Winter 2006

Satan hérétique: Histoire de la démonologie (1280-1320) (review)

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Satan hérétique: Histoire de la démonologie (1280-1320) (review)

Abstract
In this rich and informative study, Alain Boureau breathes new intellectual life into an old task—to explain the major European witch hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by reference to conditions in late medieval European society. Such founding fathers of the field of witchcraft studies as the American Henry Charles Lea and the German Joseph Hansen argued that the mentalities and legal procedures that supported early modern witch-hunting stemmed directly from the repressive qualities of the medieval church. More recently, a number of European and American scholars (including myself) have focused on the earliest witch hunts and major treatises on witchcraft from the fifteenth century. It is widely recognized that these [End Page 244] trials and particularly these treatises were premised on authorities’ overt hereticization of demonic magic and even more fundamentally on a growing concern over the scope and reality of demonic power in the world. Boureau proposes to examine the origins of these conditions. The critical shift, he argues, came during the pontificate of John XXII (1316–34), and was rooted in a number of intellectual developments stretching back into the late thirteenth century.

Disciplines
European History | History of Religion | Other History | United States History

Comments

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Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft, Volume 1, Number 2, Winter 2006, pp. 244-246 (Review)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: 10.1353/mrw.0.0073

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Sommers” into the collection, then, is one segment in a polemical exchange, rather than a description of a case of possession and exorcism.

This is the case, obviously, with all the documents in the collection, and Almond is well aware of the polemical nature of these narratives. In all the early modern English pamphlets that discussed possession and exorcism, events were shaped by means of narrative into morality tales, eschatological prophesies, and polemical goals. Thus, Almond points out that the “True and fearful vexation of one Alexander Nyndge: being most horribly tormented with the Devil” of 1615 (pp. 46–57) is a larger version of an earlier pamphlet of the 1570s. The differences between the two versions are striking. While in the first version Alexander was possessed for only one day, by 1615 his possession lasted six months; and the later version includes lengthy prayers that are missing from the earlier version. Could the difference between the two versions shed light on the dynamics of possession narrative? Undoubtedly so. Could a systematic comparison between them get us nearer the events themselves? Perhaps. In Nyndge’s case, as in the cases of Darrell/Sommers and of Mary Glover, including alternative versions of the same event could have served both heuristic and scholarly interests. Almond’s collection could have benefited from pondering the gap between the narratives and the events, and from making available for students the complexity of discovering “what really happened” in possession and exorcism in early modern England.

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In this rich and informative study, Alain Boureau breathes new intellectual life into an old task—to explain the major European witch hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by reference to conditions in late medieval European society. Such founding fathers of the field of witchcraft studies as the American Henry Charles Lea and the German Joseph Hansen argued that the mentalities and legal procedures that supported early modern witch-hunting stemmed directly from the repressive qualities of the medieval church. More recently, a number of European and American scholars (including myself) have focused on the earliest witch hunts and major treatises on witchcraft from the fifteenth century. It is widely recognized that these
trials and particularly these treatises were premised on authorities’ overt hereticization of demonic magic and even more fundamentally on a growing concern over the scope and reality of demonic power in the world. Boureau proposes to examine the origins of these conditions. The critical shift, he argues, came during the pontificate of John XXII (1316–34), and was rooted in a number of intellectual developments stretching back into the late thirteenth century.

That medieval Christian authorities would regard the performance of demonic magic to be heretical might seem to require no explanation. In fact, however, this position necessitated a dramatic overhaul of earlier opinion. Heresy entails incorrect belief, whereas the performance of demonic magic is an act into which incorrect beliefs had to be read. Moreover, the presumption that this act would produce real effects by which one could work harm in the world required that demons be deemed capable of doing more than just tempting humans into error. Both of these conditions are fairly clearly developed in John XXII’s important decree *Super illius specula* (1326), in which he summarily excommunicated anyone who invoked demons for magical purposes. Boureau contrasts this decree effectively with the canon *Episcopi*, which had been a major (although by no means exclusive) authority on magical and demonic operations since the tenth century. The canon clearly implied that demons had little real power beyond the ability to create deceptive illusions. The main error that it imputed to those who interacted with demons was the belief that demons could achieve other effects.

In order to explain the shift from *Episcopi* to *Super illius specula*, Boureau enters into many streams of high- and late-medieval intellectual and religious culture. He begins most immediately with John XXII, his personal concerns over demonic magic, his fears that such magic was being used against him, and his use of charges of demonic magic against political enemies. Boureau also notes that John’s obsession with demons might well reflect the fact that many of his enemies, especially the Spiritual branch of the Franciscan order, accused him of being the Antichrist or at least a minion of Satan. Essential to John’s thinking, though, was the classification of actions, as opposed to beliefs or intentions, as heretical. This Boureau links to a larger trend in what might be termed inquisitorial thought. For the previous two centuries, church authorities investigating heretics confronted the problem that beliefs and intentions are so easily dissembled. They began to focus on actions and the general reputation (*fama*) derived from actions as evidence of belief. Yet Boureau is not interested merely in some narrow, institutional explanation for shifting concerns around 1300. He extends his observations into many areas of medieval culture.
Boureau links concern over effective demonic magic, for example, to increasingly precise ideas of sacraments. Demonic magic—a ritual achieving its effect through the more or less automatic operation of demonic power—was seen by many as a corollary to the sacraments—rituals that functioned through the more or less automatic operation of divine power. Central to the condemnation of magic as heretical was the idea that magicians bound themselves to demons via pacts. While the notion of the demonic pact was age-old, Boureau argues that it took on new resonance in the thirteenth century, when notions of contracts and contractual obligations became very strong in medieval society, such that by 1300 the pact was an “institution sociale fondamentale” (p. 107). Linked to the idea that people might contract with demons to perform various services was the increased theological interest beginning in the later thirteenth century to determine what powers and abilities demons might actually possess. Such concerns led to reconsidérations of an ancient demonic ability—the power of possession. Theologians now debated at length the spiritual, mental, and medical ramifications of possession (Boureau has a long and interesting section about somnambulism, as a comparable state in which humans might be active but lack conscious control over their actions). All of this leads to considerations of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century notions of personhood and individuality.

We are far, at this point, from the court of John XXII and its more obvious concerns over demonic magic. Boureau offers a brief epilogue, but does not fully tie all his diverse strands together. This seems appropriate. John XXII did not single-handedly alter medieval conceptions of demonic power. Rather, he operated in (and contributed to) a world in which such conceptions were developing and changing for a multiplicity of reasons. One very important development that Boureau curiously avoids mentioning is the growth of overtly demonic magic known as necromancy being practiced in this period by educated clerics. Many church authorities explicitly cited the practice of such magic by members of their own elite class as a cause for increased concern over demonic activity. Yet Boureau has virtually nothing to say about debates over necromancy. For a study that moves effectively through so many areas of medieval culture to have missed one area so close to its central concern is unfortunate. Yet Boureau’s work is so informative and so provocative on such a range of subjects that it is churlish to dwell on ground he does not cover. This is a book that any scholar working in the history of European magic, demonology, or late-medieval religious culture generally will want to read.

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