Astrologie und Öffentlichkeit im Mittelalter (review)

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Abstract
This is a curiously conceived book. In his introduction, Mentgen begins by noting the “shocking” lack of attention the topic of astrology has received especially among German medievalist (p. 1). He also notes that the practice of astrology faced two significant obstacles throughout the medieval period—it had suffered legal condemnations since late antiquity, and certain aspects of it contradicted the Christian doctrine of human free will. Yet this book deals not at all with the long and complex history of legal or intellectual opposition to astrology. Neither does it intend to provide a complete survey of the practice of this craft in medieval times. Instead, Mentgen focuses on the issue of the public reception of astrological predictions. He notes the difficulty of defining a “public” in medieval times, with a nod to Habermas (pp. 10–12), but offers no resolution to this dilemma, and afterward treats it unproblematically. On the subject of astrological “Öffentlichkeit,” Mentgen intends to be comprehensive, covering the entire medieval period and all of Europe, but in fact he radically narrows his focus to only two issues (the second, admittedly, quite large). The book makes absolutely no attempt to unify its two entirely separate topics, and so is, in fact, really two separate books.

Disciplines
European History | History of Religion | Medieval History | Other History

Comments

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Michael D. Bailey

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For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mrw/summary/v004/4.1.bailey04.html
worth reading, both for those interested in the life and work of Morton
Smith, and for those interested in the question of the Secret Gospel and its
place in the history of earliest Christianity.

NICOLE KELLEY

Florida State University

gerd mentgen. Astrologie und Öffentlichkeit im Mittelalter. Monographien zur

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The first “book” Mentgen has written concerns the propagation of the so-
called Toledo letter in all its variations from its first appearance around 1185
to its final fading from importance after 1524. The second concerns the place
of astrology in the courtly culture of the twelfth through early sixteenth
centuries. The subject of the first “book,” the Toledo letter, is perhaps the
most famous prophetic text of the later Middle Ages. It circulated extremely
widely and appeared in numerous variants, reissued repeatedly over the
course of several centuries. There is no question that it reached a large (by
medieval standards) public, but what relates it to the practice of astrology?
The initial letter and many of its later variants were supposedly authored by
astrologers. Moreover, Mentgen notes that the initial context of the letter’s
composition was a fearful astrological convergence in 1185 that promised to bring natural disasters in its wake. Many later variants of the letter were also connected with significant astrological convergences. Yet Mentgen’s analysis does not really focus on the astrological overtones that the letter, or its contexts, may convey. Instead, what emerges is a study of medieval prophecy, and as Mentgen admits, while many medieval prophetic texts had astrological components similar to those in the Toledo letter, many also did not. No attempt is made to analyze specifically astrological prophecy, or to contrast it to other variants of prophetic activity.

The second “book” is comprised mainly of a catalog-like survey of astrologers associated with various princely courts. Mentgen begins with a brief look at courtly astrologers in ancient Rome, Islam, Byzantium, and early medieval western Europe (each receives a few pages of treatment). He then narrows his focus to the later medieval West, and proceeds systematically with chapters on the twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries (this last extending a bit into the early sixteenth). Each chapter is subdivided geographically, so readers are led on a tour through Europe. The deployment of sources covering such a wide area, both geographic and chronological, is impressive, but the analysis never goes very deep. Mentgen often does little more than name certain astrologers at various courts, provide their dates, and briefly describe their major activities. He makes little attempt to analyze how they were situated or operated within courtly cultures, as Jean-Patrice Boudet and Jan Veenstra, for example, have done in reference to specific courts in France and Burgundy. As for “public reception,” the existence of court astrologers seems enough evidence for Mentgen that they had a public; he makes no effort to discern how their predictions were received or utilized, or how this reception may have changed over time, as, for example, Hilary Carey has done for English court astrologers.

At the end of this second “book,” Mentgen raises two interesting points of analysis. He suggests that astrologers in many courts rose in prestige in the fifteenth century, and that astrological predictions were frequently deployed as political propaganda between rival princes. Either point, if clearly demonstrated, would be an important contribution to our understanding of medieval astrology. Unfortunately, neither is developed fully enough to become a solid argument, remaining instead only interesting but tentative assertions. Mentgen also raises a major point at the end of his first “book.” Attempting to explain the end of the Toledo letter’s popularity, he sets its final variant appearing in 1524 in the context of early-sixteenth-century concerns over a second, world-ending flood. When these fears proved unsubstantiated, he asserts, a major shift took place in prophetic mentalities, but this argument,
too, is underdeveloped. New variants of the Toledo letter may be lacking after 1524, but other medieval prophecies continued to circulate. While Mentgen credits Robert Lerner’s work on prophecy at many points in his book, he does not engage at all with Lerner’s major thesis that basic prophetic mentalities did not undergo significant change until at least the early eighteenth century.

Despite the level of erudition evident at many points in this book, too many major issues are skirted or set aside entirely. Too often the author simply presents information while offering little or no real analysis. Although his focus is actually fairly narrow, his intended reach still occasionally exceeds his grasp. Authorial decisions regarding focus and also exclusions are seldom clarified. For a topic as complex as astrology and its public reception, this will not do. Readers will find much valuable information in this book; they will not find a fully satisfying argument.

Michael D. Bailey
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In this erudite and engaging work, John Warne Monroe examines the emergence and development of three esoteric movements in France in the second half of the nineteenth century. The book opens with the familiar story of the Fox sisters and the appearance of spiritualism in 1848 New York, then transitions to the sudden explosion of this movement onto the French scene in 1853, where the physical manifestations of spirit phenomena led to a rage for so-called tables tournantes. French observers embraced American spiritualism for a variety of reasons—for some, it was simply an amusing fad or parlor game, while for others, communication with the spirits of the dead offered consolation for grieving relatives and the promise of definitive answers for long-debated metaphysical questions. Both the Catholic Church and the scientific establishment were initially taken aback by spiritualism, and were uncertain how best to respond to this new vogue. After initial ambivalence, church leaders condemned spiritualism as an impious challenge to the uniqueness of the Christian revelation and a snare to lure disaffected believers away from the true path to Christ.

Of course, the French cultural and intellectual milieu that received spiritu-