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Reivew of "Des Teufels Lug und Trug: Nikolaus Magni von Jauer, Ein Reformtheologe des 15. Jahrhunderts gegen Aberglaube und Götzendienst"

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Reivew of "Des Teufels Lug und Trug: Nikolaus Magni von Jauer, Ein Reformtheologe des 15. Jahrhunderts gegen Aberglaube und Götzendienst"

Abstract

Late medieval superstition has received a fair amount of attention recently. In 2010, Euan Cameron's expansive *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, and Religion, 1250–1750* considered it at some length before moving on to later periods, and in 2013 my own *Fearful Spirits, Reasoned Follies: The Boundaries of Superstition in Late Medieval Europe* dealt with it exclusively. Krzysztof Bracha's detailed study of a single late medieval author and a major (arguably *the* major) late medieval treatise on superstition is both the latest and also earliest important study in this area. The book is a German translation and updating of Bracha's 1999 Polish publication *Teolog, diabel i zabobony: Świadectwo traktatu Mikolaja Magni z Jawora De superstitionibus (1405 r.)*. In the intervening years, he has produced a number of valuable articles on superstition, several in German and a few in English, but it is wonderful to have his major study finally made available in a language that far more Western European and American scholars will be able to read.

Disciplines

Cultural History | European History | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Medieval History

Comments

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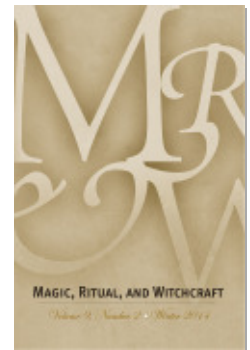
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Des Teufels Lug und Trug: Nikolaus Magni von Jauer: Ein Reformtheologe des 15. Jahrhunderts gegen Aberglaube und Götzendienst by Krzysztof Bracha (review)

Michael D. Bailey

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Reviews

KRZYSZTOF BRACHA. *Des Teufels Lug und Trug: Nikolaus Magni von Jauer: Ein Reformtheologe des 15. Jahrhunderts gegen Aberglaube und Götzendienst*. Trans. Peter Chmiel. *Quellen und Forschungen zur Europäischen Ethnologie* 25. Dettelbach: J. H. Röhl, 2013. Pp. 272.

Late medieval superstition has received a fair amount of attention recently. In 2010, Euan Cameron's expansive *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, and Religion, 1250–1750* considered it at some length before moving on to later periods, and in 2013 my own *Fearful Spirits, Reasoned Follies: The Boundaries of Superstition in Late Medieval Europe* dealt with it exclusively. Krzysztof Bracha's detailed study of a single late medieval author and a major (arguably the major) late medieval treatise on superstition is both the latest and also earliest important study in this area. The book is a German translation and updating of Bracha's 1999 Polish publication *Teolog, diabeł i zabobony: Świadcstwo traktatu Mikołaja Magni z Jawora De superstitionibus (1405 r.)*. In the intervening years, he has produced a number of valuable articles on superstition, several in German and a few in English, but it is wonderful to have his major study finally made available in a language that far more Western European and American scholars will be able to read.

Nikolaus Magni was born in Jawor (German: Jauer) in what is now Polish Silesia around 1355. He studied and then taught at the University of Prague for over two decades, until he moved to the University of Heidelberg in 1402. He was an important theologian and academic leader at both institutions, and his movements to some extent illustrate the lines of intellectual connection and influence that criss-crossed Central Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, stretching from Prague, Krakow, and Vienna in the east to Cologne and Heidelberg in the west. The first part of Bracha's book consists of two substantial chapters that trace Nikolaus's life and career and situate him and his work in the context of late medieval efforts to promote religious reform among both the clergy and laity. Also in Part I is a shorter, more technical chapter detailing the origins and manuscript circulation of his great work *De superstitionibus*. The second part of the book examines that treatise in detail, with five chapters grouped around major aspects of superstition that it addressed.

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As Bracha readily admits, the importance of this treatise does not lie in any great originality on its part. On almost every point, Nikolaus relied on standard patristic and scholastic authorities like Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, and William of Auvergne. What distinguishes his work is its encyclopedic nature and its astonishing circulation. More than a century ago (in the only other book-length study of Nikolaus), Adolph Franz identified 58 surviving manuscript copies of *De superstitionibus*, an enormous number for a theological treatise (*Magister Nikolaus Magni de Jawor* [1898]). Bracha has expanded this list by almost 100 additional manuscripts, bringing the total count to 152, listed in an appendix. Almost all of these manuscripts originated in Central Europe, meaning that Nikolaus's influence was somewhat confined geographically, but it was all the more intense for that concentration. Also remarkable is that his influence basically did not extend past the fifteenth century, nor did his treatise ever find its way into print. I will return to this point below.

Bracha's book performs two important tasks that should give it a resonance beyond what its seemingly narrow focus might promise. First, in Part I, it provides a short but valuable study of Central European intellectual and religious currents through the lens of a major but now little-remembered and understudied figure. Then, in Part II, it presents a detailed exploration of late medieval superstition via the most extensive and widely circulated Central European exemplar of an antisuperstition treatise. Precisely *because* Nikolaus Magni was not startlingly original on any point, Bracha's study gives background information on many important Christian figures who wrote about superstition in the patristic and scholastic periods. He also looks beyond Nikolaus himself, comparing his treatise and showing parallels to the works of other clerical writers who addressed this topic in the late medieval period, including Jean Gerson and Denys the Carthusian.

Bracha correctly recognizes that "superstition" served less as a label for a discrete kind of activity than as a boundary marker separating legitimate practices from improper or excessive ones in many areas. In Part II of his study, he dedicates chapters to "omens," "consecrated objects and church ritual," "word and writing," and "time and space." The issue of boundaries is most evident when he analyzes Nikolaus's discussion of ecclesiastical rites and sacramental items that were obviously legitimate in origin, but which could be used in improper ways or around which improper beliefs could cluster. Likewise, some omens and even active forms of divination such as casting lots or astrological prediction *could* be used appropriately to peer, however darkly, into the course of future events; very often, however, they represented

improper attempts to gain illicit or impossible knowledge. “Word and writing” discusses mainly holy words, blessings, prayers, and their potential misuse, especially when crafted into magical amulets. “Time and space” addresses widespread beliefs in propitious or unpropitious times, such as the famous Egyptian Days, which were condemned by church authorities. Physicians, however, needed to understand what times were appropriate for certain medical procedures, usually depending on astrological conditions. Behind all of these areas of possible error and transgression stood the threat of the demonic, for demons were constantly trying to delude humans into false beliefs and often empowering otherwise empty rites. Bracha, therefore, also has a chapter on late medieval demonology. His conclusion, though, is that Nikolaus Magni was not as “radical” in this area as he might have been, and this helps explain why his major work, so amazingly popular at first, was little known in later centuries.

As already noted, *De superstitionibus* exists in an astonishing number of manuscript copies. In its initial burst of popularity it was clearly the medieval, theological equivalent of a best-seller. It was never printed, however, and by the end of the 1400s it appears to have no longer been widely read. Bracha largely agrees with Adolph Franz’s explanation for this startling decline. Nikolaus wrote about many issues that were just about to coalesce into a much more extreme vision than he presented; namely, the idea of diabolical witchcraft that many clerical writers began to articulate beginning in the mid-fifteenth century. These works superseded Nikolaus’s more constrained approach to such topics as spells, demons, and magical rites. Bracha’s book, therefore, allows us see how these issues figured in late-medieval intellectual and religious culture before the extreme idea of witchcraft began to take hold, which in turn helps us see this period in its own terms and not through the sometimes distorting lens of later history.

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JONATHAN BARRY. *Witchcraft and Demonology in South-West England, 1640–1789*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Pp. 384.

This book contributes to a growing movement in witchcraft studies that has extended the field beyond the traditional focus on the period of the witch trials. Following an introduction that provides a concise, but successful, overview of current thinking, Barry presents six case studies from the South