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The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages

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The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages

Abstract

This volume emerged from the Wiles Lectures delivered at Queen's University, Belfast, in 2006, and the four chapters of the work retain their original character. The tone is light and breezy throughout. Complex problems are rendered accessible, such that the book might work well in advanced undergraduate courses dealing with medieval science, intellectual culture, or magic. The topic Bartlett tackles is obviously enormous, and in the scope of four short lectures, he can only begin to address the many profound issues that arise from serious consideration of what the Middle Ages meant by "natural" and "supernatural." Experts will not find much new ground broken. Neither is the work a systematic overview, focusing more often on well-chosen examples rather than presenting a coherent survey, but it succeeds admirably in providing clear illustrations of major trends.

Disciplines

European History | History of Religion | Medieval History | Other History

Comments

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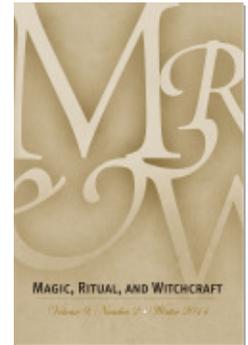
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The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages **(review)**

Michael D. Bailey

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Reviews

ROBERT BARTLETT. *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. x + 170.

This volume emerged from the Wiles Lectures delivered at Queen's University, Belfast, in 2006, and the four chapters of the work retain their original character. The tone is light and breezy throughout. Complex problems are rendered accessible, such that the book might work well in advanced undergraduate courses dealing with medieval science, intellectual culture, or magic. The topic Bartlett tackles is obviously enormous, and in the scope of four short lectures, he can only begin to address the many profound issues that arise from serious consideration of what the Middle Ages meant by "natural" and "supernatural." Experts will not find much new ground broken. Neither is the work a systematic overview, focusing more often on well-chosen examples rather than presenting a coherent survey, but it succeeds admirably in providing clear illustrations of major trends.

Bartlett addresses the basic issue of medieval conceptions of the natural and the supernatural in his first chapter. He notes that nature is a vast and mutable concept that must always be defined against something. His real focus falls on the thirteenth century, where ideas of the supernatural first clearly appear. Earlier medieval centuries had classified various things as being *supra naturam*, but only in the thirteenth century did the idea of some things being *supernaturalis* become common. The developers of this notion were scholastic theologians like Thomas Aquinas; as Bartlett notes, "the mendicants, high Scholasticism, and the supernatural were born together" (p. 16). He goes on to discuss scholastic efforts to distinguish supernatural miracles from natural marvels, and to designate monsters as natural, albeit rare and wondrous, occurrences. The emphasis of the chapter tends to be on the natural more than the supernatural, examining scholasticism's new respect for a comprehensive and coherent (ultimately Aristotelian) "nature."

In his second chapter, Bartlett highlights the idea of a mechanistic physical universe most commonly associated with the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and then argues that some aspects of this mechanistic thinking existed in earlier centuries as well. Exactly how medie-

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val “mechanism” differed from later mechanical philosophy is not really the point. Rather, Bartlett mainly wants to illustrate that the Middle Ages understood certain natural and mechanical links of causation—presenting a more “rational” medieval mind than some modern readers might expect. This point is most entertainingly illustrated when Bartlett quotes the nineteenth-century novel *King Solomon’s Mines*, in which, at one point, the European colonialist heroes, using a simple almanac, predict an eclipse and so convince the African natives that they possess powerful magic. Medieval Europeans also understood and could predict the movements of the heavens mechanistically, and the Byzantine emperor Alexius Comnenus is reported to have used a similar subterfuge to astound the less sophisticated Pechenegs, against whom he was warring, in the eleventh century (pp. 59–62).

Chapter 3 focuses on demons, witches, and “dog-heads,” in order to illustrate medieval conceptions of beings and of being. Medieval thinkers were very concerned to understand the nature of demonic existence, the potential reality of demonic bodies, and above all the natural possibilities of demonic power. Most demonic actions were understood as illusions (Bartlett’s principal example is the famous canon *Episcopi*, so important for later notions of the witches’ sabbath), but how those illusions were produced needed to be understood, and demons themselves were no less real (or threatening) just because they operated mainly by deception. Dog-heads are Bartlett’s main example of the medieval tendency to posit monstrous hybrid creatures, typically living in the exotic orient, but nevertheless to understand these beings as fully natural and potentially fully human. As Europeans came into greater contact with the East after the eleventh century, it became increasingly difficult to sustain belief in such creatures (as their supposed natural habitats were being explored and none were being found), but this was not an example of natural thought overcoming supernatural; rather, it was simply a case of an aspect of nature becoming more fully understood through exploration and experience.

The theme of experience (and experiment) continues in the final chapter, which focuses on the scientific (natural philosophical) thought of Roger Bacon. Here Bartlett effectively illustrates the similarities and differences between medieval and modern “rationality.” Bacon had a largely mechanistic view of the universe, especially of the heavens. Included in this view was the standard medieval acceptance that the heavens influenced the earth via emitted rays. For Bacon, all of nature emitted rays and exerted influence. Thus a man who is often considered one of the progenitors of modern experimental science also firmly accepted the reality of a great deal of “natural magic,” or as Bartlett notes, “a whole range of activities that, we feel, almost anyone

would label ‘magic’” (p. 141), since medieval authorities typically reserved the term “magic” only for the operation of demonic, not strictly natural, powers.

The issues at the heart of each of these chapters could easily be (and have been) the focus of lengthy monographs. Bartlett succeeds in finding straightforward approaches to often very knotty issues, but he does not strip them of their complexity. None of the chapters present neat and tidy solutions to the problems they examine. Neither is there any concluding chapter that attempts to tie all of the natural and the supernatural up in a single elegant package. Needless to say, in so short a treatment of such large matters, major areas no less deserving of attention than those illuminated here are left in darkness. The book’s usefulness is as a point of entry, not a final destination. The routes it opens are marvelous indeed.

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BÉATRICE DELAURENTI. *La puissance des mots—“Virtus verborum”: Débats doctrinaux sur le pouvoir des incantations au Moyen Âge*. Paris: Cerf, 2007. Pp. 579.

For all that magicians sometimes employed signs, symbols, gestures, stones, or herbs, spoken spells still comprise the most pervasive magical device in Western culture. The very ubiquity of verbal formulas in many forms of magical operation make words a difficult subject for scholars to grasp. In this impressive study, Béatrice Delaurenti takes a carefully limited approach. As her subtitle indicates, she examines intellectual debates about the power of words in the Middle Ages. In fact, she focuses on a period of intense debate that lasted, in her analysis, from around 1230 to around 1370. These dates mark important “parentheses,” as she will ultimately term them in her conclusion, that bracket an era in which some authorities gave serious consideration to the potential natural power contained in incantations.

The standard Christian position on the “power of words” that dominated most of the European Middle Ages was that words were essentially powerless. They were only signifiers that conveyed commands or supplications to powerful entities. Prayers, obviously, petitioned God or his saints; magical spells, intentionally or not, invoked demons. A third potential category beyond the divine/demonic binary appeared in the thirteenth century, however. As Western Europe was flooded with Arabic texts containing Greek and Hebrew learning (and of course extensive Muslim commentary on that learn-