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Religion, the Supernatural and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe: An Album Amicorum for Charles Zika

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Abstract

This volume developed from a 2009 conference held in honor of Charles Zika at the University of Melbourne, where he spent most of his long career. In addition to an introductory essay by the editors, which provides a brief intellectual biography of Zika and establishes the major themes of the volume, there are seventeen contributions. Befitting Zika's own interdisciplinarity and pioneering work incorporating visual records into historical analysis, most of the contributors are historians, many of whom draw in some way on art or other visual material, while four are art historians who situate their analysis within particular historical contexts. Befitting Zika's internationalism, the majority of contributors are Australian, but four work in Europe and another four in North America.

Disciplines

Australian Studies | Cultural History | European History | History of Religion | Medieval History

Comments

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Religion, the Supernatural, and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe: An Album Amicorum for Charles Zika. Jennifer Spinks and Dagmar Eichberger, eds. Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions 191. Leiden: Brill, 2015. xix + 418 pp. \$218.

This volume developed from a 2009 conference held in honor of Charles Zika at the University of Melbourne, where he spent most of his long career. In addition to an introductory essay by the editors, which provides a brief intellectual biography of Zika and establishes the major themes of the volume, there are seventeen contributions. Befitting Zika's own interdisciplinarity and pioneering work incorporating visual records into historical analysis, most of the contributors are historians, many of whom draw in

some way on art or other visual material, while four are art historians who situate their analysis within particular historical contexts. Befitting Zika's internationalism, the majority of contributors are Australian, but four work in Europe and another four in North America.

The essays cover a broad swath of territory. A number of them focus on England, Germany, or the Low Countries, and these tend to address aspects of the Reformation. Italy is also well represented, and a few essays extend the reach of the collection to colonial North and South America. Topics range from demonic possession and witch trials, including a reconsideration of the famous witch hunt at Salem, to observations of comets and depictions of beached whales. What holds them all together are their attempts to follow lines of analysis or methodological approaches derived from the work of Zika. These Zikanian elements may be more or less pronounced, but in some way or another virtually every essay in this collection endeavors to read strange but often-familiar evidence from a slightly new and revealing angle.

As with any collection, some of the essays are more successful or reach sharper conclusions than others. Also, some of the groupings chosen by the editors hang together and inform one another better than others. The essays gathered in part 3, "The (Un)natural World," all address signs or portents in some way (including reading reports of New World cannibalism as a sign of savagery imposed on natives by European authors). The authors do not explicitly reference each other, but between them they begin to build up a coherent picture of the changing place of signs and portents in the early modern world. Likewise, in part 4, "Artefacts and Material Culture," Lyndal Roper reviews the place of "Luther Relics" in Protestant culture, finding that they were in some ways more akin to modern tourist souvenirs than medieval saints' relics. This insight is carried forward by the next essay, in which Peter Sherlock analyzes the epitaphs and other inscriptions of Westminster Abbey as, in part, placards intended to guide tourists through the building's sights. Alexandra Walsham closes the section, and the book, with a survey of the place of post-Reformation relics in England, mainly items or remnants of executed Catholics. While she does not introduce any idea of sacral tourism into her analysis, her discussion of martyrdom and memory rounds out the section nicely.

Following the model of Charles Zika, almost all of these essays seek to examine the evidence on which they focus in some kind of new light. Often this involves seeing what insights can arise when a piece of visual evidence is incorporated into analysis of some historical event, or in certain cases seeing what new perspectives are gained when a visual image is linked to and analyzed in light of some particular historical development. Not all the essays break substantial new ground, nor would one expect them to. A number are content to reinforce existing conclusions or assumptions, but their fresh perspectives remain valuable. Overall the collection is a fitting tribute to the career of a pathbreaking scholar.

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