Christian Demonology and Popular Mythology (review)

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Abstract
This is the second volume in a planned series of three emerging from an international conference held in 1999 in Budapest (for a review of the first volume, Communicating with the Spirits, by this reviewer, see Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft 1.2 [2006], 257–60). The focus of this volume is human conceptions of and purported interaction with spirit-entities that traditional Christianity would label as demons. The essays collected here do not limit themselves to explorations of what Christian authorities had to say on the subject of demons, however, but also address folkloric spirit beliefs (the "popular mythology" as opposed to the "Christian demonology" of the title), and explore how these two realms of understanding spirits influenced one another. The organizing principle of the volume is therefore quite explicitly that of "popular" and "elite" cultures and their interactions. In the introduction, the editors acknowledge that this model has been strongly challenged by much recent research on magic, witchcraft, and demonology. Nevertheless, they hold that their use of the model is justified by real differences between the official demonology espoused by Christian authorities (theologians, magistrates, etc.) and conceptions of demonic/spirit entities held by the common laity. They also note that this volume does not privilege elite over popular conceptions, but instead seeks to explore the interaction and influence that spread in both direction. In fact, the potential problematics of the model do not really come into play here because most of the articles collected are too short and theoretically simplistic for the framework to matter.

Disciplines
Cultural History | European History | History of Religion | Other History

Comments

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Reviews


This is the second volume in a planned series of three emerging from an international conference held in 1999 in Budapest (for a review of the first volume, Communicating with the Spirits, by this reviewer, see Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft 1.2 [2006], 257–60). The focus of this volume is human conceptions of and purported interaction with spirit-entities that traditional Christianity would label as demons. The essays collected here do not limit themselves to explorations of what Christian authorities had to say on the subject of demons, however, but also address folkloric spirit beliefs (the “popular mythology” as opposed to the “Christian demonology” of the title), and explore how these two realms of understanding spirits influenced one another. The organizing principle of the volume is therefore quite explicitly that of “popular” and “elite” cultures and their interactions. In the introduction, the editors acknowledge that this model has been strongly challenged by much recent research on magic, witchcraft, and demonology. Nevertheless, they hold that their use of the model is justified by real differences between the official demonology espoused by Christian authorities (theologians, magistrates, etc.) and conceptions of demonic/spirit entities held by the common laity. They also note that this volume does not privilege elite over popular conceptions, but instead seeks to explore the interaction and influence that spread in both direction. In fact, the potential problematics of the model do not really come into play here because most of the articles collected are too short and theoretically simplistic for the framework to matter.

The articles here are all quite brief. This had been the case with the first volume as well, and clearly reflects the conference-paper origins of these pieces. In the first volume, however, several authors had been able to expand their contributions. Here, only the first article, Benedek Láng’s study of a Polish handbook of magic and the context of its composition and circulation, seems to have been significantly expanded to around twenty pages. Otherwise, discounting bibliographies and occasional appendices, the articles in this volume average around ten pages, with the shortest being just six pages long. Another problem is the time that has passed, now seven years, between the original conference and the publication of this volume. One inevitably gets the feeling that one may be reading already outdated research. For example, Jonas Liliequist’s article on “Sexual Encounters with Spirits and Demons in
Early Modern Sweden” does not take into account Walter Stephens’s important 2002 book *Demon Lovers*, which offers an interpretive paradigm that now must be addressed when discussing supposed sexual encounters between humans and demons.

The first volume contained articles covering much of Europe. Here, by contrast, the focus is limited to central and eastern Europe and Scandinavia—that is, Poland, Hungary, Slovenia, Macedonia, and Sweden. This is quite valuable, insofar as there is no great surplus of scholarship on the topics of magic, witchcraft, and demonology from these lands—certainly not scholarship readily available to western European or North American academics generally limited to English, French, and German. Presenting a number of studies from these eastern (and northern) regions in English is a worthwhile service. What these articles seem to introduce, however, is a generally less developed state of scholarship than in the burgeoning fields of western European witchcraft and demonology.

Many of the articles here are simply descriptive, introducing certain belief structures, legends, or texts, but then engaging in only limited analysis and almost never digging deeply into the theoretical problems entailed by popular/elite interactions. For example, in an article that seeks to compare legends of Saint Margaret of Antioch, swallowed by a dragon, to mythological conceptions of women transforming into serpents, Karen Smith concludes “the evidence of fertility practices associated with Margaret suggests that women who engaged in them participated in overlapping layers of cultural assumptions and beliefs” (p. 129), but she does not really analyze how these layers overlapped or interacted. Similarly, in an article on modern Slovenian beliefs regarding magical healing, Monika Kropej concludes “the faith in the supernatural power to heal diseases, to prevent and solve difficulties is still alive in Slovenian ethnic territory” (p. 199). Anyone familiar with only a little of the rapidly growing body of scholarship on magical beliefs enduring into the modern era in western Europe could have assumed this. More interesting would be how these beliefs have survived in Slovenian lands and how they have altered. Kropej does suggest one major alteration over time—Slovenians still believe in magical healing but no longer accept the reality of black magic used to harm. As her source-base consists mainly of three modern accounts of healing magic, however, this startling conclusion (given that historically belief in magical healing and harming have always been intertwined in complex ways) does not seem sufficiently supported.

Whether these shortcomings stem from the fact that less work has been done on these questions in central European lands, and so scholars must concentrate more on simply introducing information and setting up paradigms,
or whether they arise from the brevity of the majority of these articles is impossible to say. Certainly scholarship on central Europe enjoys the advantage of the large amount of work done on western European lands, and can draw on, contrast with, and challenge models developed in that scholarship. The editors of this volume, in their own work, are prime examples of that. Yet the articles they have gathered here generally do not seek to situate themselves in broader theoretical or methodological discussions, at least not in very complex ways. There are exceptions, of course. Benedek Láng’s article on a Polish magical text draws extensively on work on magical handbooks in western Europe, for example. Moreover, any readers interested in learning about specific beliefs in central European lands will certainly garner useful information from all of these articles. But those with a more general interest in magical or demonological beliefs and looking for significant advances in the paradigm of popular/elite interaction, either to support or challenge that paradigm, will come away disappointed.

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Alexander Rödlach provides a substantive analysis of processes of meaning-making surrounding the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Zimbabwe. Focusing on “sorcery” beliefs and theories of “conspiracy,” his book queries “how these two types of belief became attached to the disease, attributing the epidemic with meaning and behavior” (p. 4). It consistently and effectively argues that in present-day Zimbabwe conspiracy theories and sorcery beliefs operate in tandem to offer everyday understandings of the medical causalities of the epidemic and ready explanations of why particular individuals become stricken with HIV/AIDS.

Rödlach’s study centers on Nkulumane Township, one of Bulawayo’s poorer suburbs. Close to a decade spent working in Zimbabwe first as a Catholic priest and then as an anthropological researcher has afforded him the opportunity to do the sort of deeply immersive fieldwork advocated most notably by the anthropologist Paul Stoller, whom he cites (p. 19). The duration and depth of Rödlach’s experiences in Zimbabwe is reflected in the