Religion und Magie in Ostmitteleuropa: Spielräume theologischer Normierungsprozesse in Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit (review)

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Abstract
In his introduction to this collection of articles based on papers delivered at a conference in Passau in 2004, Thomas Wünsch asserts that magic was an "integral aspect" of religion in premodern Europe (p. 2). The overriding goal of this collection is to demonstrate that, for most of European history, magic and religion were not sharply divided and competing realms. With the caveat that religious authorities throughout medieval and early modern Europe did, in fact, regard practices they labeled as magical or superstitious as being profoundly irreligious or antireligious, the essential interrelatedness of "magical" and "religious" practices will come as no surprise to most readers of this journal.

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Comments

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In his introduction to this collection of articles based on papers delivered at a conference in Passau in 2004, Thomas Wünsch asserts that magic was an “integral aspect” of religion in premodern Europe (p. 2). The overriding goal of this collection is to demonstrate that, for most of European history, magic and religion were not sharply divided and competing realms. With the caveat that religious authorities throughout medieval and early modern Europe did, in fact, regard practices they labeled as magical or superstitious as being profoundly irreligious or antireligious, the essential interrelatedness of “magical” and “religious” practices will come as no surprise to most readers of this journal.

The other goal of this collection is to bring greater attention in Western European and North American academic circles to work being done on Central and Eastern Europe. While all the articles are written in either German or English, many of the authors hail from Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. In the two decades since the fall of the Iron Curtain, the reintegration of scholars from former east bloc lands into the Western scholarly community has been a laudable goal, pursued with particular diligence by German academics. This reintegration helps efface the historically unprecedented but obviously now strongly entrenched perception of a sharp bifurcation running through the middle of Europe and reestablishes a cultural zone extending from Budapest and Vienna through Prague and Krakow to the Baltic Sea. In the medieval and early modern period, this zone, now often called Central Europe (or here “east-central Europe”), formed the eastern edge of Latin Christendom, and, while showing some distinct social and cultural features, had strong links to the west.

Again in the introduction, Wünsch notes that this region was, naturally enough, characterized by a later Christianization than Western Europe, but that by the late medieval period it had “caught up” and exhibited many of the same features, especially in terms of religious culture (religious reform and so forth), that were evident in more western lands. While episcopal authorities might continue to decry a residue of paganism they claimed to have endured in these regions, Wünsch follows Dieter Harmening in asserting that this was mostly just standard rhetoric drawn from earlier Christian polemics. Oddly, then, one enters this volume wondering what the basis for the regional focus is, aside from the obvious modern divisions. This is reinforced
by the organization, which is not topical or chronological, but rather geographical. The volume begins with articles on Austria, then Bohemia, then Poland, then Hungary, and finally the southern Balkans. Sometimes this organization works, or at least causes no obvious problems, but at other points disjunctures are evident.

Consider the first several articles. In the first, Richard Kieckhefer reexamines the famous Innsbruck witch trial of 1485, conducted by Heinrich Kramer, who would go on to write *Malleus maleficarum* shortly thereafter. His careful examination discloses new aspects of a trial that, for all its particularity, is nevertheless fairly characteristic of elite demonological concerns and witch-hunting energies stemming from more western Alpine lands. The second article, by Martin Scheutz, examines traditions of magical treasure-seeking in Austrian lands in the eighteenth century, evident among various social groups but mainly located at the lower, poorer end of the social spectrum. The only real unity between these two fine pieces of historical analysis is that they happen both to fall within Austrian borders. The third article returns us to the late medieval period, and to a more elevated, courtly context, focusing on the imperial court in Prague, but here we have moved into the “Bohemian” section of the volume.

Few of the articles that focus on elite levels of society draw any sharp distinction between the regions on which they focus and other areas of Europe. How could they? Imperial Prague and Vienna were great cosmopolitan centers. Some efforts to draw out regional particularities are made. In a survey of manuscripts dealing with the topic of superstition in Czech libraries, which notes how few of these there are compared to Western collections, Zdeněk Uhlíř speculates that the level of radical Hussite opposition to “superstition” may have made standard critiques of the subject appear mild and worthless in late medieval Bohemia. This is followed, however, by an essay by Christoph Daxelmüller that stresses the cosmopolitan magical culture of Rudolf II’s Prague a century later. Further into the volume, Krzysztof Bracha’s fine study of the treatment of magic and superstition in late medieval Polish sermons demonstrates nothing uniquely “Polish” or “central European” about the attitude of clerical preachers toward these topics. The strongest argument for a regional difference is made by Benedek Láng in an article on attitudes toward necromantic texts in late medieval Krakow. Compared to strong condemnations of magical texts at the University of Paris, Láng finds a relatively more tolerant attitude at the university in Krakow. This he attributes to Krakow’s (and other eastern universities’) more recent foundation. The academic magic arts had simply not had as much time to flourish in the east as in the west, and so had not yet raised significant levels of concern. Perhaps more
importantly, rifts between the faculty at these newer institutions, which often manifested in disputes over magical arts, had not yet had time to develop.

This is not to say that Láng succeeds where other authors in this volume fail. For the most part, the authors here, especially those who focus on elite intellectual or political milieus, are not concerned to identify or explain regional particularities. This tendency is, however, more pronounced in articles focusing on “popular” or “folk” magical practices. Here, unfortunately, despite Wünsch’s note of caution in the introduction, several authors take up the theme of strong “pagan holdovers” in more recently Christianized eastern lands. This is a complicated issue. Certainly Christianization did not eradicate folk customs ultimately rooted in pre-Christian times, and one could reasonably expect that in regions where Christianization was more recent, more of the “pagan” character of various beliefs and practices might survive, but the strong effect of even a few generations of Christianity cannot be discounted. None of the authors makes untenable claims. Bernhart Jähnig sees such practices as a “mix” of Christian and pre-Christian elements (p. 161). Beata Wojciechowska concludes they represent both “archaic strata” of belief and “layers influenced by Christianity” (p. 238). An important question, however, is not whether we, looking back, can see any trace of potential pagan elements in common practices, but whether contemporaries might have perceived any. Tomasz Wislicz, writing about a growth of “informal” sites of popular devotion in early modern Poland, argues that these in no way reflected a “return to paganism”; instead even informal (that is, popular and not officially approved) sites were grounded entirely in “Christian representations” of sacrality (p. 289).

Historians (I am one) have a marked tendency to get skittish when the transhistorical methods of folklorists are applied, and there are some pronounced examples in this collection. Jerzy Kaliszuk, writing about late medieval devotion to the three magi in Poland, finds such a dearth of evidence that he often draws on German and Bohemian examples, and on devotional practices of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, about which he remarks “we can only suppose that some of these customs date back to the Middle Ages” (p. 254). The final article, by Thede Kahl, examines attitudes toward the evil eye in the Balkans. Most of the evidence Kahl surveys is modern, with a few flashbacks to ancient condemnations of the evil eye. Almost nothing is said about medieval and early modern practices. In fairness, this article does not assert that it focuses on the Middle Ages or early modern period, but this volume does, and that makes this article an odd choice to close out the book.

There is little thematic unity to the essays collected here. Nor is there a
consistent focus on examining regional particularities, and what focus there is along those lines (on pagan holdovers into later periods) is problematic. The organization of the volume does not do much to enhance the coherence of the articles. All that said, most of the articles here are very worthwhile, and all focus on regions that are still too little covered in general medieval and early modern magical studies. That the volume as a whole fails to cohere or give any overall picture of “magic and religion in east-central Europe” is no fatal flaw. It is useful to have a number of good articles conveniently packaged between two covers.

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