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Exorcism and Enlightenment: Johann Joseph Gassner and the Demons of Eighteenth-Century Germany

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Abstract
Once upon a time, scholars were sure that the Reformation had "disenchanted" the world. Max Weber said so, after all. By casting aside saints' relics and sacramentals, Protestant theologians seemed to have undercut the "magic of the medieval church" and created a more modern and "rational" form of religion. Then we noticed the inconvenient truth that witch-hunting had continued and, in fact, had reached its height during the Reformation era. The Scientific Revolution seemed the next obvious period to locate disenchantment and the clear transition from a magical and spirit-obsessed premodern world to empirical, rational modernity. The closer one looks at early modern science, however, the less it appears to have marked an absolute break from other contemporary modes of thought. But the Enlightenment, at least, with its goal of crushing all superstitious "infamy," seemed reassuringly [End Page 220] and reliably modern. Did not Enlightenment philosophes openly deride belief in spirits, demons, and occult powers of every ilk? Do they not sound so very much like us?

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Exorcism and Enlightenment: Johann Joseph Gassner and the Demons of Eighteenth-Century Germany (review)

Michael D. Bailey


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Mangan’s text is more than a historical overview of magic, and it is also more than a performance-theory analysis of entertainment conjuring. It offers insight into the way that religious and spiritual thought and practice have transformed throughout the ages, and how the “skeptical” and “paranormal” interpretations of magic tricks—performed by either entertainment magicians or efficacious magicians—can offer insight into how magic serves both secular and spiritual purposes in the present era (pp. 194–95). Mangan fights the Western bias that assumes that “magical thinking” is something that is associated primarily with so-called “primitive” or “pre-literate” peoples (p. 195), and he argues that magical thinking is “by no means incompatible with an informal understanding of modern technology” (p. 195). By making these arguments, Mangan offers some fairly concrete examples of how performance practices have helped to shape new tributaries in the larger current of the Western religious performance tradition—and he has done this in a book that is written in an elegant style that is clear, humorous, and intellectually stimulating. This book will likely be of interest to a wide readership, including generally interested readers and scholars of theater studies, performance studies, popular culture studies, esotericism studies, media studies, the sociology of religion, and religious studies.

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Once upon a time, scholars were sure that the Reformation had “disenchanted” the world. Max Weber said so, after all. By casting aside saints’ relics and sacraments, Protestant theologians seemed to have undercut the “magic of the medieval church” and created a more modern and “rational” form of religion. Then we noticed the inconvenient truth that witch-hunting had continued and, in fact, had reached its height during the Reformation era. The Scientific Revolution seemed the next obvious period to locate disenchantment and the clear transition from a magical and spirit-obsessed premodern world to empirical, rational modernity. The closer one looks at early modern science, however, the less it appears to have marked an absolute break from other contemporary modes of thought. But the Enlightenment, at least, with its goal of crushing all superstitious “infamy,” seemed reassur-
ingly and reliably modern. Did not Enlightenment philosophes openly deride belief in spirits, demons, and occult powers of every ilk? Do they not sound so very much like us?

Of course they do, and especially so when we only listen to those aspects of Enlightenment discourse that conform to our ideas of what modernity should sound like. Scholars of magic and superstition are only beginning to attend seriously to other strains of thought evident in this period. Martin Pott and now Sabine Doering-Manteuffel writing in German, and Owen Davies, Willem de Blécourt, and David Allen Harvey writing for Anglophone audiences, among others, have begun to expose other aspects of eighteenth-century intellectual developments and their lasting effects on modernity. Theology and other areas of religious thought, and also “magical” and “occult” thinking, remained important for far longer than we typically imagine, and the era of Enlightenment was characterized by far more diverse developments than just the philosophes’ confident declamations of all infamy. With this valuable book, Erik Midelfort, long known as an expert on early modern German witchcraft, adds his voice to the recharacterization, or at least complication, of what the era of Enlightenment really meant in Europe.

His story centers on Johann Joseph Gassner. From 1774 to 1776, in Ellwangen and Regensburg and many other locales across southern Germany, this Catholic priest performed hundreds of exorcisms and ritual healings. His actions garnered tremendous popular attention, drew crowds, and sparked intense debate among both Catholic and, surprisingly, Protestant intellectuals. Finally, his controversial practices became too unsettling to too many powerful people, and in 1776 Pope Pius VI put an end to the whole business by transferring him to an out-of-the-way parish and forbidding him to perform any more public exorcisms. Midelfort sees Gassner as an important example of alternate Enlightenment trends that scholars far too often ignore. Importantly, however, although certainly any number of “enlightened” authorities opposed Gassner, Midelfort never presents him as an oppositional figure to “the Enlightenment.” Rather, he argues that Gassner was as exemplary of his age as was Voltaire or Rousseau, Kant or Goethe. He uses the Gassner affair to illuminate normally unseen aspects of the Enlightenment, and to cast certain known aspects of the eighteenth century in new light.

The first point Midelfort makes (in his first chapter) is that Gassner was no holdover from an earlier age. He was, in fact, not really a traditional exorcist, and the rites he performed, although ultimately including the Rituale Romanum, differed from traditional exorcisms. The people he cured did not exhibit classic signs of possession, such as speaking in tongues or demonstrating knowledge of secret or far-off affairs. Rather, they were sick or injured
in some way. Gassner had first to demonstrate that their illnesses were caused by demons, or at least that their suffering was exacerbated by demonic forces. He did this by testing his patients in a number of ways, among others by commanding their pain to increase, before finally casting out the demon. Midelfort presents this as a method of “thinking with demons”—of finding a way to reinject the demonic back into what could easily be regarded as purely natural events. Part of Gassner’s premise seems to have been that demons must be understood as part of the natural world, a line of thought that had been developing since the later Middle Ages. Ironically, Gassner’s natural/demonic explanations for illness, and the cure he offered, often fared better under empirical verification than did other contemporary and more seemingly “scientific” cures, such as those offered by Gassner’s contemporary Franz Anton Mesmer.

In his second chapter, Midelfort sets the Gassner affair in the political and social context of the eighteenth-century Holy Roman Empire. Often regarded as a political joke by this time, the empire was still, according to Midelfort, doing effectively what it had done for centuries, namely, allowing numerous small jurisdictions to coexist and survive next to larger and more powerful neighbors that, without the overarching imperial structure, would have swallowed them up. Gassner was only able to operate as he did because he could constantly shift venues when authorities in one area began to become concerned about his activities. Significantly, when opposition arose, even from “religious” authorities (the various prince-bishops and other ecclesiastical/secular lords of the empire), it stemmed not from theological grounds, but from purely political ones. Absolutist rulers (or aspiring absolutists) did not necessarily deny the possibility of demonic power or exorcism, but they certainly objected to a nascent popular movement that drew and inspired large crowds of people.

Midelfort then returns, in the subsequent chapter, to the central topic of the cures that Gassner performed. He notes the detailed, although obviously problematic, records that Gassner kept, and the number of eyewitness accounts we have from both believers and skeptics, as Gassner’s fame spread. Again Midelfort’s point is that Gassner was not really focused on the act of exorcism in a traditional sense. Rather, his main purpose was always to help people conceive of and manage their suffering in particular, religiously informed ways. The act of exorcism itself was almost secondary to this process. Critics of Gassner also serve to demonstrate how religious thinking remained vital in the eighteenth century. Drawing on Protestant critics particularly (but also Catholic ones), Midelfort shows that opposition to Gassner grew from the typically enlightened standpoint that demons did not really exist or at
least could not interact with and affect the physical world. Midelfort links this, however, not to agnostic or even Deist critiques of religion, but to a new and more scientific approach to biblical interpretation being developed by theologians, which maintained that the Bible, and crucially its overt references to demons and exorcism, should not be accepted literally, but rather needed to be understood historically.

In his final chapter, Midelfort sets Gassner and the controversy he engendered even more broadly in the context of eighteenth-century modes of writing and polemic. Not so much Gassner himself but the debates of which he was the central focus can only be understood in light of the tremendous later-eighteenth-century increase in production of newspapers and journals in which not careful argument but rather sharp criticism and ridicule was the normal mode of expression. Again the point is that the Gassner affair was not atypical of its period, but instead illuminates, and is in turn illuminated by, essential aspects of Enlightenment society and culture. Gassner himself drops almost completely from sight in the final chapter, in fact, but it nevertheless serves as a valuable conclusion to the overall argument Midelfort has been building. This is a book designed to alert us to the fact that the eighteenth century past is more of a foreign country that we often imagine. Yet the Enlightenment does represent the origin of much of modern, Western culture (at least intellectual culture). The largest point of Midelfort’s incisive study may be to remind us that modernity itself is not so completely modern after all.

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The aim of this voluminous collection (twenty contributions) is “to develop further the multiple relationships between magical practices, witchcraft, and warfare in the African continent . . . both during colonial and post-colonial times” (p. xiii). The editor, Beatrice Nicolini, emphasizes in her introduction the many-sided character of the project, both with respect to the background of the various authors, the choice of topics, and the multiple methodologies followed. There are, indeed, signs that it proved difficult to keep the project in hand. The book is marred by editorial flaws. The reader