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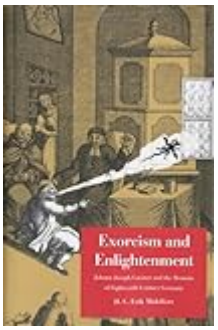

H. C. Erik Midelfort. *Exorcism and Enlightenment: Johann Joseph Gassner and the Demons of Eighteenth-Century Germany.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. 240 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-10669-5.

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The Ironies of Modernity

Erik Midelfort, the acclaimed author of books on witch hunting and the history of madness in early modern Germany, has produced a fascinating study of an immensely popular eighteenth-century exorcist. In the 1770s and 1780s, Johann Joseph Gassner, a Catholic priest, gained widespread fame for healing a large number of people across southwest Germany. Gassner cured people by exorcizing demons, a practice viewed skeptically by Catholic authorities and attacked vigorously by enlightened thinkers across Germany. Midelfort examines the political, cultural and intellectual contexts in which Gassner worked. He seeks to understand how Gassner's cures actually worked, and traces the extensive public debate that erupted over Gassner's exorcisms. As he has in all his books, Midelfort shows that the simple answer–in this case that the Gassner case was essentially a conflict between mostly Protestant enlightened thinkers and Catholic traditionalists–disguises a much more complex and interesting reality.

Although this is a slimmer volume than his other works, Midelfort still brings great erudition to this study. He explains the dominant views of eighteenth-century theologians and other intellectuals about demons and demon possession. Midelfort points out that belief in demons was, at least theoretically, separate from belief in witches. Much of the learned skepticism about Gassner came from a fear that his concern with demons would lead to a revival of witch accusations. This fear was not unjustified, as several witch trials did occur on the edges of the religious excitement caused by Gassner's exorcisms. At the same time, Protestant and Catholic theologians found it difficult to reject such beliefs entirely, since Jesus himself had cast out demons. The theological issues around demons led to spirited debates about how to interpret the biblical passages about exorcism.

Gassner was very popular. In 1775, during a sojourn in Ellwangen under the protection of a sympathetic bishop, over 1,500 foreign visitors flooded the little town, hoping to be cured. Protestants as well as Catholics sought his assistance, but Gassner's primary clients were Catholic peasants and residents of small towns. As Midelfort says, "many … found in Gassner welcome proof that traditional religion still had some fight left in it" (pp. 14-15), even in the 1770s. One of the themes of

the book is that there is considerable irony in the fact that an obsession with exorcism gripped Germany at the height of the Enlightenment. In another twist, Midelfort traces the parallels between Gassner and a fellow healer, the "naturalizing and self-proclaimedly scientific" (p. 19) Franz Anton Mesmer. Mesmer, like Gassner, hailed originally from the region around Lake Constance and he too "invoked invisible qualities or forces as the root cause of physical ailments" (p. 19). Mesmer's theory of animal magnetism, however, led him to international fame in Vienna and Paris, while Gassner's exorcisms were eventually forbidden by both the Emperor and the Pope.

Midelfort admittedly might have explored more fully the reasons behind Gassner's success. Midelfort mentions several times that Gassner's activities led to a religious revival in Southwest Germany. Other than the fact that people flocked to Gassner for cures, we do not learn very much about the nature of this revival. Did Gassner's fame lead to more frequent pilgrimages, or to the development of new shrines, or to some other changes in Catholic religious practices? Was there something qualitatively different happening in Catholicism that made Gassner so popular, or was his work imbedded in traditional religiosity? After all, miraculous cures at shrines and other holy sites–sometimes on a scale equal to Gassner's cures–were an integral part of Baroque Catholicism in the century after 1650. Or did Gassner's success constitute a reaction against the enlightenment ideas that were penetrating the Catholic Church right to the parish level? While Midelfort explains the political, intellectual and cultural context of Gassner's work, the religious developments are somewhat unclear.

In a provocative chapter, Midelfort examines Gassner's exorcisms themselves. He emphasizes that Gassner was a healer who cured people of diseases, most frequently lameness, blindness, madness or more generic "pains." Gassner was not always successful, nor did he treat everyone who came to him for help, sometimes telling patients that their illness was "natural" and thus not to be cured by an exorcism. Gassner's exorcisms could be long, drawn-out affairs, as he ordered the demons to move about the possessed person's body, and as he convinced the patient that the proper prayers to the name of Jesus would be effective. Gassner's clientele varied widely and as his fame grew, he cured more nobles and educated people. About 60 percent of those whose cases appear in the records were women.

In explaining what happened in Gassner's exorcisms, Midelfort moves carefully between two positions. On the one hand, he argues that historians must "avoid flattening out the experiences of other cultures and assimilating the variety of humankind to our own parochial experience, [and] we need to preserve the integrity of the language work within which such disorders have their reality and in which we experience them" (p. 83). On the other hand, he works to provide the reader with an explanation of how Gassner could have healed so many people: "What sort of explanation or understanding gives us as observers comfort?" (p. 86). While reminding us that the first duty of historians is to show compassion for people in the past, Midelfort does come to his own understanding: "And what Gassner seems to have been doing by the end of his career was providing religious instruction by which afflicted persons could take charge of their ills by placing them in larger framework of Christian meaning" (p. 86). In this effort, Gassner was part of a broader tendency within Catholicism to encourage a deeply internalized and personal religion among all levels of society, a tendency we would probably call more modern than traditional.

Intellectuals across Germany vigorously debated Gassner's exorcisms. Not surprisingly, these debates took place in the contexts and language of the Enlightenment. Polemical pamphlets, newspaper and journal articles and learned books all contained contributions to the debate. Perhaps somewhat ironically, Gassner's supporters published eyewitness reports of his exorcisms and consistently appealed to experience. Efforts by critics to show that Gassner used fraud failed, as did most attempts to show that the cures were temporary. As "enlightened" opponents of Gassner found that they could not appeal to empirical evidence to disprove his miracles, they were forced to resort to ridicule and derision. Midelfort reminds us that at the height of the Enlightenment, rational discourse in the public sphere was not always possible. "The emergence of 'the public' splintered almost *ab initio* into various mutually uncomprehending publics, a condition that will seem familiar to us all" (p. 142).

This fascinating study reminds us of the complexity of cultural developments in the eighteenth century. The clash between superstition and reason, tradition and modernity and religion and Enlightenment turns out to have been riddled with confusion and contradictions. Gassner's story is full of the kinds of ironies that Midelfort has always so effectively presented.

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