Nathan Johnstone

The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. x, 334

Nathan Johnstone writes in his conclusion to this book that his goal was “to demonstrate that the devil in early modern English culture was neither a leftover from the medieval world, nor a half-way house on the way to a purely human concept of evil.” He shows how the devil and demonism were firmly entrenched in all levels of early modern English culture, presenting interaction with the devil as lived experience. When discussing temptation, for instance, he shows how a clever religious man “might coax the Devil into admitting his fundamental impotency, providing a striking example to observers and readers of the veracity of the Protestant chronological scheme.” This testimony clearly has a religious and political agenda, but also presents the event as real.

Johnstone uses high, low, fictional, and non-fictional textual sources to show how the concept of the devil was in constant flux, at once ubiquitous and highly idiosyncratic, fragmented along social, political, and religious lines. He shows how the devil was something generated through discursive exchange—through broadsides, testimonials, and sermons—but also played a “discrete role” in the lives of early modern English people, both as a tempter of individuals and as a corrupter of institutions. Just as the physical body is subject to “demonic subversion,” so “the temptation of the body politic provided a parallel political analogy which gave focus to the perception of subversion of the commonwealth.” Johnstone resists the reduction of the devil to “an oppositional symbol or discursive tool,” insisting that the devil was well established both as political trope and as lived experience before 1640. While some post-structural critics might quibble with his definition of lived experience, his study uncovers a complex and nuanced sociological, historical, and political reality.

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