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REVIEW ARTICLES

MAGIC, WITCHCRAFT AND SUPERSTITION

Aberglauben für Laien. Zur Programmatik und Überlieferung mittelalterlichen Superstitionskritik. By Karin Baumann. Quellen und Forschungen zur europäischen Ethnologie, 6. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1991. 2 vols. Pp. xiv+914. DM 148.

Zaumberei im Abendland. Von Anteil der Gelehrten am Wahn der Leute. Skizzen zur Geschichte des Aberglaubens. By Dieter Harmening. Quellen und Forschungen zur europäischen Ethnologie, 10. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1991. Pp. 141. DM 29.80.

Witchcraft in the Netherlands from the fourteenth to the twentieth century. Edited by Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra and Willem Frijhoff. Universitaire Pers Rotterdam, 1991. Pp. xii+211.

The topic of witchcraft has preoccupied historians of late-medieval and early modern Europe for so long now that equally important issues such as magic and 'superstition', which have much to tell us about the nature and evolution of witch belief, have been woefully neglected. The works reviewed here offer some hope that this may be about to change. All three offer distinctive and rewarding views on the connections between 'superstition', magic and witchcraft that may open up some new lines of enquiry in a field that has become somewhat stereotyped in the questions asked and the themes explored. Karin Baumann's weighty two-volume study is ostensibly devoted to the question of 'superstition' as defined in catechetical literature of the later middle ages, but its title misleads since her impressive exposition encompasses far more than that. We could even say that it is really three books in one. The first hundred odd pages constitute a history of catechetics from the early church until the later middle ages. The second section focuses on late-medieval catechetical texts dealing with the Ten Commandments, largely manuscripts located in Munich, originating in the greater Bavarian region and mostly of monastic provenance. Baumann provides (pp. 127–271) a careful description of the texts, their authors and their contents, highlighting some significant features which make them important for the wider religious history of the later middle ages.

The bulk of these tracts were a product of the 'Viennese school' of Nikolaus von Dinkelsbuhl and his pupils, especially Stephan von Landskron, whose *Himmelstrass* was probably the most successful work of popular religious instruction of the later middle ages. The Viennese school was characterized by its concern to produce vernacular works of basic religious instruction for the 'unlearned' – laypeople of little education and possibly of minimal literacy. This included recognition of the importance of visual catechetics, translating the Gregorian idea of images as the 'books of the common folk' into pastoral practice. The activities of the Viennese school are not entirely unknown, as Baumann admits, but her examination of its impressive production of catechetical material shows just how vibrant it was as a systematic programme of detailed religious instruction targeted at lay people, yet another example of the religious reforms of the fifteenth century that were to provide the infrastructure for those of the sixteenth. Baumann devotes her second volume to text editions of two of these vernacular tracts

on the Decalogue, Nikolaus von Dinkelbuhl's and that of an anonymous author. Her study does not pretend to tell us anything about the reception and impact of these works and one suspects that they may have been pressed into service for confessors and pastors rather than ending up in the hands of the lay people for whom they were intended. However, she has provided her readers with some important basic information which will form a starting point to begin the task of assessing reception and impact.

In the context of this review, however, it is the third element of her book that calls for particular attention, her discussion (pp. 272–492) of the way in which the theme of 'superstition' was handled in the catechetical expositions of the First Commandment. The texts in question provide an almost encyclopaedic range of 'superstitions', discussed by Baumann under the headings of auspicious or inauspicious signs and times, divination and a diverse range of 'magical practices' such as conjurations or forms of protective magic. Baumann convincingly shows how her authors drew together a number of medieval intellectual traditions in their attack on 'superstition', which they saw as breaching the honour due to, and trust in, God enjoined by the First Commandment. First, they took over attacks on pagan belief and practices from the early middle ages, embedded in the works of ecclesiastical writers who both catalogued and condemned them. Second, they incorporated into their critique Augustine's semiological theory of the signifying power of all creation. Those who believed in or practised the 'superstitions' in question had misunderstood natural signs through their own ignorance or vanity, or had been deceived by false signs created by the devil or evil spirits. This viewpoint continued the anti-pagan polemic of early medieval writers, who had condemned the falsity of pagan belief as a work of the devil, rather than a matter of ignorance. The third element was the view of Aquinas that all superstitious practices involved some kind of pact with the devil, whether tacit or explicit.

Because of the popularizing nature of these catechetical works, Baumann concludes that they provide an important link between a learned ecclesiastical view of 'superstition' and magic as essentially diabolical and the emergent witch paradigm which began to take popular root during the fifteenth century. They also, without exception, foster a stereotype of women as most susceptible to such diabolical deceptions, both from their presumed moral weakness and from their lesser rationality, labels particularly applied to old women. The word 'witch' (*Hexe*) is not used in these writings, but its content was being steadily defined within a very dense semantic field of vernacular concepts and terms, in essence creating a popular discourse on witchcraft which the apparently simple words *Hexe*, *Hexerei* could immediately invoke. Nonetheless, these catechizers were far removed from the obsessive and often simplistic witchcraft mania of a Heinrich Institoris. Baumann skilfully highlights their psychological subtlety and their theological complexity. They accepted that many people turned to magical practices out of fear and anxiety for their temporal welfare, but such an attitude manifested a lack of trust in God that qualified it to be counted as a transgression of the First Commandment. It was a renunciation of the Creator in favour of lesser creatures, indeed, in favour of demonic spirits. In cataloguing such transgressions, the catechizers were aware of the danger that a detailed list of condemned practices or beliefs would merely serve to popularize them and sometimes they are infuriatingly unspecific about what they condemn. This raises the question of how far these scholastic authors were merely repeating ancient topoi, rather than chronicling the belief and practice of their contemporaries. Baumann is cautiously honest, arguing that it is simply too difficult to tell on the evidence of the texts alone,

just as it is difficult to assess the full weight of their influence. Clearly, this is an agenda for further research.

Baumann's work is a continuation of the complex study of the medieval evolution of the term 'superstition' presented some years ago by Dieter Harmening. In *Zauberei im Abendland* Harmening collects together some shorter essays on the broad issue of magic, some of which have been published before in earlier versions. The overall theme of magic and its relationship to witchcraft is approached from a number of directions. Harmening traces the meanings attached to the word 'magia' in the later middle ages and Renaissance in order to highlight two aspects of intellectual tradition – the continual distinction between a philosophical understanding of magic, rooted in interest in the laws of natural science, and a demonic praxis of sorcery. Much of the distinction turned around the question of diabolical efficacy, and whether diabolical magic, by contrast to 'natural magic', did not work by means of illusion, a distinction that was strengthened with the emergence of ideas of mathematical–physical causality in the early modern period. In another essay, he reminds us, however, how far theologians complicated this picture, which might have generated a consistent scepticism about witchcraft, by the injection of a neo-platonic cosmological model which allowed for the presence and operation of demons. This arose from christianizing strategies which attempted to incorporate pre-christian ideas of a demonic world by representing demons as fallen angels set on frustrating God's plan for humankind and restoring, in human eyes at least, their divine status. Much of this view was systematized by St Augustine, who set in train the notion that by trafficking with demonic spirits one was entering into a pact with them, even if only tacitly, an argument which passed via Aquinas into the conventional wisdom of many late-medieval churchmen. It was also Augustine who rooted magic in a semiological understanding of supernatural efficacy that brought it close to notions of the sacraments, so laying the basis for an antithetical notion of magic: whereas the sacraments served to denote and shape a church, diabolical magic created an anti-church. Any truck with the one therefore involved rejection of the other. Taken together with a theological anthropology which emphasized women's greater susceptibility to sin, the foundations were laid early in the middle ages for the fateful intellectual conjuncture of the late-medieval witch, as represented in the *Hammer of Witches*.

In a further essay, Harmening shows how concepts of the witch were applied to various practitioners of sorcery to assimilate them to this model, given impetus by the fact that many of the spells and incantations used by cunning women seemed to be no more than appropriations of the sacramental magic of the official church, with its blessing and exorcisms. In other essays, Harmening shows the importance of pedagogical work such as treatises on the Ten Commandments in spreading these notions into popular currency and contributing to a growing conventional wisdom about the character of 'the witch'. The enduring fascination of the stereotype is nowhere more strikingly attested than the catalogue of witchcraft materials compiled by a special research team commissioned during the 1930s by none other than Heinrich Himmler. The *Reichsführer*'s intentions were not entirely transparent, but Harmening offers a brief outline of the project, which must rank as one of the greatest curiosities of the twentieth century – and one, alas, so badly carried out as to be of little use for proper historical analysis. Other essays cover ground similar to that already discussed by Baumann, but have their own specific insights to offer, so that this volume can be read as a useful and more broad-brushed companion to Baumann's specialized study.

Turning to the collection of essays on witchcraft in the Netherlands, it seems at first as though we advance from theory to practice, with a baker's dozen of short studies by ten different authors on the relatively low-key persecution of witchcraft there. Maryke Gijswijt-Hofstra offers a fascinating overview which sets all the other essays in perspective. The distinctive feature of Dutch witch trials was that there was no widespread belief in the sabbath or in a large-scale diabolical conspiracy aimed at subverting Christian society at large. Most witchcraft accusations involved maleficient magic or sorcery. Here the volume as a whole generates confusion by refusing to accept any distinction between witchcraft and magic, witchcraft (in the sense of an explicit pact with the devil) and sorcery. Thus, those phenomena discussed by Harmening or Baumann under the heading of 'magic' or 'superstition' are all labelled witchcraft. The justification offered is that the main Dutch term used for such practices was *toverei* (the equivalent of the German *Zauberei*), while the term *hekserij* (German: *Hexerei*) did not really embed itself until quite late, indeed virtually as executions for witchcraft ceased in the northern Netherlands. Yet this is clearly a case where a linguistic purism which refuses to use words not used by people of the time obfuscates rather than illuminates. The word 'witchcraft' has so many connotations for the modern reader that simply using it here summons up all the wrong associations.

If we bear in mind, then, that much of the discussion in this volume concerns the treatment of magic or sorcery, what Harmening's or Baumann's sources would have called 'superstition', we can see broader connections between the situation in the early modern Netherlands and that hinted at by the late-medieval catechetical literature. Netherlands theologians' views, as mapped by Marcel Gielis, were more or less in agreement with those of a Nikolaus von Dinkelbuhl, using the same Augustinian-scholastic assumptions about fallacious semiology and magical efficacy. Some of the fifteenth-century Netherlands theologians were more concerned to distinguish between the approved rituals of the church and those which were prohibited, but generally followed the view that magic rested on a delusion, albeit one induced by the devil. The witch paradigm of the *Malleus maleficarum* was never received in the Netherlands and subsequently under the influence of protestant anti-ritualism, Dutch thought moved to regarding sorcery as folly, rather than diabolical conspiracy. The writings of lawyers discussed by Herman Belien developed steadily in this direction, so that the ground was prepared for the sceptical work of Balthasar Bekker, discussed by G. J. Stronks. There were, of course, prosecutions for sorcery in the Netherlands and some witchtrials of a classic kind, especially in Gelderland, studied by Hans de Waardt and Willem de Blécourt, in this case strongly influenced from Germany. However, as Hans de Waardt points out (p. 80) the 'Dutch pattern' was generally one of isolated prosecutions, few chain-reaction trials and certainly no mass panics. Thus, several of the essays here can effectively focus on judicial procedure (de Waardt, C. M. A. Caspars, Gijswijt-Hofstra) or else on social factors such as enmity, insults or feuds (de Blécourt and Pereboom, de Waardt).

The most intriguing essays reveal the links between recourse to magic and forms of popular medicine, especially de Blécourt's on the existence over four centuries of Frisian cunning folk (here confusingly called 'witch doctors'). Indeed, Tom Dekker shows that belief in sorcery continued in the Netherlands right up to the twentieth century, proving that whatever the scepticism of intellectuals or jurists, the functional role filled by magical beliefs and practices was not displaced, and certainly not by Dutch Calvinism. Indeed, on the evidence adduced for Zeeland by Gijswijt-Hofstra in a further essay, Calvinist consistories were uninterested in pursuing magic, and then

usually counter-magic, as a form of error. The overall value of these essays is considerable, even if some confusing terminology is adopted throughout. They reveal that the dominant form of practice in the Netherlands was protective magic, and in this the region does not seem too different from other parts of Europe. However, the essays do not focus sufficiently on this topic, because they are preoccupied with locating the Netherlands on the spectrum and time-scales of witch persecution of the classic kind. If we read them against the mental grid set up by Harmening and Baumann, we can see a broad pattern of continuity in popular belief and practice. This was indeed 'superstition for lay folk', but the term describes a habitus they embraced without any trace of internalizing the condemnations of ecclesiastical or secular authorities.

CLARE COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE R. W. SCRIBNER