

***Jesuit Prison Ministry in the Witch Trials of the Holy Roman Empire: Friedrich Spee SJ and his Cautio Criminalis (1631).*** By Frank Sobiech. Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Jesu, 2019. xii + 539 pp. €60.00 cloth.

Ever since the late seventeenth century, Friedrich Spee, SJ, has been recognized and celebrated for the hymns he composed (some of them still sung today) and for his courageous opposition to the surging witchcraft trials in the Holy Roman Empire of his day. In 1631, his warning against the abuses of torture and criminal procedure was published anonymously and apparently without his consent; and in 1632, a second edition of the *Cautio Criminalis* was published with his knowledge and participation. At the time, such publication efforts went well beyond what his order permitted, and he was consequently never allowed to take the final four-fold vow of a professed member of the Society of Jesus. His critique of witchcraft trials was based not primarily on wide reading but on his personal experiences trying to console and provide sacramental confession to men and women accused or already convicted of the loathsome crime of having made a secret pact with the devil (along with all the attendant details of the elaborated crime of *maleficium* as it had evolved by the seventeenth century) and of working harmful magic against their neighbors. Three years after the publication of his deeply moving book he died of an infection contracted while working with wounded soldiers in Trier.

This much has been well understood and widely known for hundreds of years, and Spee's place in the Jesuit Order and the diversity of opinions on witchcraft among his fellow Jesuits has been well canvassed, starting with the solid works of Bernhard Duhr, SJ, and leading to a vigorous and continuing burst of excellent studies starting about 1990.

Now I have before me the massive tome of Frank Sobiech, an abridged version in English of his habilitation thesis (Würzburg, 2017), a volume of over 500 pages. The question naturally arises concerning what the author's extensive labors have added to what we already knew. No one has ever before consulted so many archival sources to document Jesuit prison ministry in the Lower Rhenish province of the order and Spee's place in that context. Sobiech cites documents from no fewer than eighty-three archives, mainly German and Italian. But I have to confess that I have never before had such difficulties in understanding and evaluating a serious piece of historical research. One problem is that the English offered here is such a brutally literal translation of academic German that it is often unintelligible. As an earlier reviewer remarked, it would have been better if it had remained in German (David J. Collins, SJ, *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 7 [2020]: 699–702, at 702). But aside from the difficulties of language, Sobiech seems to have had no clear idea of what story he wished to tell. He shows that, as a young member of the Jesuit Order, Spee had a series of disagreements with the views of his superiors. He can demonstrate with many anecdotes that the Jesuits in Germany mainly supported the witchcraft trials but that there were several exceptions. It is no wonder that Spee's book had to evade the web of censorship and appear anonymously. We knew that. He shows that, in general, the Jesuits displayed an amazing indifference to the sufferings of the prisoners in their spiritual care, and he emphasizes the agonizing dilemmas father confessors imposed on the poor people accused of

witchcraft: they frequently threatened to withhold absolution unless a suspect confessed (falsely) to having a pact with the devil. He launches the speculation that the Jesuits, with their engagement in “Jesuit drama,” perhaps confused their theatrical productions with the realities they found in the jails. They frequently collaborated with the secular authorities in securing convictions of women and men whom torture had compelled not only to provide false confessions but also to implicate others. In large measure, we also knew that (although Sobiech provides countless details). He documents what we already knew in 1,590 meticulous footnotes. But the text of the book itself reads like a massive heap of footnotes to a text we do not see.

Sobiech claims that his book provides, for the first time ever, “a complete biography of Spee,” but nowhere does he give us a rounded portrait of Spee as a hymn writer or as a moral theologian, nor is there even a discussion of what Spee may have thought of the devil and witchcraft. Sobiech seems to assume that we already know the *Cautio Criminalis* so well that it is unnecessary to analyze it further. But for those of us who do know this important text, it is difficult to see what extra light Sobiech brings to it. Near the end of his book, the author provides a promising discussion entitled, “On the statistics of the witch trials”; but it turns out to be a paragraph that is content to claim that someone else could use the Jesuit *Litterae annuae* to reconstruct the numbers of suspects and convicts in the various sections of the Rhenish province (375). If this volume has a larger thesis, the author has successfully hidden it. Sadly, a mighty engine of dedicated research has churned through the archives and libraries of Europe but has failed to tell us anything important that we did not know already.

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***Priest of Nature: The Religious Worlds of Isaac Newton.* By Rob Iliffe. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. xi + 522 pp. \$34.95 hardcover.**

Rob Iliffe’s *Priest of Nature: The Religious Worlds of Isaac Newton* is a work of excellent historical scholarship. I have no significant negative critiques to offer. Therefore, I provide a summary of foundational events from Iliffe’s narrative that assist in understanding the core of Newton’s religious convictions.

One of the most clouded questions surrounding Isaac Newton is: how did Newton arrive at theological conclusions that, according to Iliffe, had they been widely known, would have put Newton in the company of other radical reformers? Instead of the orthodox understanding of the Trinity—One God who exists as three equal, eternal, and *homoousios* (same substance) persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—Iliffe identifies “the hideous nature of tritheism, and the radically subordinate status of Jesus Christ relative to the Father” as the “dominant doctrinal points in Newton’s theology” (134). Iliffe observes that from the mid-1670s, as part of the recently reinstated Divinity Act, all masters of arts students were required to “propose two questions on theological topics and to read a thesis on the first” (133). As a part of this process, in February 1677, Newton opposed the Socinian view that God did not know future events that God did