

as a sort of building committee. The church also employed *voorlezers*, those who read scripture (and in some instances could read sermons already printed and approved) and *voorzangers* who led the congregation in song. One set of documents outlines the hiring of a bell-ringer, who did more than ring the bell at appropriate times (and summon the minister when the service was about to begin) and so also dug graves, prepared the sanctuary for services, and acted as a sort of “head usher.” When the church needed a manse for Selijns, the deacons were engaged to pay for its building. The deacons held monies separate from the elders. So the new building was to be erected and the church would pay rent to the deacons. And they would have space in the parsonage for a deaconry as well. An odd set of documents note a theological matter. A certain Jacob Koelman is reported to have caused significant difficulty in the Netherlands. He was suspected of being Labidist, or of an experiential sect that among other things condemned church ceremonies. Apparently a couple recent immigrants were spreading Koelman’s ideas and so disturbing church folk.

Finally, I add a word of appreciation for Sypher’s attention to the Dutch text. His copious footnotes offer insight not only of translation, but of the various abbreviations used in the original. This work of scholarship is invaluable to those who work with texts, and adds to our fund of knowledge in the use of seventeenth-century Dutch. Sypher even had a special character designed for this volume to replicate one such abbreviation! His introduction gives the documents an appropriate historical context. *Liber A* is a noteworthy addition to the growing body of literature, original and otherwise, on the Dutch colony in New York, and so is central to our understanding of the history of the United States.

Rainer Decker. *Witchcraft & the Papacy: An Account Drawing on the Formerly Secret Records of the Roman Inquisition*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008. xv + 262 pp. \$45.00. Review by BRETT F. PARKER, ISOTHERMAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE.

One of the great values of Rainer Decker’s sweeping treatment of the papacy’s role in European witchcraft trials from the late middle

ages to the modern era is to contextualize the Church's position on witchcraft against the backdrop of the constant struggle between secular and ecclesiastical authorities, as well as its attempt to limit potential heresy while not enflaming persecutions. In tracing the development of papal ideas on the nature and purpose of *maleficium*, Decker weaves a refreshing account of papal moderation and skepticism. Arguing that modern notions of witchcraft, both in the sense of evil deeds (*maleficia*) and pacts with the devil, were slow to develop, Decker emphasizes the Church's role in minimizing judicial abuses, restraining overzealous inquisitors, and preferring pastoral care in many cases over punishment. He also piggybacks on recent scholarship suggesting that not all witchcraft charges were aimed at women and that men constituted a "surprising high" proportion of accused especially in upper Italy (213). In all these ways, Decker provides a reasoned and balanced account of the Catholic Church's response to witchcraft, noting that there was "no dominant teaching" about the devil and magic but rather "a multitude of theories and ways of dealing practically" with the problem (215).

Much of the importance of Decker's work rests in the novelty of his sources. Having gained access to the Archive of the Holy Office in 1996, Decker unearthed a wealth of information from the protocols of the Roman Inquisition, sources that not only pointed to papal restraint in local persecutions of suspected witches but indicate a deep suspicion over the centuries of the validity of magic. Because of this incredulity, inquisitors "paid little attention to the magic that was widely used by ordinary people" in the late middle ages (14). What is important in this period, however, is the discernment of whether the devil was invoked or played any role in the art of magic. In most cases, the Church's view was that claims of magic were exaggerated or harmless and certainly not heretical. Moreover, adjuration and leniency were the preferred modes of resolving the matter. Thus, by the close of the fourteenth century, the church had no defined policy about what constituted witchcraft.

Things changed in the fifteenth century, however, as greater acceptance of witchcraft coincided with the growth of witch trials in the Alpine region. Papal documents show that in response to requests from local inquisitors, popes now accepted the concept of witchcraft

and linked it with apostasy, resulting in an increased number of death sentences. This new turn was most famously steered by Heinrich Kramer, whose book *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487) called for more aggressive witch-hunting. While Kramer was authorized to conduct trials by more than one pope, Decker rightfully notes that the Church had bigger fights with conciliarists and, in the following century, had little influence in German territories. This did not preclude the Church's involvement in the trials in Venice and Spain, which were often in response to criticism by secular authorities about ecclesiastical abuses. But Decker's conclusion is again that the church was not proactive or zealous but rather temperate in its encouragement of greater spirituality and its insistence on "high standards of proof" (84).

Moderation was more formerly institutionalized in the *Instruction Concerning Witchcraft Trials*, an early seventeenth-century document prescribing procedural matters in the cases of suspected witches. Not only did the *Instruction* cast doubt on the employment of the devil in magic but also afforded the accused greater rights. By imposing these measures on ecclesiastical judges, Decker insists that *Instruction* became a model for witchcraft trails over the next century and even helped prevent or limit witch crazes in Italy. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, caution continued to be the guiding principle of the Church. Death sentences continued to decline overall, although papal bulls calling for the death penalty in cases of desecration of the host were issued. It is worth noting that Decker sees the Church as still regarding *maleficia* as potentially a serious crime in the nineteenth century, but adds that it still overlooked a large number of minor infractions and, at least in Italy, worked diligently to limit the number of trials that scarred much of Europe.

On the whole, Decker has written a thoughtful, well-researched, and balanced account of the papacy's response to witchcraft. He adroitly blends the dynamics of local witchcraft cases over six centuries with the variety of ecclesiastical responses that shaped the Catholic Church's understanding of the nature of witchcraft, its distinction between the evil acts themselves and their intent, and ultimately the need for spiritual care and procedural caution.