DISENCHANTMENT AND RE-ENCHANTMENT IN EUROPE, 1250–1920

Enchanted Europe: superstition, reason, and religion, 1250–1750. By Euan Cameron. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. xii + 473. ISBN 978–0–19–925782–9. £35.00.

Milton's angels: the early-modern imagination. By Joad Raymond. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. xviii + 465. ISBN 978–0–19–956050–9. £30.00.

Spectres of the self: thinking about ghosts and ghost-seeing in England, 1750–1920. By Shane McCorristine. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. x + 275. ISBN 978–0–521–74796–7. £19.99 pbk.

The relationship of reason to religion is a preoccupation of our times. Some contemporary culture-warriors, particularly in Britain and the United States, vehemently maintain their inherent antitheticality, and imagine themselves engaged in a heroic struggle to preserve Enlightenment rationality and hard-won scientific advances in the face of a global upsurge of irrational belief. Behind much of the histrionics is a sense that history itself has gone off course. The long-held presumption of an essentially linear path of development, via such milestones as the Reformation, Scientific Revolution, and Enlightenment, towards a condition of benevolent and universal secular modernity has been thrown into disarray by the evident power of religious faith, not merely to maintain a fading hegemony, but to generate new forms of social identity and inspire cultural and political action across the developing and developed world. Where once the long sweep of the 'secularization paradigm' seemed axiomatic and universalizing, sociologists of religion now posit flowing and ebbing tides of 'Christianization' as a hallmark of modern European history.[1]

In problematizing the relationship between historical progress and the evolution of secular rationality, historians of the long early modern period can congratulate themselves on being ahead of the curve. They have had the advantage of a compelling master-narrative against which to whet their revisionism. The greatest of religious sociologists, Max Weber, famously proposed that the Reformation, particularly in its Calvinistic incarnation, promoted the 'disenchantment of the world': a conscious rejection of magical, numinous, and supernatural beliefs in favour of faith in a distant and transcendent deity.[2] For the better part of two decades, historians have been expressing their

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[1] David Martin, *On secularization: towards a revised general theory* (Aldershot, 2005).

[2] Max Weber, *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York, NY, and London, 1930).

doubts about how this worked out in practice. An intensified preoccupation with demonic agency, a highly providentialized universe micro-managed by an interventionist God, and rich Protestant sub-cultures of folk belief and popular magic have all been suggested as more plausible medium-term effects of the religious disruptions of the era than any lurch towards spiritualized abstraction in religious matters.[3] Yet the dismantling of the Weberian thesis has raised more questions than it has answered. Should the Reformation now be seen as an intellectual failure, or as a cultural and pastoral success? Was disenchantment defeated, or only deferred? Should we think in terms of broad continuity, or of patterns of re-enchantment in post-Reformation and post-Enlightenment Europe? How marked was the contrast between Catholic and Protestant societies? The three volumes here under review, taking as their collective subject matter popular rituals and incantations, spirits and demons, angels and ghosts, all help to focus – if not necessarily to resolve – such questions. The affordable cover price in each case suggests an optimism, at least on the publishers' part, that these are issues in which general readers as well as scholars retain a stake and an interest.

I

Amid widespread loss of certainty about the modernizing potential of the Reformation, and even about modernity itself, Euan Cameron's impressively researched and lucidly written *Enchanted Europe* seeks to restore a sense of purpose and direction into debates about the disenchantment of Europe. Cameron, a distinguished historian of the European Reformation, admits to impatience with what he calls 'the now conventional postulate that Protestantism was as "enchanted" and devil-ridden as its medieval predecessors' (p. 23). He has in mind here the work of social historians of religion such as Alexandra Walsham and Bob Scribner, whose methodology he suspects of laying insufficient emphasis on the theological writings of the reformers themselves. (It is unfortunate in this context that Cameron, in a gratuitous endnote, feels impelled to suggest Scribner's own Catholic faith and upbringing as an unacknowledged motive for scepticism about the modernizing impact of Protestantism.) Cameron's own perspective on continuity and change is unashamedly elitist and top-down. He surveys an extraordinary breadth of printed sources in Latin and a range of European vernaculars in order to supply a history of superstition, or rather, a history of discourses about superstition: an analysis of the changing 'superstition-critique' of Europe's intellectual elites over the course of five centuries from the mid-thirteenth century

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[3] Stuart Clark, *Thinking with demons: the idea of witchcraft in early modern Europe* (Oxford, 1997); Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in early modern England* (Oxford, 1999); Bob Scribner, 'The Reformation, popular magic, and the "disenchantment of the world"', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 23 (1993), pp. 475–94.

to the middle of the eighteenth. 'Superstition', as Cameron is well aware, is a problematic and loaded term, forever located in the eye of the beholder. A working definition might paint it as worship of the true God by inappropriate means (as opposed to idolatry, worship of false gods). The early chapters of *Enchanted Europe* describe a long struggle on the part of late medieval theologians to find and describe the dividing line between superstition and acceptable devotion. Intellectuals encountered among the people an expectation of a world filled with imminent, unpredictable, and often amoral spiritual forces, at odds with the cosmic dividing lines between divine and demonic agency that structured their own understanding. Medieval writers might fulminate against ignorance and credulity, but they were often pastorally sensitive enough to recognize that certain forms of popular counter-magic were too ingrained to be usefully eradicated. On this, as on so much else, the church never spoke with a single voice: neo-Thomists, within defined parameters, tended to allow for the inherent sanctity of objects and the automatic efficacy of approved rituals; some nominalists, portentously for the future, ascribed all spiritual effects to the express and immediate action of God, and warned that beneficial results could never securely be relied on from any works of devotion.

The Reformation (and its prelude, the biting superstition-critique of Erasmian humanism) was thus an intensified continuation of a long-running conversation. Protestantism adapted medieval conventions for identifying particular practices and beliefs as demonic in origin, and amplified them in range and scope: Catholicism itself – its core sacraments and rituals – was nothing less than a species of superstition. In the middle ages, Satan was often seen as operating under a 'blanket permission' to tempt humanity and cause harm, but Protestant (particularly Calvinist) orthodoxy saw the immediately controlling, if inscrutable, hand of God behind every Satanic action: recourse to extraordinary or ritual means to head off the judgements of God was thus completely inadmissible. Tridentine Catholicism meanwhile showed continuities with the medieval critique of superstition, but was also deeply concerned to defend the efficacy of traditional rites against the attacks of the Protestants. Here, Cameron makes a powerful and persuasive case against the tendency in recent historiography to view the Protestant and Catholic Reformations as essentially parallel paths of acculturation and social discipline – in fact, the discourse of superstition allowed each side, quite literally, to demonize the other.

Confessional debates were, nonetheless, conducted within a common inherited framework of Christian Aristotelianism, postulating the existence of spirits as incorporeal substances in the material world. The eroding of this intellectual framework in the course of the seventeenth century had profound implications for the treatment of 'superstitious' belief. On the one hand, a handful of radical thinkers, including Thomas Hobbes and Balthasar Bekker, employed familiar Protestant anti-superstition rhetoric while drawing on the new mechanical philosophy in order to deny the very existence of spiritual beings, as they were conceived of in both Catholic and Protestant tradition. In alarmed response,

self-appointed defenders of orthodoxy like the English philosophers Henry More
and Joseph Glanvill rushed to validate popular stories of witchcraft, ghosts, and
spirits, in the process abandoning the a priori criteria for assessing the possibility
of a preternatural event that for centuries had guided their predecessors, Catholic
and Protestant. (Why the late seventeenth-century campaign to confound
'atheism' through the evidence of the supernatural should have been so over-
whelmingly English an affair is something Cameron does not altogether satis-
factorily explain.)

Glanvill and co.'s suggestion that almost anything might be true if empirical
evidence seemed to support it invited an inevitable backlash: a wave of ridicule
and fashionable satire that fuelled the early Enlightenment's contempt for
miracles and 'enthusiasm'. The *philosophes*, suggests Cameron, 'reworked elements
of the arguments that Protestantism had devised more than two centuries earlier'
(p. 309) in its attacks on popular superstition, though their arguments were now
detached from Aristotelian cosmology and the dogmatic authority of scripture.
Ironically, as elite disdain for popular credulity increased, actual pastoral pressure
to transform such beliefs was likely diminishing: if the people were not really
heedlessly flirting with demonic powers, then there was little reason to fear super-
stition or to push for its obliteration. The way was opened for a further devel-
opment in the nineteenth century: the Romantic discovery and celebration of
national 'folk cultures', superstition as whimsy and cultural ornament.

In amassing a plethora of intractable source material, and harnessing it to a
coherent narrative of intellectual change, Cameron has done scholarship a con-
siderable service. Nonetheless, one comes away from the book troubled by some
nagging doubts. In the first place, throughout the text, the conceptual status of
'superstition' itself remains rather uneasily suspended. At the outset, Cameron
seems to concede its character as a purely intellectual construct, and rightly insists
that historians must never presume to identify what 'actually' constitutes super-
stition as opposed to true religion. Yet increasingly he falls foul of his own stricture,
speculating on the methodological and evidential possibilities for writing a history
of superstitious belief, and by the end talking about the 'genuine "superstition"'
surviving in European cultures into modern times. It is hard here not to feel that
the author has been seduced by the perspective of his sources. Another concern is
that *Enchanted Europe*, for all its subtlety and sophistication, aims to tell a pro-
foundly teleological story. In seeking to defend a version of the Weber thesis, and
other 'ideal-type' approaches to the character of the Protestant Reformation,
Cameron argues (p. 22) that 'it is perfectly possible for a religious movement to
contain within it the seeds of a later development: but for those seeds not to
germinate in the first, second or third generation'. Disenchantment was a ticking
time-bomb. Yet to postulate convincingly the necessarily modernizing potential
of Protestant thought (in the face of the cultural agency of very significant numbers
of actual Protestants) requires rather more elaboration than it is able to receive
here. It also assumes a primacy of ideas at the expense of decisive political, social,
and cultural factors operating in particular, and contingent, historical contexts.

In this respect, *Enchanted Europe* suggests some of the limitations of internalist intellectual history, even as it exemplifies its elegant and incisive practice.

II

The broad sweep of Cameron's Europe-wide survey is usefully counter-pointed by Joad Raymond's monograph on *Milton's angels*, which focuses on one country, one particular aspect of belief in the supernatural, and, ultimately, on one literary text. Yet Raymond's approach reaches out beyond the confined world of Milton studies and makes his book of very considerable interest to historians of the religion, culture, and politics of late sixteenth-and seventeenth-century England. Raymond starts from the premises that *Paradise lost* is, first and foremost, a poem about angels, and that angels were a central component of the literary and religious imagination of post-Reformation England. Although angels had been prominent in both medieval scholastic theology and popular religious practice, the Reformation neither rejected angels nor simply tolerated them as a residuum of earlier devotional culture. Raymond devotes the first half of his book to a rich and rewarding exploration of the place of angels in Protestant thought and religious representation. Although formal angelological treatises were rare, angels penetrated writings of all kinds, and performed a wide range of philosophical and theological functions. English Protestants may have attacked the excessive 'curiosity' of the schoolmen, and some evinced a Calvinist minimalism on such questions as whether humans were assigned an individual guardian angel, or exactly how angels were arranged in ranks and hierarchies, but that did not stop them posing a range of thorny questions about the nature of these celestial beings: what and how do angels know? Do they have bodies, senses, freewill? How can they interact with humans? Are they differentiated by sex, or by names? Such questions played a role in biblical exegesis, in the working out of systematic theology, in the vindication of Protestantism as the true church, and in the offering of pastoral comfort to the laity. Angels functioned as nothing less than 'a means of conceiving of order, and a means, through analogy and differentiation, of conceiving what it is to be human' (p. 87).

The angel beliefs of early modern England were dynamic and creative, rather than static and received. Since angels were a much-utilized means of interpreting and commenting on hierarchy, there was a swell of interest in them in periods when hierarchies were being challenged and tested. The revolutionary decades witnessed a swell in angel commentary, and in direct angel-communication. Raymond supplies an intriguing case-study of the circle around the Pordage family: the father, John, conversed with angels at his Berkshire rectory, while the son, Samuel, composed an epic poem, *Mundorum explicatio*, employing angels to expound a mystical theology. It is another epic poem, of course, which forms the heart of the discussion. Raymond is dismissive of interpretations of Milton which see him as a purely 'literary' figure, pursuing aesthetic and artistic goals in detachment from the burning religious and political questions of the day. At the

same time he is suspicious of historicist readings that seek to interpret the poem in terms of precise contemporary and political allusions. In Raymond's view, Milton's strikingly real angels (who digest food, suffer pain, and make love for pleasure) resist any form of allegorical decoding. They are the creations of a poet who, in consciously prophetic mode, believed himself to be writing revealed truth, or at least 'an inspired truth-telling fiction' (p. 365). The key is the Protestant doctrine of 'accommodation', the notion that throughout history God comes halfway to meet imperfect human understanding and perception. For Milton, and for Protestant culture more generally, accommodation legitimated descriptions of the invisible spiritual world and preserved the integrity of scriptural literalism in the face of mounting philosophical attacks against it. For creative authors, it ensured that there need be no antipathy between theology and poetry, story-telling and doctrine, and it did so 'by offering a mode of description that was neither literal nor figurative' (p. 164).

Literary scholars will doubtless debate Raymond's bold interpretations of *Paradise lost*; historians will instinctively welcome an approach that is richly and deeply contextualized, but resists any straightforwardly reductionist readings. Raymond's demonstration that angels – late into the seventeenth century – gripped the poetic and theological imagination of Protestant England clearly has implications for the debates over 'disenchantment'. Raymond's own view on this is a robustly revisionist one: angels were neither killed off by the Scientific Revolution nor were they an undue embarrassment to mechanical philosophers. They remained to the end of the century and beyond a vibrant part of a variegated world-view. But there is nonetheless something climactic about Milton's poetic triumph, and about the period it embodies. Raymond's own sensitive account of Dryden's 1674 reworking of *Paradise lost* as opera reveals the emergence of a profoundly different sensibility, a more self-consciously fictive awareness, and a willingness to leave theology to the theologians. Angels (the efforts of Hobbes and Bekker notwithstanding) had certainly not been banished from the intellectual firmament, but neither, as the eighteenth century dawned, did they any longer provide the flexible and cohesive system of meaning they had once represented.

III

For the purposes of Protestant dogmatic and pastoral theology, one of the distinct advantages of angels was that they were not ghosts. Reformation orthodoxy held that the souls of the dead never returned to confront the living in this world; certainly not from a purgatory which, according to Protestant theology, did not exist. If people saw what they thought were the spirits of the dead, these could only be good or evil angels (probably the latter). Yet, in what must be accounted one of the great catechetical failures of Reformed teaching, popular belief in ghosts continued unabated, in England as elsewhere in Protestant Europe. Picking up at the point where Cameron's *Enchanted Europe* comes to an end,

Shane McCorristine's *Spectres of the self* examines some aspects of the culture of ghost-seeing in England through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and into the twentieth. In the process, it provides a fresh and interesting perspective on the complex relationship between 'modernity' and supernatural belief.

The account here suggests that we might pause before accepting Cameron's intuition that by the dawn of the Romantic era educated writers had more or less given up on eradicating popular superstition. In England at least, a considerable body of literature from the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century pursued an avowed and urgent 'anti-superstition agenda' with regard to spirits and spectral visitations. Some of it was aimed specifically at children, such as Mary Weightman's 1791 *Dialogues for youth against the fear of ghosts and other irrational apprehensions*. Such authors regarded belief in ghosts as laughably archaic. As part of the demystification strategy, some even included chiaroscuro illustrations, by staring at which, and then redirecting their gaze at a blank surface, readers could induce their own spectral visions (though, as McCorristine notes, home-entertainment of this kind itself represented a form of re-enchantment in thinking about the supernatural). But far from allowing themselves to be snuffed out in this fashion, the embers of belief in the possibility of genuine contact with the dead showed a remarkable capacity to reignite and blaze forth in new areas of thought and culture. The extraordinary rise of the spiritualist movement is a case in point, though it is not a principal theme of McCorristine's book. Nor is he much concerned with the resilience and evolution of folklore, popular culture, and local traditions regarding ghosts, a theme that has been ably tackled by other scholars in the last few years.[4] Rather, McCorristine wants to foreground a distinctively 'modern' conception of the ghost, arising out of the psychological and psychiatric preoccupations of the nineteenth century. The main focus is on the efforts of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) (founded 1882) to place appearances of ghosts on a firm 'scientific' footing. The SPR was a voluntary association of enthusiastic amateurs, whose full membership roll encompassed the great and the good of late Victorian society (Gladstone, Tennyson, Conan Doyle, R. L. Stevenson, Freud, and Jung were all on the books). While its professed approach was sceptical and experimental, its active membership overlapped with that of spiritualism, and several of those involved in its investigations of spectral phenomena were predisposed to believe what they were setting out to test; McCorristine speaks about its activities representing a 'surrogate faith' for those suspended by the ebbing tide of belief in late Victorian England. Its outlook, in fact, in some ways recalls that of Joseph Glanvill and his fellow supernatural-enthusiasts of the seventeenth century, striving to blend the empiricist principles of the Royal Society and Baconian science with the demons and witches of traditionalist religiosity.

McCorristine is not without a sneaking regard for the aficionados of the SPR and other Victorian ghost-seers. They were, he suggests, seeking to circumvent

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[4] See in particular Owen Davies, *The haunted: a social history of ghosts* (Basingstoke, 2007); Sasha Handley, *Visions of an unseen world: ghost beliefs and ghost stories in eighteenth-century England* (London, 2007).

what Foucault famously described as the authoritarian blackmail of the Enlighten-
ment: 'you either accept the Enlightenment and remain within the tradition of its
rationalism … or else you criticize the Enlightenment and then try to escape from
its principles of rationality'.[5] The SPR was in fact strongly committed to principles
of rationalism and scientific investigation. Having gathered and assessed reports
from a mass polling of correspondents, three of its leading members published in
1886 a report concluding that ghostly apparitions were 'phantasms of the living',
telepathic impressions produced by a dying person and received as an impression
in the mind of a percipient connected to them. The phenomena in question were
typically banal, and far removed from the hauntings and revenge ghosts of
popular folklore. Yet it was the latter that were destined to survive, and even to
undergo a kitsch revival in modern media culture, while the findings of the SPR,
rechristened the Society for Spookical Research, were relentlessly mocked by the
scientific establishment of the day. Through the course of the period, McCorristine
identifies a growing concern on the part of sceptics and believers alike with
the phenomenological status of the ghost-percipient, with the 'hallucinatory'
nature of ghost-seeing. Ghosts were no longer part of the objectively 'real' world,
but were still of great cultural and psychological significance. In fact, suggests
McCorristine, they offer vital clues to the nature of modern subjectivity, via the
notion of a haunted or 'spectral self'. This is an intriguing and suggestive prop-
osition (though an early modern historian is likely to reflect that a propensity to
see spirits had long been linked – as in the case of Hamlet – to introspection and
melancholia).

What these three very interesting volumes collectively suggest is that while
there has evidently been no clear linear progression from enchantment to dis-
enchantment, neither is it particularly helpful to conceive of patterns of dis- and
re-enchantment as a see-saw, an ebbing and flowing tide, or any such cyclical
metaphor. If we think of it in these terms, we are likely to be signing up, con-
sciously or not, to some essentialized version of the categories themselves, or
perhaps surrendering to Foucault's Enlightenment blackmail. What is remark-
able, however, is the capacity, over several centuries, of both 'rationality' and
'irrationality' to inhabit new forms and reinvent themselves in new guises. The
engagement, dialectical and polemical, of a self-defining 'rationality' with a range
of putatively irrational others is not a unique condition of secular modernity,
but a cultural phenomenon of very long standing. We should not expect it to
come to an end anytime soon.

UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK   PETER MARSHALL

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[5] Michel Foucault, *The politics of truth*, ed. Sylvere Lotringer (Los Angeles, CA, 2007), p. 110.