Dämonische Besessenheit: Zur Interpretation eines kulturhistorischen Phänomens (review)

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Abstract
This ninth volume in the “Hexenforschung” series tackles a broad topic: demonic possession in all its forms. The volume emerged from a 1999 conference held under the auspices of the Arbeitskreis interdisziplinäre Hexen-forschung (Workshop for Interdisciplinary Witchcraft Research). Authorities during the era of the major European witch hunts often regarded demonic possession and obsession as phenomena closely connected to witchcraft. Yet as this volume points out, belief in spirit possession in various forms appears in numerous cultures throughout history. These beliefs and the cases related to them, however, have generally received far less scholarly attention than the phenomenon of witchcraft and witch-hunting. The organizers of the conference therefore cast their net widely, drawing not only on the discipline of history but also on historical anthropology, theology, ethnology, and even psychiatry. The chapters included in this collection range from biblical antiquity to the 1990s, and from western Europe to Korea and Australia. That said, the majority of the chapters (twelve out of eighteen) focus on Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the age of the witch hunts and, as the editors rightly assert in their foreword, a “golden age” for demonic possession. The other articles offer more or less explicit points of comparison to early modern Europe.

Disciplines
Cultural History | History of Religion | Other History

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This ninth volume in the “Hexenforschung” series tackles a broad topic: demonic possession in all its forms. The volume emerged from a 1999 conference held under the auspices of the Arbeitskreis interdisziplinäre Hexenforschung (Workshop for Interdisciplinary Witchcraft Research). Authorities during the era of the major European witch hunts often regarded demonic possession and obsession as phenomena closely connected to witchcraft. Yet as this volume points out, belief in spirit possession in various forms appears in numerous cultures throughout history. These beliefs and the cases related to them, however, have generally received far less scholarly attention than the phenomenon of witchcraft and witch-hunting. The organizers of the conference therefore cast their net widely, drawing not only on the discipline of history but also on historical anthropology, theology, ethnology, and even psychiatry. The chapters included in this collection range from biblical antiquity to the 1990s, and from western Europe to Korea and Australia. That said, the majority of the chapters (twelve out of eighteen) focus on Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the age of the witch hunts and, as the editors rightly assert in their foreword, a “golden age” for demonic possession. The other articles offer more or less explicit points of comparison to early modern Europe.

After a brief introductory note by Hans de Waardt, the editors have grouped the chapters into five sections. The first addresses “Possession, Sickness, and Deception.” Johannes Dillinger leads off with a useful article on biblical antiquity, in which he notes that ancient cultures regarded spiritual entities as part of the natural world, that all illness was deemed to be a matter of spiritual affliction in some sense, and that only gradually did a more precise notion of demonic possession and exorcism distinct from general healing rites develop. The other chapters then trace the complexities arising from the need to distinguish demonic possession from natural illness, most often from melancholy, in medieval and early modern Europe. The chapter by Erik Midelfort addresses this issue in the broadest terms and is therefore the most generally useful. Joyce Miller closes the section with a valuable reminder that even in the early modern period, while most people accepted authorities’ categorization of demonic possession as a special affliction to be treated only by religious ministers, the belief that most diseases were as much spiritual and physical in nature remained widespread.
The next section deals with “Possession in Art and Media.” Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen notes that the highly theatrical behavior of early modern demoniacs was reflected in the actual theatrical literature of the day, being held up to ridicule, for example, in certain plays by Ben Jonson. Ursula-Maria Krah explores how accounts of possession served as confessional propaganda in early modern pamphlet literature. There follows a section on “The Golden Age of Possession: Case Studies.” Each of the five chapters here deals with some specific case (or group of cases) from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century, exploring how possession could be used as religious propaganda, as exemplary of certain types of spirituality, as a tool of religious and political conflict, or simply as a deception to gain charity.

From the mid-seventeenth century we jump, in the fourth section, to “Possession in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.” Here María Taussiet examines an early-nineteenth-century case of an outbreak of possession in the Spanish village of Tosos. The possessed women of this village blamed a supposed witch for their affliction, and (in an ironic twist from the norms of earlier periods) the witch fled to authorities for protection from the violent mob of demoniacs. Sarah Ferber and Adrian Howe then detail a late-twentieth-century case from Australia in which four practitioners of charismatic Christianity beat to death the wife of one of them in the course of an exorcism. Ferber and Howe focus as much, indeed more, on the dilemma of a modern Western court trying to accommodate a respect for religious practice and belief while still prosecuting a violent murder as they do on the function of demonic beliefs among certain modern Christian groups. Samuel Pfeifer addresses this issue of belief somewhat in psychiatric terms, noting that among psychiatric patients who consider themselves religious believers, over one third maintain that they may be spiritually afflicted, and nearly all of those who maintain this seek spiritual remedies (ranging from simple prayer to formal exorcism) for their mental afflictions.

The final section deals with the “Intercultural Question” of “Possession and Shamanism.” Rune Blix Hagen demonstrates that the form of shamanism practiced by the arctic Sami bears far more relation to spirit possession than to ecstasy or trance states, although here possession is a positive occurrence rather than a demonic affliction. Hoo Nam Seelmann raises a similar issue when comparing Korean forms of shamanism to Western forms of possession. Lacking the strict theological separation of good and evil inherent in Christianity, and also, she maintains, lacking the fiercely developed Western sense of individual identity, Koreans do not react as strongly as Westerners typically do against the sublimation of personal identity entailed in possession.
Shamanistic possession can therefore occupy a more positive position in Korean culture.

The collection as a whole is extremely useful for introducing many themes pertinent to the study of demonic possession. The comparative chapters are fairly scattered, in terms of their own focus, but do serve, as the editors intend, as useful comments on the “golden age” of European possession. The criticism that could be made of any essay collection could be leveled here—some chapters are stronger than others, and some integrate more effectively with others in their sections. Curiously, given the attention called to the complicated connections between possession and witchcraft, and the focus of most of the chapters on the “golden age” of possession that exactly parallels the era of the European witch hunts, almost nothing is said about witchcraft in any of these chapters. That seems a shame, but perhaps, too, it was intentional—an effort by the editors to present possession in its own right, rather than have it appear still merely the handmaid of the topic that for so long has overshadowed it in scholarship.

It should be noted that while the volume bears a German title, seven of the eighteen chapters are in English. All are accompanied by abstracts in both English and German.

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