastes are the images drawn from classic Latin poetry, describing Jesus as the shepherd Daphnis or “chaste love, Cupid pure.” Spee borrows too from the bridal imagery of the biblical Song of Songs, and, in a long line of Christian mystics before him and J.S. Bach after, he writes of the feminine soul (*anima*) longing for Christ, her spouse. In verses reminiscent of the Latin hymns for matins or vespers, Spee waxes lyrical over the beauties of creation. “When dawn dispels the night with its golden rays,” joyfully he awakens and calls to God. “When murky gloom at eventide clothes us in dark shadows,” he ponders his sins and the brevity of life. He closes with a challenge to the world to raise its voice in a songfest in praise of God.

The prose in Spee’s *Güldenes Tugend-Buch* is less rhapsodic than his verses, but here too his exuberance shines through. Why describe the heavenly host greeting new arrivals with just harps or trumpets? Why not flutes and cymbals, pipes and drums? Whether describing the tortures suffered by the martyrs or the bounty of the Creator, why just two examples when he can think of ten? And here too modern readers are likely to be put off by emotion-laden avowals of love for “sweet Jesus.”

In his book on the virtues as in his poetry, one has to get beneath the excesses to realize that Spee was no mere sentimentalist. Behind the diminutives and florid language, one still finds the lion

Behind the diminutives and florid language, one still finds the lion of the Cautio, a spiritual director eager to arouse in his charges and readers great desires to love and serve God by growing in the theological virtues that lie at the heart of any Christian spirituality.

⁶⁰Kurt Küppers, “Trutz-Nachtigal,” in Michael Sievernich, S.J., *Friedrich von Spee: Priester-Poet-Prophet* (Frankfurt a/M: Knecht, 1986), 83.

of the *Cautio*, a spiritual director eager to arouse in his charges and readers great desires to love and serve God by growing in the theological virtues that lie at the heart of any Christian spirituality.

Spee informs his readers at the outset that his *Güldenes Tugend-Buch* was not meant for scholars. And like Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises* from which he clearly took his inspiration, it was not meant

to be read so much as put into practice.⁶¹ The book is written in the form of a fictitious conversation between himself and a woman penitent who comes to him for weekly confession and desires to grow in her spiritual life. He responds by giving her precise instructions on how to take a quarter- or a half-hour each day for praying over and practicing the virtues of faith, hope, and

*Where did Spee get the courage to risk his life and write the *Cautio*? Was it perhaps not his spirituality but the fact that he was assigned to hear the confessions of the accused witches?*

love. The primary readership Spee intended for his book does indeed appear to have been women.⁶² But it could serve just as well as a handbook for priest confessors giving spiritual direction to lay people.

Along with its practical, pastoral design, Spee's virtue book draws from the *Spiritual Exercises* in its instructions for "application of the senses." He encourages readers to use their imaginations and express their feelings. Imagine yourself conversing with the apostles, he tells them, or being faced with martyrdom, lying on your death-bed, or looking at all the sick people in the world. Repeatedly he asks readers to pray with sighs of joy, sorrow, or longing. He has them take their pulse and whisper a short prayer with every heart-beat. Some of his instructions strike us as quaint. Others may remind us of the Eastern meditative practices popularized by the late An-

⁶¹Spee, *Güldenes Tugend-Buch*, 11.

⁶²Schools for teaching catechism to children arose in and around Cologne at this time, taught by women who took the vow of chastity but lived outside the cloister, so-called *Virgines Devotæ* or *Devotissen*. These women appear to have been the primary intended readership. See Ludwig M. Kuckhoff, "Friedrich Spees *Güldenes Tugend-Buch*," in Giunther Franz (ed.), *Friedrich Spee zum 400. Geburtstag: Kolloquium der Friedrich-Spee-Gesellschaft Trier* (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 1995), 161.

thony De Mello. But at their heart, *mutatis mutandis*, they also remind us of Karl Rahner with their earnest attempt to communicate to ordinary people an Ignatian spirituality of everyday life.

“In Spe Spes Fuerat”

As a child of his times, it's no surprise that the substance of Spee's spirituality was that of a Counter-Reformation Catholic Jesuit. But while entirely within the pale of Catholic orthodoxy, Spee was also willing to push at the limits. And it is in his efforts to transcend the confessional boundaries of his time that we see how his particular take on Ignatian spirituality can inform and enrich our own.

Spee is quite traditional in his treatment of faith, which he describes as an intellectual assent to truths revealed by God and taught us by the Church. This is what the manuals used to describe as *fides quod*, adherence to articles of faith, creedal formulas, and dogmas. In his chapters on faith, Spee has the reader pray over the words of the Apostles' Creed, Bible stories, and stories of martyrs who suffered for their faith.

Likewise traditional is Spee's treatment of love, which comprises more than half the book. With medieval tradition he distinguishes between two kinds of love. The first, the love that desires something for itself (*amor concupiscentiæ*), Spee identifies with hope. The second is love proper, the kind that wishes well (*amor benevolentia*) and gives of itself to another (*amor amicitia*).

For Spee as for Ignatius, love is to be manifested more in deeds than in words, and the two great commandments are essentially one; one shows love for God by loving others. One brings greater glory to God by helping souls. Spee urges his reader to buy a poor person a loaf of bread. Care about children's education; buy schoolbooks for a student who can't afford them. More challenging still, overcome your disgust at the stench and visit a hospital, bring a meal to the sick, wash their linens, make their beds.

Thus far, nothing related here about Spee's spirituality could be called unconventional. Except perhaps for his lyricism, nothing in his expression of Ignatian spirituality would set him apart from other Jesuits. More to the point, nothing so far suggests an answer to the questions posed above. Where did Spee get the courage to risk his life and write the *Cautio*? Was it perhaps not his spirituality

but the fact that he was assigned to hear the confessions of the accused witches?

But Spee was hardly unique in receiving such an assignment. Indeed, some of his sharpest criticism in the *Cautio* is directed against priest-confessors who give no consolation to the accused women. Refusing to hear of any protestations of innocence, they only harangue the women to confess to the same crimes they did under torture. Spee tells us about a priest who accompanied almost two hundred witches to their deaths absolving only one or two of them after they had confessed their crime. God will demand an accounting from these ignorant priests, Spee thunders. They are asking for sacrilegious confessions, and the poor wretches who refuse to commit the sacrilege die "like dogs" without the sacraments.⁶³

It is in the context of experiences like these that we need to read the pages Spee devoted to hope. Here we can detect the source of Spee's courage, whether it was to write the *Cautio* or to minister to the wounded soldiers and risk the infection that eventually took his life. Here too we can surmise some idea of what he said to console the condemned women and to overcome their despair.

In a book meant for spiritual reading and pastoral use, Spee chose to forgo a formal, scholastic definition of hope and describe it instead with a variety of verbs. To hope means to long for, yearn for, sigh for God. It means we put ourselves completely in God's hands from which we wait and look for all that is good. That we hope means that we "trust and count" on God (GTB 20).

Spee says nothing in his virtue book about doing penances; his emphasis is on trust in God's mercy and grace.

As noted above, Spee identified hope with the love of desire for God (*amor concupiscentiæ*) as distinct from love proper, which the scholastics identified as bene-

volence (*amor benevolentia*) and friendship (*amor amicitia*). The point is important to make only because Spee declared the distinction to be more virtual than real. He has observed, Spee writes, that spiritual writers often confuse the two kinds of love and attribute the quali-

⁶³ *Cautio Criminalis*, 66; Ritter, 76–77.

ties of one to the other. The reason they do, he explains, is that we need to have both kinds of love for God. To have the love that is friendship, you necessarily have to have the hope that is the love of desire (GTB 30).

The foregoing may seem like scholastic hair-splitting on Spee's part. But we need to remember that he was working in a theological minefield. It was the pre-ecumenical heyday of the Counter-Reformation. Catholics and Protestants were slaughtering each other in a Thirty Years War ostensibly over issues of faith and the gospel. And of the various verbs with which he described hope, the one he used most consistently was trust, which is to say, the *fides fiducialis* of Luther's *sola fide*.

Sola fide for Luther and his reform movement was the doctrine by which the church stands or falls, the heart of the gospel message: salvation comes not from good works but solely from trusting in God's mercy.⁶⁴ Luther saw love as a good work, at the heart of the works righteousness for which he attacked Catholic tradition as being contrary to the gospel. The Council of Trent condemned the idea of salvation *sola fide*. Catholic theology insisted that faith is an intellectual assent to revelation that is a response to grace but must be informed and enlivened by love.

In short, as strange as it may seem to us today, faith and love had become red flags. They had become slogans of contention, as much as the Lutheran *sola* and the Catholic *et*. And here was Spee claiming in so many words that the conflict was theoretical, that Lutheran trust (*fides fiducialis*) was equivalent to hope in Catholic tradition and that in reality neither trust nor love existed without the other.

It is worth noting here that, when Spee's *Güldenenes Tugend-Buch* was published, Archbishop Johann Philipp von Schönborn, an admirer of Spee and a friend of Leibnitz, sent a copy of it to the Lutheran philosopher. Leibnitz was impressed by Spee's ability to reconcile Catholic and Lutheran convictions and praised it as "clearly a godly book" (*divinus plane libellus*).⁶⁵ Spee's chapters on hope, with

⁶⁴ See *The Augsburg Confession*, XX,26 and *The Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, IV,86, Theodore G. Tappert (ed.), *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959). My thanks to Dr. Bernhard Asen (Saint Louis University) for his assistance in providing an accurate reading of Lutheran theology in this matter.

their frequent biblical citations and constant references to God's infinite mercy and love, evidently spoke to Leibnitz's Lutheran piety and served as a major cause for his enthusiasm.

Spee opens the section on hope with a series of rhetorical questions. Would you dare to doubt God's mercy, even if you were the world's greatest sinner? Would you despair of God's mercy, if you were at sea in a sinking ship with no priest present? Or in a situation not dissimilar from that of the accused witches, would you despair, if you were infected with a terrible disease and no priest would come near to give you absolution?

Citing Isaiah (49:15), Spee asks, "Can a mother forget her child"? He goes on to describe God as father and mother, then mixing the metaphors even more, as sister and brother, help and refuge [GTB 128]. Dwelling on God as having a motherly heart, he

describes God as a "mighty empress," who loves each of us like her favorite child in danger of death. With an analogy even more original, he likens God to a heap of gunpowder big as the earth. Could it help but explode if ignited? So too is it God's nature to be merciful. Spee argues his point

Spee did not deny the existence of Purgatory but professed that God has given us "infallible means" to escape it.

from the psalms, the prophets, and the parables of Luke, which he describes as God's "true, infallible word" [GTB 151]. The greater our misery, the more glorious God's mercy. God wills all people, even the greatest sinner, to be saved.

Spee betrays the influence of medieval Augustinian tradition as well as the first week of the *Spiritual Exercises*, in focusing his anthropology on human sinfulness. Our situation is such that all we can do is trust in God's gracious mercy. Like Ignatius in the Principle and Foundation, Spee counsels his readers against hanging their hearts on any creature; only God can give you the peace you long for. Trust not in your own strength, but only in the power of God. When you feel lost and alone and think your heart will break, look

⁶⁵ Kuckhoff, "Tugend-Buch," 160, 175.

at the crucified Christ, who prayed, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Even though Spee’s *Güldenenes Tugend-Buch* was first published posthumously, it still needed approval by the Society. Not surprisingly, it was in connection with his thinking on trust that his Jesuit censors had the greatest difficulty with Spee’s theology. Fortunately, the original manuscript still exists and allows comparison with the published version and to see where Spee’s thinking on hope was considered too innovative for his times. Two major omissions from that first edition deserve notice here.

Spee encourages his readers to grow in faith and trust in God by reading the Bible. So far so good. But then he goes on to point out that one has to admire how much Protestants are strengthened and consoled in all manner of adversities by reading Scripture. If Protestants could draw such hope and reliance on God with their “wrongheaded” understanding of Scripture, how much more could Catholics, obedient to the church, grow in hope and trust with their proper understanding of the Bible [GTB 76]. Even with Spee’s rebuff of Protestant biblical interpretation, his censors took scissors to the text. Holding Protestants up as models of virtue was, if nothing else, “offensive to pious ears.”

Not just a paragraph, as in the above instance, but an entire chapter hit the cutting room floor, when the censors came to Spee’s treatment of purgatory and the question of forgiveness of punishment as well as sin [GTB 158–162]. The Council of Trent, in its 12th canon on penance, held that punishment (*pœna*) remains even after forgiveness of guilt (*culpa*). Spee says nothing in his virtue book about doing penances; his emphasis is on trust in God’s mercy and grace. And in the situation of condemned women facing a death by fire (*fewr*), there was no question of consoling them with the thought of dying and plunging into the flames of purgatory (*Fegfewr*).

If we don’t have the words Spee spoke to accused witches when he visited them in their cells or accompanied them to their deaths, we do have his theology of grace. In a conversation between himself and his reader, he asks a leading question. If a Turk, a Jew or a pagan sinned his entire life but converted on his deathbed and was baptized, would he not upon dying escape purgatory and go straight to heaven as God’s beloved child? Of course, is the answer, for that is traditional Catholic teaching. Would God then, Spee asks

rhetorically, be any less generous to a Christian who receives the sacraments before dying? Trent notwithstanding, he finds the answer obvious.

Spee then becomes even more speculative. What if that Turk or pagan wanted to convert but was killed for his Christian faith before he could be baptized? Would he not enter heaven immediately as a martyr? Again the answer is yes. Baptism of desire (*in voto*) and of blood both have long histories in Catholic tradition. So, Spee asks his readers, are you willing to be a martyr? Are you willing to die a martyr's death? And if that Turk or pagan would be able to escape purgatory with a quick thrust of a sword or blade, would not the same be true for Christians who are willing to die for their faith but must suffer a slow martyrdom of many years struggling with the world, the flesh, and the devil?

Spee did not deny the existence of purgatory but professed that God has given us "infallible means" to escape it. He remained within the boundaries of Catholic orthodoxy, but was breaking new ground with his thinking about "*martyrium in voto*." It was the generally accepted view of Catholic theologians that an evil intention (like committing adultery in one's heart) was already sinful before the act. Spee was only carrying that line of thinking to its logical conclusions. If one could commit a sin in one's heart and reap the punishment, why couldn't one do a good deed in one's heart and reap the reward, including the reward for a heroic deed like martyrdom?

Spee's censors did not think a book on spirituality for lay people was the proper place for trailblazing new paths in theology. The chapter was troublesome not only for its innovative thinking on Purgatory but its affinity to Lutheran piety. Don't think about your works, Spee counseled his readers. Don't worry about your merits. "You should have a greater opinion of God's generosity, for that gives him glory. . . . Just put your trust in God's generosity and the blood of Christ; for it is not child's play that God died for you." Put yourself into the hands of God who is "a thousand times more gentle and generous than we imagine" [GTB 160].

Spee closed his section on hope with several reflections and exercises on the Lord's Prayer, where he cites the method suggested by Ignatius in the *Spiritual Exercises*. Say the prayer slowly, take as long as an hour if you wish, dwell on the meaning of each phrase.

Would you like to say the Lord's Prayer in only three words? Then simply pray "*Dein Wille geschehe,*" thy will be done. Put your hope and trust in God by praying those three words throughout the day. Once his readers had learned to grow in hope and trust with exercises like these, Spee could then go on to instruct them on what it means to love.

The foregoing, I believe, answers the questions I posed above about Spee's courage and ability to console. Charles Péguy once described hope as the little sister that walks between her big sisters, faith and love. Spee, whose very name engendered thoughts of hope, gave that often neglected virtue more serious reflection than it usually gets from theologians. Trusting in God's grace and mercy was the source of Friedrich Spee's courage to speak the truth to power, even at the risk of his life and vocation as a Jesuit.

As for his message to women tempted to despair as they looked forward to death by fire, the answer is the same. Though we don't have his exact words as he walked them to the stake, we can surmise them: Just keep repeating, thy will be done, thy will be done. Put your trust in God's love and mercy. Think of those martyrs who gave their lives for their faith. Imagine yourself a martyr dying for Christ. The heavens are opening for you. Make your suffering and death a martyrdom.

In a culture more given to patriarchy than our own, he anticipated the encouragement of GC 34 to "listen carefully and courageously to the experience of women."

As noted at the beginning of this essay, the fact Spee's *Cautio* compared the accused witches to the early Christian martyrs was one of the reasons Bishop Pelcking found it a "most poisonous book." Spee may have been treading close to the limits of Catholic orthodoxy at the time, but the fact that he regarded the executed women as martyrs *in voto* was arguably the main reason he could write rhapsodic hymns about the beauties of dawn or ever get to sleep at night.

A Role Model for Today?

A 17th century Jesuit exemplifying what it means to be a Jesuit today? It's not exactly what someone would expect. When the Thirty-Second General Congregation defined the promotion of justice as integral to the Jesuits' service of faith, many both in and outside the Society wondered if this was a break with its tradition. Spee's life provides just one more argument against any such misgiving.

When GC 34 expanded the concept of justice beyond that of economics, it challenged Jesuits academically equipped to do so to go beyond the service that alleviates the consequences of injustice and to provide a social analysis and theological reflection on its causes [400].⁶⁶ Three hundred years before concepts like "social analysis" and "theological reflection" existed, Spee was doing just that. Even at the risk of riling authorities, he did his thinking outside the box, at the edges of orthodoxy, and in solidarity with the most marginalized in his society.

Spee presaged GC 34's insistence that being "friends of the Lord" means being "friends of the poor" [34] and its acknowledgment that oppression today has a distinctively "feminine face" [364]. In a culture more given to patriarchy than our own, he anticipated the encouragement of GC 34 to "listen carefully and courageously to the experience of women" [372].

At the request for a description of Jesuit identity in our time, the 32nd General Congregation responded with the following:

What is it to be a companion of Jesus today? It is to engage, under the standard of the Cross, in the crucial struggle of our time: the struggle for faith and that struggle for justice which it includes.⁶⁷

Those words are inscribed on the tomb of the six Jesuit martyrs of El Salvador. They could just as well be inscribed on the tomb of Friedrich Spee.

⁶⁶ *Documents of the Thirty-fourth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1995).

⁶⁷ *Documents of the 31st and 32nd General Congregations of the Society of Jesus* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1977), 401, #12.

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