



**David Lederer.** *Madness, Religion and the State in Early Modern Europe: A Bavarian Beacon.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 361 S. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-85347-7.



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## The Rise and Fall of Spiritual Physic

David Lederer examines the nature of madness in early modern Bavaria, focusing on the use of “spiritual physic” to cure those suffering from various kinds of psychological distress. Lederer emphasizes the effectiveness of spiritual cures—such as confessing one’s sins, going on pilgrimage or submitting to exorcism—for many people. As he follows his story into the later seventeenth century, Lederer finds religious leaders becoming skeptical and even critical of such practices, not because they had adopted Cartesian dualism or some sort of early Enlightenment attitudes, but because of the desire of the elite and the state to control the popular “superstitions” that accompanied pilgrimage and exorcism.

Lederer also makes an argument about the nature and frequency of spiritual afflictions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The number of people suffering from severe psychological distress peaked in the first half of the seventeenth century in the context of heightened religious tensions, which included apocalyptic fervor, outbreaks of witch-hunting and extensive discussion of the activities of the devil. Lederer appeals to the (somewhat worn) concept of the “general crisis of the seventeenth

century,” by positing that cases of madness increased in the context of social and economic crises. The general crisis was most dramatically exemplified by the subsistence difficulties of the decades around 1600, the demographic stagnation of the seventeenth century and, most dramatically, the disaster of the Thirty Years’ War.

The argument that people suffered more from spiritual afflictions in times of socioeconomic crisis is appealing, but difficult to substantiate. Lederer asserts, for example, that Bavarian shrines that specialized in curing spiritual afflictions peaked in popularity in the period 1650-80. These were of course the decades of recovery from the devastation of the war, which forces Lederer to argue that the intense activity at shrines “demonstrates the lasting psychological effects of the general crisis of the seventeenth century, long after relative stability had returned to the region” (p. 140). If anything, he shows how difficult it is to find straightforward correlations between social and economic difficulties or cultural and religious phenomena, even as he shows how important a role the historical memory of the Thirty Years’ War played for the rural population of Germany.

Lederer demonstrates more convincingly the connections between religious madness and the rise of confessional tensions and the social disciplining that accompanied them. The Jesuits, in particular, promulgated the practice of frequent confession as both a strategy for inculcating self-discipline and also as a method of overcoming spiritual anxiety and even curing more serious forms of madness. Church and state in Bavaria also promoted a whole network of shrines aimed at meeting the various needs of the population, including the needs of the spiritually sick. Lederer points out that Catholic leaders generally expected people to resort to these cures in the context of “a taut net of social discipline,” but that the common people developed their own meanings and practices, mostly focused around somewhat disorderly pilgrimages to local shrines (p. 142).

Lederer examines the nature of spiritual afflictions from the perspective of the individual sufferer as well. He acknowledges here the methodological difficulties involved in trying to identify—and name—the illnesses suffered by people in the past. Nevertheless, he argues effectively that there was a shared vocabulary of spiritual afflictions in the early modern period, and that certain categories of suffering stand out. He traces the main categories, including “madness,” somatic disorders, fear/terror/shocks/pregnancy, affective disorders, demonic temptations and obsession/possession (pp. 154–177). On the one hand, Lederer asserts the occurrence of a greater frequency of spiritual afflictions than some previous studies, such as that of H.C. Erik Midelfort, have shown. On the other hand, he also emphasizes the relative unimportance of demonic activity in contributing to spiritual affliction.

Lederer effectively presents a number of case studies to illustrate his general points. He argues (correctly, I think) that spiritual and emotional illnesses can only be understood if they are examined in context. To this end, he examines two cases very carefully—the first is of a nobleman who “lost his senses” during his *peregrinatio academica* in Italy in 1661. Lederer’s second case study is that of a servant girl who came to be possessed by demons as she considered marriage to a baker’s apprentice. Both sufferers sought help at the shrine at Benediktbeuren, which specialized in healing the spiritually sick, and neither ever fully recovered. Lederer argues that these cases are exemplary in that they show people coming apart emotionally during important “rites of passage”—courtship and marriage in one case, an important career step in the other. While the notion of “rites of passage” recalls “timeless” anthropological concepts,

Lederer is careful to place the transitional moments examined here in the particular context of the society and culture of seventeenth-century Bavaria. He also shows how these sufferers resorted to all of the various layers of spiritual physic—prayers and the application of holy water, penance and communion, particularly at a powerful shrine and, ultimately, exorcisms.

Later in his study, Lederer examines the “decline of religious madness.” Here he points out how, from the mid-seventeenth century on, the educated elite became increasingly skeptical of forms of spiritual physic. This shift was political: “the decline of religious madness and the subsequent rise of a secular insanity defense is found not in philosophy, nor on the battlefield, but in the pragmatic victory of the reason of state policies over confessional strife” (p. 203). This is not a new notion, and dovetails well with research on the end of the witch-hunts. Lederer also reminds us that even in the sixteenth century there had always been dissenters among the elite, even among the Jesuits, who criticized the easy appeal to demonic possession and spiritual affliction. These skeptics gained the upper hand in the administration of Bavaria after 1670 or so.

Lederer must deal at this point with Michel Foucault’s notion of the “Great Confinement,” that is, the widely accepted notion that the elite came to favor the segregation of the mentally ill. To his credit, Lederer does not adopt Foucault’s model without considerable modification. The Bavarian state did embrace “an ideology of spatial segregation” and sought to confine the mad in the Holy Spirit Hospice in Munich. The wider population, however, had widely accepted the notion that madness was a sign of spiritual illness that could to be cured by spiritual means. The issue of the burial of suicides illustrates the growing gulf between popular and elite understandings. By the 1650s, the Aulic Council in Munich generally considered suicides a consequence of insanity and not of “spiritual despair” and usually authorized the burial of such people in consecrated ground. Throughout the eighteenth century, however, communities generally rejected this interpretation and refused to bury suicides in sacred ground. Priests often gave in to the local views and refused burial as well. Popular attitudes could be flexible, however, and local communities availed themselves of institutions like the Holy Ghost Hospice in order to avoid the costs of caring for the insane.

Lederer writes: “The will to sovereignty over the bodies of subjects lay at the heart of political culture at court in the seventeenth century” (p. 282). Yet absolutism met

not only popular resistance, but also institutional constraints. The Bavarian state found it difficult to raise money for new hospices and struggled to overcome civic resistance to state policies. Only in the nineteenth century could anything resembling a “Great Confinement” be implemented.

The strength of this book lies in Lederer’s willingness to engage both the ideological/cultural construction of madness and the everyday experience of spiritual afflictions. The result is a story of the unintended consequences of a program of religious education and propa-

ganda that convinced the population, including the sufferers themselves, of the spiritual nature of mental illness. This program also led to the development of a dense system of spiritual cures for religious madness, focused around sacramental confession and pilgrimage shrines. When the elite moved away, fairly suddenly, from this system, embracing the notion of insanity and seeking to confine the mad in asylums, the population refused to follow. As is always the case, the careful examination of the complex interplay of social, cultural and intellectual movements makes for excellent history.

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