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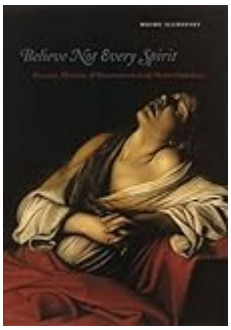


**Moshe Sluhovsky.** *Believe Not Every Spirit: Possession, Mysticism, and Discernment in Early Modern Catholicism.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. 384 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-76282-1.

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## Spiritualism and Possession

Moshe Sluhovsky has written an excellent study of possession and mysticism in early modern European Catholicism. His elegantly written and clearly argued book, *Believe Not Every Spirit*, points scholars in some new directions in understanding the meaning of demonic possession. Most importantly, Sluhovsky links cases of demonic possession to spiritual developments in Catholicism, developments that caused considerable tension and even confusion for church leaders, while opening both opportunities and dangers for individual believers, especially women, who were inclined toward mystical and interiorized spirituality.

Sluhovsky presents a clear narrative of the history of diabolic possession. This story is perhaps not surprising and mirrors in many ways developments in witch hunting, although Sluhovsky brings considerable nuance to his presentation. Before the middle of the sixteenth century, diabolical possession was considered quite mundane. It explained odd behavior and a variety of physical ailments, and it could be cured fairly easily by exorcists. In fact, there were many practitioners of cures, laypeople and women, as well as clerics. The devil and demons were active, but not considered particularly dangerous.

Beginning in the mid-sixteenth century, this pattern began to change. Diabolical possession was increasingly spiritualized–that is, the devil or his minions were increasingly likely to possess the victim's soul rather than his or her body. This spiritualization of possession was, Sluhovsky insists, closely linked to new developments in Catholic religious practice. The sixteenth century was after all the century of Theresa of Avila, and new strands of mysticism and interiorized piety developed strongly in Spain and Italy, drawing in particular on the Franciscan tradition. New forms of mysticism often emphasized passive contemplation and referred to the believer's gradual approach to mystical union with Christ. Practitioners of these new forms of mysticism, which Sluhovsky labels pre-quietist, were often women and frequently nuns.

These forms of "passive interiority" were however not just for women and were widely practiced among Catholics, including, for example, the Jesuits. However, the official church also always considered them suspect. Sluhovsky explains in detail the theological debates that attempted to draw lines between acceptable and unac-

ceptable (possibly heretical) forms of mysticism. He points out, in addition, that mystical practices were increasingly considered feminine. French mystics of this type were sometimes called *femmelettes*, people who lacked the reason and control for proper piety. More significant for the argument of this book, Sluhovsky emphasizes that both practitioners and church leaders considered the practices of passive interior mysticism fraught with the danger of diabolical possession. The closer the mystic came to spiritual union with Christ, the more the devil tried to lead her astray. Thus "discernment," the ability to distinguish between diabolical possession and an appropriate spiritual state, became important.

Sluhovsky's discussion of discernment shows how the affinity between the new spirituality and the problem of possession caused considerable conceptual confusion for the church and its theologians. In this confusion, some women carved out a space for themselves as acceptable discerners. A number of abbesses had wide experience determining whether the nuns under their care were having true spiritual experiences or if they were possessed by demons or the devil. Still, post-Tridentine Catholicism was so suspicious of female mysticism that most abbesses were secretive about spiritual and mystical activities in their convents. Sluhovsky's conclusion is that "the history of discernment of spirits is a history of practices and, as such, has been more diverse and widespread than theological writings lead us to believe" (p. 229). He further argues that, paradoxically, "the new restrictions on some forms of unsupervised (feminine) spirituality also gave spiritual women new discerning skills" (p. 229).

A final chapter engages the issue of group possessions in convents, the most famous case being that of Loudon in 1633-40. Without completely rejecting traditional interpretations of group possessions, which emphasize the psychological pressures and sexual tensions experienced by young nuns, Sluhovsky returns to his theme of the conflicts created by new forms of spirituality. "Just as the possession itself was a demonstration of a nun's spiritual engagement in and response to religious aspirations, new contemplative techniques, and the anxieties that were part and parcel of these endeavors, the exorcism was a dramatic external visualization of the struggle between God and the devil, a struggle that took place inside the nun's body and soul" (p. 248). In this view, convent possessions were especially about spiritual conditions–that is, religious and cultural developments within Catholicism. Quite often nuns even "collaborated" with abbesses, exorcists, and their fellow nuns by naming their possession demons. "Being possessed by demons could still be a spiritually rewarding experience" for some nuns (p. 264).

This point highlights Sluhovsky's emphasis on the religious, spiritual, and cultural context of possession. He certainly does not discount the importance of gender in any analysis of this phenomenon, but at the same he does not consider the ways in which new forms of spirituality were increasingly interpreted as demonic possession as *primarily* an attack on women. Furthermore, he finds Foucault's argument that the discernment of spirits was part of a general campaign of disciplining aimed at creating a new modern self too simple. The negotiations and debates around discernment often gave women new powers and a "new spiritual language" (p. 266).

This is a densely and persuasively argued book that rejects simplistic explanations of the ways European Catholics thought about and engaged with possession. His linking of new interiorized forms of spirituality with a new focus on demonic possession of the soul is important for our general understanding of Catholicism. Furthermore, Sluhovsky explains the theological links in detail and shows how fine theological distinctions often fell apart in the hurly-burly of everyday religious practice.



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