

Martin Elbel: *Magic and witch-hunts in early modern Europe*

Although the course will deal mainly with European witch-hunts, its scope is much wider. It aims at analysing the role of magic in European culture. Early cultural anthropologists (Tylor, Frazer) saw magic as a primitive form of human thought and behaviour which had been eventually replaced first by religion and later by science. Next generations of scholars however discovered that the relationship between magic, religion and science was much more complex, with blurred and overlapping boundaries.

Yet European history is marked with regular attempts to define and delineate magic, religion and science as three distinct ways of thought and behaviour. The seminar will discuss some of these attempts (which culminated in early modern witch-hunts) and their impact on European culture. It will demonstrate that the changing attitudes towards magic helped to define not only Europe's main religious systems (Judaism, Christianity) but also modern science.

Another broader issue related to European witch-hunts is the 'mechanism of persecution'. Why witch-hunts emerged and gained such a devastating momentum? Why did they start only in the fifteenth century and culminated in the period we associate with the birth of modern Europe? What did trigger the violence and what did it nourish? And also what factors contributed to their end? How can be witch-hunts compared to other 'witch-hunts' (anti-Semitism and the Shoah, Communist terror, McCarthyism)? These are just some of the questions the course wants to broach and discuss.