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Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, and Religion ,
1250-1750 (review)

Michelle Brock

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BOOK REVIEWS

Cameron, Euan. *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, and Religion, 1250–1750*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. 448. ISBN 978-0199257829.

Michelle Brock

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS, AUSTIN

In medieval and early modern Europe, theologians constantly refined, and sometimes radically altered, the rules, rituals, and practices necessary for personal and communal well-being in this life and the next. This vigorous and complex process resulted in a remarkable amount of literature on the topic of superstition. In *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, and Religion, 1250–1750*, Euan Cameron forays successfully into this complex intellectual world of late medieval and early modern theologians. This is not a book about superstition itself, which is in so many ways elusive and untraceable. Nor is this a study that speaks for medieval and early modern European culture as a whole. Rather, *Enchanted Europe* tells the specific story of how academic theologians throughout Europe defined, and then responded to, superstition. By examining a plethora of theoretical religious writings, Cameron traces how, over the course of five centuries, theologians deployed the label of “superstitious” to articulate their own faiths and to attack any beliefs and practices that did not coincide with their particular brand of orthodoxy.

For Cameron, this story has a distinctly linear path. He begins in the mid-thirteenth century with the critique of popular superstition through demonic association, and ends with the rise of “reason” in the early eighteenth century. Parts 1 and 2 of *Enchanted Europe* explore why and how theologians in late medieval Europe, through the composition of essays, treatises, and sermons, began to define and attack superstition with unprecedented vigor. Cameron contends that demonology was a key component of this discourse on superstition,

because it endowed theologians with both the reasoning and the language by which to explain certain folk practices as “superstitious” and demonically induced. Superstitious practices—including the use of charms to combat sickness, rituals to ward off poltergeists, and divination to see the future, to name a few—were seen as subversive and dangerous acts because they were associated with cooperation with the Devil.

Of course, those who committed these superstitious acts rarely intended to do harm. Uneducated European men and women used the methods most available and meaningful to them to combat disease, famine, evil spirits, and the like. Unfortunately, these methods often fell outside boundaries of approved religious orthodoxy and became the target of the theologian’s captious pen. Here Cameron rightly points out that historians cannot assume that the literature on superstition was demonstrative of any social reality, as theologians constructed an image of superstitious practices that was exaggerated and purposefully negative in order to endow the Church with full spiritual authority. Thus the literature on superstition is more reflective of the prevailing rhetoric than of reality. Still, Cameron contends that due to some evidence for the existence of practices considered superstitious, these theologians were not simply “arguing against shadows” (70).

Part 3 of the book explores how the Protestant Reformation and Counter-Reformation influenced the ways that theologians defined and combated superstition. Cameron contends that in the sixteenth century, a major shift in the literature occurred, as Protestant Reformers began to see superstition as not just a problem with the uneducated masses, but also as a demonic error endemic in the Catholic faith. In response, Catholic theologians staunchly defended their rites and rituals and tried to unite the disparate Catholic ideas on superstition. Part 4 then considers the development of ideas about superstition and demonology in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Cameron argues that in the seventeenth century, previous consensus about superstition disintegrated due to the rise of religious diversity, skepticism, and science. The debate over superstition thus “opened up,” and the nature and even the existence of the spirit world were called into question. It became possible to assert that certain phenomena simply could not and did not occur. Cameron contends that these developments in the seventeenth century paved the way for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when a new scholarly emphasis on reason led to the critique of religion’s “irrational” aspects.

Some the most interesting and provocative sections of *Enchanted Europe* address the reconceiving of demonological ideas by Protestant Reformers. In Part 3, Cameron details how the extreme providentialism of the Reformers usurped the Devil of independent agency. Satan, while retaining his innately evil nature, was “downgraded . . . to a helpless tool in the hands of the Almighty.” Accordingly, the nature of demonic assault changed, as the sowing of erroneous religious ideas became the Devil’s main weapon. Cameron claims that over time, this caused the Devil “to gradually and imperceptibly slide into the area of metaphor and symbol” (216). These assertions imply that fear of the Devil would have correspondingly declined among the educated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Through the end of the early modern era, however, militaristic conceptions of the warring of the armies of God and Satan remained intrinsic to how Protestant Reformers explained the tumultuous events around them. This polarization, buttressed by the concept of double predestination and the influence of eschatological thought, suggested that the Devil was increasingly active in the world. Even if the physical threat of the Devil declined, concern over the spiritual, internal assaults of Satan proved terrifying for Reformed Protestants, as recent works on the Devil in England have displayed (notably, Darren Oldridge’s *The Devil in Early Modern England*, Sutton, 2000; and Nathan Johnstone’s *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England*, Cambridge University Press, 2006). While Cameron is certainly right to insist that Protestants viewed the Devil as an instrument of God’s divine plan, I would caution against the assumption that providentialism necessarily relegated Satan to a symbolic position or mitigated fear of the Devil more generally.

Though Cameron claims that his interest is solely in the developments in “the literature of the intellectual analysis of popular superstition” (143), his discussion directly engages with debates about the nature and import of the Reformation. To grossly oversimplify decades of rich historiography, contributions to these debates generally fall between two extreme interpretations. On one side, the traditionalists assert that rise of Protestantism freed western Europe from the yoke of a corrupt and crumbling Catholic Church, ushering in a newer, more modern era. Conversely, revisionist historians claim that there was nothing at all modernizing about the disruptive force of Protestantism, which had little impact on European culture outside the theological academy. Most Europeans, they argue, remained firmly entrenched in the medieval world, even generations after the Reformation.

While Cameron's arguments are much more sophisticated and nuanced than many traditional perspectives, much of *Enchanted Europe* accords with the traditionalist interpretation of the Reformation. Cameron respectfully chides revisionist historians, most notably Robert Scribner and his followers, for neglecting the traditional theological sources produced by the Reformers and minimizing the cultural impact of theology more generally. Of the historians involved in the Reformation debate, *Enchanted Europe* most obviously bears the mark of Keith Thomas's pioneering *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971). Thomas promoted a teleological view of the Reformation, emphasizing the "essential unity" of the Reformation and the Enlightenment and inferring that Protestantism paved the way for a more modern society. Building on Thomas's ideas, Cameron asserts that though belief in magic persisted long after the early modern period, the *fear* of magic declined as "reason" took center stage in the eighteenth century. He implies that the Protestant Reformation, which marked a turning point in the literature on superstition, was a key step in the "disenchantment" of European religion. Unlike Thomas, however, Cameron does not presume the existence of a rigid division between the ideas of theologians and the popular beliefs of the masses.

Despite the fact that the widened chronological lens of *Enchanted Europe* lends itself to a teleological analysis, the focus on the late medieval period, the Reformation, and the early Enlightenment allows Cameron to recognize essential continuities while deftly locating a process of change. He rightly acknowledges, most notably in his discussion of Martin Luther, that the Reformation did not appear spontaneously, and that many of the ideas promoted by the Reformers were not new. This point is elementary, yet many historians of Reformation Europe begin their story in 1517, with just a hasty glance backward at the rich and formative period of late medieval Christianity. Giving a nod to the revisionists, Cameron illustrates that theologically, at least, late medieval Catholicism was not static and moribund. He successfully demonstrates the unity of many medieval, Renaissance, and Reformation ideas about superstition. At the same time, he recognizes that the Reformation did usher in profound changes in how both Catholics and Protestants understood and addressed superstition. In contrast to Stuart Clark's influential *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Clarendon Press, 1997), which minimizes confessional differences, Cameron convincingly demonstrates that Protestant and Catholics diverged in their approaches to both superstition

and demonology. He states that “it would be absurd to deny that there were vitally significant differences between the major confessions of the Reformation era on the topic of superstitions” (196). At the core of these differences was the fact that for Protestants, Catholicism itself became seen as a spiritual error propagated by Satan, and thus Catholic rites and rituals were viewed as the most dangerous type of superstition.

Cameron’s attempt to reclaim for Protestantism its modernizing force is the primary flaw in an otherwise very perceptive and useful work. Evoking *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Cameron argues that social historians who “confidently assert that there was nothing demystifying or ‘disenchanting’ about Protestantism” are ignoring that fact that “the core theology of the Reformed faith was in its very essence a process of demystification” (158). However, I would suggest that Protestantism was not, at its theological core, a process of demystification, but rather a project of consolidating mystical, supernatural power into the Godhead alone. Emphasis on the total sovereignty and providence of God, coupled with the embrace of the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, was not an attempt to remove mysticism from the Christian world. Rather, for Protestant Europe, God became the sole owner and dictator of all things mystical and enchanting.

This criticism aside, Cameron’s rigorous examination of the evasive subject of superstition makes *Enchanted Europe* essential reading for historians of medieval and early modern Europe. Through his careful exposition of a mass of dense, complex theological literature, Cameron succeeds in telling the complicated but necessary story of how theologians in late medieval and early modern Europe used superstition to define and understand “the nature of religion and its place in the universe” (3). His exclusive focus on theoretical writings, however, often leaves the reader wondering how ideas about superstition actually influenced society outside the theological academy. Cameron nonetheless makes a convincing case that in order to understand religious change, historians must take seriously the actual intentions of the Reformers, rather than just the impact of these intentions. *Enchanted Europe* moreover serves as a timely reminder of the value of analyzing religion on its own terms. Cameron demonstrates that the attack on superstition must not be interpreted as simply a political trope or a functional tool. Rather, the theological preoccupation with correct religious practice was born of the potent desire to find order and cosmological certainty in a very uncertain world.