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The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England (review)

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(Review)

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the clergy had broken the covenant by disallowing the children of God to read the scriptures as part of their own spiritual discipline. Key to Tyndale's life's work was his belief that the laity needed the ability to access scripture in their own language in order to learn the truth of God's word for themselves, to discern true doctrine, and thereby to become true followers and children of God. Further, Werrell argues, Tyndale ultimately called for the restoration of the covenantal signs of the unreformed Church, to their original meaning, purified from the man-made additions and changes of the medieval which caused them to depart from their God-given purpose.

The author of *The Theology of William Tyndale*, Ralph S. Werrell, is an Anglican priest and a founder of the Tyndale Society. His doctoral thesis forms the basis of the book, and he is currently continuing his research on the roots of Tyndale's theology. Though still structured somewhat like a dissertation, the book is readable and well-documented. It is an important addition to the literature of the theology and history of the early English Reformation.

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Nathan Johnstone. *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England*.

Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. x + 334 pp. index. bibl. \$85. ISBN: 0-521-80236-9.

There are two standard depictions of the devil in the early modern era. The devil is viewed either as a medieval belief that was fading with the rise of modern rationalism or as an aspect of occult practices, beliefs, and prosecutions. According to Nathan Johnstone, such interpretations have marginalized the early modern devil. *The Devil and Demonism* does not directly challenge historical interpretations of witchcraft demonology, but rather focuses on the devil's unexceptional role in the lives of early modern men and women. By doing so, Johnstone is able to locate the devil and demonism at the center of English religious and political culture.

With the emergence of Protestantism, Johnstone sees a "subtle realignment" that significantly transformed Protestant understanding and experience of the devil (106). In Catholicism the intercessory church kept the devil at bay through rituals and ceremonies, such as the exorcism of infant baptism. For English Protestants, the devil could not be defeated or avoided. Demonic temptation was part of normal personal experience, what Johnstone calls the "hidden agency of the devil" (23). Belief in the devil helped early modern men and women understand both external reality and their own internal temptations and fears, but not in a simplistic demonization of otherness. The possibility of internal subversion meant that anyone, no matter how sincere, pious, and seemingly godly, could fall under demonic influence. Catholicism was a natural target for demonic rhetoric, but the

contrariety of the devil also explained Protestant sectarianism as well as crime, war, political conflict, and, most importantly, personal struggles with temptation, pain, and theological doubt. In a sense, English Protestant identity was constructed in opposition to the ongoing reconstruction of the devil and his agency.

At the core of Johnstone's book is the Protestant struggle with temptation. People still believed in the devil's power to act in the physical world, but the reformed interpretation of the devil saw his real power as his "influence on the conscience" (287). While there is naturally ample theological analysis, Johnstone's focus is on the cultural meaning of the devil, not simply the development of Protestant doctrine. In fact, one of the strongest aspects of Johnstone's book is his treatment of Puritanism. Although Johnstone provides a few examples, this reviewer would have appreciated more discussion of the problematic relationship between diabolism and predestinarian theology. Particularly impressive, however, is Johnstone's ability to link the personal experience of the devil to broader cultural developments and historical events. Internal temptation provided a lens for viewing external reality. Thus, Johnstone argues, the prevalence of demonic rhetoric in political discourse cannot be dismissed as simple derogatory slander, but rather demonstrates a worldview where political and religious opponents struggled personally and corporately against the devil.

The first four chapters examine the development and vagaries of Protestant demonic theory and experience, while the last four focus more on the external and political ramifications of diabolism and, after a chapter on crime, move in a chronological manner from 1570 through the Interregnum. The chronological coverage and bulk of the sources are more limited than the title suggests. Johnstone is clearly at his best when engaging with the religious conflicts that first divided England and then contributed to the violence and chaos of the mid-seventeenth century. He convincingly argues that diabolism was at the "centre of political thinking" and, eventually, of the "satanic politics" of the Civil War (290, 213). Based on a wide variety of sources, Johnstone demonstrates the multivalent complexity of demonic belief and usage. The voices of men and a significant number of women come through on nearly every page and make this a lively, even a moving, read.

Despite all the books on English culture, religion, and politics, as well as the vast interest in witchcraft, magic, and the occult, there has been little focused scrutiny of the devil's role within English society. Johnstone's ambitious book gets to the core of early modern English culture by giving serious attention to a society's gravest fears. The vast majority of English men and women understood their lives and the world around them based on their experience of the devil and demonic temptation. The book is suitable for advanced undergraduates.

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