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Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Satanic Abuse in History (review)

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Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Satanic Abuse in History (review)

Abstract

Many scholars of witchcraft and demonology have at times alluded to the seemingly transhistorical and transcultural nature of at least some aspects of their studies. To give only one example, the hearings of the McCarthy era are often held up as modern “witch hunts.” More recently, scholars have also recognized certain dynamics akin to witch-hunting in major panics concerning the supposed satanic ritual abuse of children in the United States and to a lesser extent Europe in the 1980s and 1990s. In this book, David Frankfurter, whose previous work has focused on religion in late antiquity, considers these apparent connections at length. While he admits that any given incident will be contingent on immediate historical and cultural factors, he asserts the striking constancy, from antiquity to the present, of what he terms the “myth of evil,” that is, the belief that a widespread demonic conspiracy exists within society, the members of which are responsible for horrifically wicked acts. Such conspiracies have never existed, or at least there has never been any real evidence of their existence, but they have shaped the way societies have conceived of evil. From Roman depictions of immoral Christian orgies, to the medieval stereotype of ritual murders committed by Jews, to the early modern witch hunts, to modern SRA (satanic ritual abuse) panics, societies have always been ready to believe in a clandestine minority driven by supernatural entities to commit monstrous evil that will, inevitably, subvert society if it is not exposed and extirpated.

Disciplines

Cultural History | History of Religion | Other History

Comments

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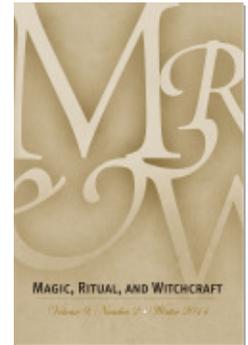
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Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Satanic Abuse in History (review)

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als at first, following the instructions found in books. She might then contact other solitaries, or attend a Wiccan and Pagan festival, or a coven-led ritual, but mainly she leads a loner's life.

Clifton's book does not cover everything. He excludes Pagans who look to ancient cultures, like the Celts, for their symbols and rituals. He also leaves out feminist spirituality, which is closely linked to Wicca and Paganism. But he does an admirable job of providing for the first time a formal history of the movement. His book contains a timeline, glossary, and bibliography, all of which enhance the book's usefulness. This book is highly recommended for undergraduates as well as general readers.

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DAVID FRANKFURTER. *Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Satanic Abuse in History*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006. Pp. xvii + 286.

Many scholars of witchcraft and demonology have at times alluded to the seemingly transhistorical and transcultural nature of at least some aspects of their studies. To give only one example, the hearings of the McCarthy era are often held up as modern "witch hunts." More recently, scholars have also recognized certain dynamics akin to witch-hunting in major panics concerning the supposed satanic ritual abuse of children in the United States and to a lesser extent Europe in the 1980s and 1990s. In this book, David Frankfurter, whose previous work has focused on religion in late antiquity, considers these apparent connections at length. While he admits that any given incident will be contingent on immediate historical and cultural factors, he asserts the striking constancy, from antiquity to the present, of what he terms the "myth of evil," that is, the belief that a widespread demonic conspiracy exists within society, the members of which are responsible for horrifically wicked acts. Such conspiracies have never existed, or at least there has never been any real evidence of their existence, but they have shaped the way societies have conceived of evil. From Roman depictions of immoral Christian orgies, to the medieval stereotype of ritual murders committed by Jews, to the early modern witch hunts, to modern SRA (satanic ritual abuse) panics, societies have always been ready to believe in a clandestine minority driven by supernatural entities to commit monstrous evil that will, inevitably, subvert society if it is not exposed and extirpated.

Frankfurter begins by asserting two worlds of “demonology” (that is, roughly, the “religious” belief in supernatural entities that either commit evil or inspire humans to evil). The first of these is the “local” world of small communities, in which demons or spirits are typically associated with aspects of the natural world, must frequently be interacted with, and, while often capricious or antagonistic, are not necessarily fully evil. A more universal view of the demonic is then imposed on these local worlds by religious institutions. In order to assert their own power and authority, “ritual experts” (temple priests, prophets, official exorcists) set relatively unstructured local demonic beliefs into vast cosmic structures of good versus evil. The only way to oppose evil is to adhere to the official cult and the experts who represent and direct it. Frankfurter’s main example here is the late-antique phenomenon of the early Christian holy man exercising power by his assertion of control over demons, presented not as ambivalent nature-spirits but as resolutely evil fallen angels. The model works equally well, however, for the intrusion of Christian missionaries into the “local” spiritual worlds of precolonial Africa and America, or the assertion of social workers or psychologists that they alone hold the key to understanding and opposing rampant satanic child abuse in the modern West.

Since such “religious” experts (Frankfurter argues that even secular authorities who operate in this fashion draw on religious models of good vs. evil and of the demonic) attain power by casting themselves as the opponents of and only hope against demons, it makes sense that they construct the demonic as the inverse of themselves. The perverted rituals and monstrous ceremonies attributed to agents of demonic conspiracies are, quite clearly, the inverse of established religious and social rituals. People then accept these inventions because they are such a clear and easy way of conceptualizing the “Other.” People support the construction of these stereotypes by what Frankfurter labels either direct or indirect mimesis. Direct mimesis entails individuals asserting that they have been participants in the supposed conspiracy—those who confess, either before or after judicial torture, that they are witches, or who claim to have been members of satanic ritual abuse cults, for example. Indirect mimesis entails people asserting that they have witnessed or otherwise experienced the supposed conspiracy—for example, cases of demonic possession or the recovered memories of supposed SRA victims.

This is a sweeping book that provides numerous insights and inevitably raises numerous questions. The notion that ideas of demons and demonic conspiracies function in some way as depictions of societal and cultural otherness is relatively obvious. The particular ways in which Frankfurter deems that otherness is constructed and operates, however, will doubtless prove

“good to think with” to many readers. His most powerful insight, and his fundamental argument, is that the essence of the demonic originates in the collision of relatively unstructured local worlds of mutable belief with the fixed cosmologies of structured religions and their “ritual experts.” The initial fusion between these two worldviews took place in antiquity, but eruptions of the supposedly demonic continue to occur most frequently, he asserts, in any circumstance in which these two worlds come into particularly close interaction. In the case of modern SRA panics, for example, his argument is that Western culture has so completely internalized a universal cosmology of the demonic that many now feel compelled to explain the most private and “local” of evils—the sexual abuse of a child, which typically takes place inside a household—by reference to vast conspiracies. Readers will want to decide for themselves how useful and convincing this extension of the analysis is.

Frankfurter’s local versus universal dichotomy carries many overtones of the old popular versus elite dichotomy that most recent work on witchcraft argues against. As his attempt to fit modern SRA panics into his framework shows, Frankfurter does not adhere to any simplistic or rigid conception of the ways local versus elite/expert concerns must manifest themselves. Inevitably, though, he has no opportunity in a single book covering such a broad span of time to carefully examine all the potential complications. To give just one example, he opens the book with the case of local witch fears brewing in the Spanish Basque country in the early 1600s, and erupting into a full witch hunt when experts from the Spanish Inquisition arrived to conduct official inquiries, thus introducing his basic pattern of local and elite interaction. He completely omits, however, that one of the judges dispatched to this region, Alonso de Salazar Frías, was deeply skeptical of the witch hunt and eventually succeeded in ending rather than promoting it. Across early modern Europe, expert authorities and institutions, particularly the centralized Spanish and Roman Inquisitions, worked as frequently to extinguish local anxieties as they did to exacerbate them, all the while holding a firmly universalist view of evil demonic agency.

Another problem with the book is its firmly Western, Christian context. Frankfurter asserts early on that the patterns he will discuss apply to all religions, but the vast majority of his evidence is drawn from the history of Christianity, from late antiquity to the early modern witch hunts. Examples from Africa, Asia, or the Americas typically refer to Christian missionary activity or the postcolonial era. Christianity is a notoriously centralized and authoritative religion. One wonders how Frankfurter’s insights would apply to somewhat less structured systems such as Hinduism or Buddhism, or even

the other great Western monotheisms. Islam, which conceives of jinn rather differently than Christianity does of demons, receives not a mention. Judaism is treated only as the object of Christian conspiracy theories (the myth of Jewish ritual murders) and never as an authoritative cult promoting ritual expertise in its own right. On occasion, Frankfurter notes that other, indeed all, cultures have ritual experts. African tribal societies had and have temple priests and witch doctors who make claims to authority and power. Yet in the face of Christian missionary activity, all such figures seem to collapse immediately into an uncomplicatedly “local” belief structure.

There is, of course, no way to treat the full scope of demonic evil and its conceptualization across all cultures in a single book. Although grounded in the history of the Christian West, Frankfurter’s ambitious study offers valuable structures for considering such seemingly universal ways of constructing evil. This is a book that scholars in numerous fields will want to consult and consider.

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RICHARD GOLDEN, ed. *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft: The Western Tradition*. 4 vols. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-Clio, 2006. Pp. xxxvi + 1238.

The world of scholarship has been eagerly awaiting this ambitious encyclopedia for several years. Its most comprehensive predecessor has long been *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology* (1959, with 227 entries), by the medieval English literary scholar Rossell Hope Robbins. Recent smaller entries into this field have not been an adequate substitute for a thorough reassessment of the state of this burgeoning area of historical research.¹ Robbins’s work summarized much of what was known and thought before scholars began their systematic assault upon the archival records of witchcraft trials, and so it is not surprising that his entries on many individual demonologists have stood the test of time better than his attempts to survey the history of

1. See, for example, Michael D. Bailey, *Historical Dictionary of Witchcraft* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2003) with 199 pages of text; William E. Burns, *Witch Hunts in Europe and America: An Encyclopedia* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2003) with 359 pages of text; or Rosemary Guiley, *The Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft*, 2nd ed. (New York: Checkmark Books, 1999) with 421 pages of text. The latter volume emphasizes the much more recent past.