

Euan Cameron. *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, and Religion, 1250–1750*.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. xii + 473 pp. index. bibl. \$55. ISBN: 978–0–19–925782–9.

Euan Cameron's long-term history of Christianity's theological engagement with "superstition" intentionally takes its title from Balthasar Bekker's notoriously skeptical *Bewitched World* of the early 1690s. Its organizing theme extends this book well beyond conventional notions of Renaissance in both directions, and it contains only one brief chapter (10) about Renaissance Christian humanists. The author's choice of evidence is "by intention highly selective" and "intends to contribute to a growing area of discussion" (x) about the history of magic and witchcraft in Western civilization. Although its best sections are probably those dealing with late medieval scholasticism and the early Enlightenment, it devotes four chapters (11–14) to Protestant critiques of superstition, emphasizing fundamental differences between magisterial Protestants and post-Tridentine Catholic views of what constituted intolerably wrong religious practices. To the former, Catholicism itself was inherently superstitious.

Overall, Cameron presents a useful guide to the shifting meanings of a slippery but always pejorative concept. Because "superstition" applied to traditional customs associated with ignorant rustics, the author must engage with another slippery concept, "popular culture," which his sources generally describe both selectively and indirectly. He admits that "I am uncertain whether one can construct any meaningful or useful explanatory narrative that demonstrates how one form of 'superstition' mindset transformed itself into another across time," but adds two

sentences later that “Beyond all doubt, on the other hand, the intellectual *response* to superstition has a history” (18). Cameron is also very clear about what this account omits. “No systematic attempt is made to evaluate the institutional or legal impact of the ideas discussed here,” which have been “excluded for reasons of space and coherence” (27). He does not discuss witchcraft or demonology unless such authors (e.g., Weyer or Delrio) also discuss superstitions. Cameron also excludes both intellectual ‘high magic’ and Christian missions beyond Western Europe.

Within the ample boundaries remaining, the book offers an interesting range of information and insights. For instance, Cameron argues persuasively for the early emergence of a distinctively Protestant theology of superstition, although the non-confessional Johann Weyer “would become an absolutely crucial figure” in this development (179–80). Interestingly, close family ties united two major Protestant theologians with major Protestant writers on superstitions: Caspar Peucer, who published a “formidable encyclopedic textbook on . . . divination,” was Melancthon’s son-in-law (181–82) and Ludwig Lavater, the great Reformed expert on ghosts, was Bullinger’s son-in-law (187–88).

Cameron’s account concludes in an eighteenth century where few Enlightened authors, “with perhaps a handful of exceptions” (310), reduced all religion to superstition, but where established Protestant theology had gradually reduced the devil to mere metaphor and symbol. Superstition itself had not been eliminated, but once the devil became harmless, it too became harmless: “Once intellectual theologians lost their fear and alarm at invisible demonic powers,” Cameron concludes, “they would cease to be concerned about waging a pastoral campaign against superstitions” (311).

Certain threads re-enter Cameron’s account at irregular intervals, sometimes unexpectedly. Commentaries on the biblical Witch of Endor appear in a half-dozen places, all after the Reformation, with the “brutal rationalist razor” of the obscure English sectarian Ludowick Muggleton given the most space (259–60). Equally obscure figures (and obscure treatises by well-known figures) populate his account; the fifteenth-century Swiss canonist Felix Hemmerli, whose work on exorcisms was not printed until 1600, appears nine times because he was among the authors most sympathetic toward rural customs. Long-lived superstitions like the ill-fated Egyptian days lasted from St. Augustine through Martin Luther to the Jesuit Martin Delrio, who was “probably the first to publish a list of which twenty-four days of the year they actually were” (223) — although an English Protestant subsequently printed a different list from what he called “an old Romish prayer book” (283). Such themes can be traced through Cameron’s index, which unfortunately omits his “supreme example of a totemic meaningless word.” *Ananisapta*, once “widely used as a preservative against plague . . . in the later Middle Ages” (54), reappears on 74 and 221, where the indefatigable Delrio “suggested a highly intricate etymology, derived from the Hebrew,” for it.

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