

David J. Collins, ed.

The Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft in the West. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. xi + 728. Hb, \$160.

This important and ambitious collection of twenty authoritative essays on the history of magic and witchcraft, edited by the Jesuit scholar David J. Collins, associate professor of history at Georgetown University, is likely to become a standard work in the field because of the quality of the contributions, and the unprecedented wide range of material covered in a single volume. Collins stands in a long tradition of Jesuit scholarship of magic and demonology. During the twentieth century, Jesuit scholars moved from defending traditional demonology (as Adolf Rodewyk did) to a critical analysis of these beliefs, e.g. Herbert Thurston and, more recently, Henry Ansgar Kelly. Needless to say, Collins approaches magic and witchcraft as a historian, and his achievement in this volume is a fine methodological balancing act in a field where scholars are particularly reluctant to have their particular specialism confused with another—Collins describes this as “the siloing of scholarship within ever-narrowing disciplines and sub-disciplines” (1).

In a review of this length, it is not possible to do justice to all twenty essays by attempting an evaluation of each one; instead, this review will survey the contents and methodology of the volume before commenting on a selection of individual contributions. The volume is divided into six chronological and geographical sections, beginning with antiquity; this first section is subdivided into chapters considering the ancient Near East, Egypt, and the Greco-Roman world. The second section covers the early Latin West, including considerations of magic in the Roman Empire and the early church. The next three chapters, entitled “Parallel Traditions,” consider expressions of magic in the Byzantine, Islamic, and Jewish worlds. The fourth section considers magic in the late Middle Ages under the titles of “Common Magic” (which might otherwise be described as “folk magic”), learned magic, and diabolic magic. I was especially pleased that Collins chose to include a chapter by Helen Parish, “Magic and Priestcraft: Reformers and Reformation” dealing specifically with controversies concerning magic in the Reformation period. The fifth section of the book, “Colonial Encounters,” considers examples of magic and witchcraft from Spain and Mexico, British North America, and the Dutch East Indies. The sixth and final section, “The Modern West” is perhaps the most eclectic of all, addressing the twentieth-century survival of traditional belief in magic and witchcraft.

The avowed aim of Collins's volume is “to shed light on magic as a cultural phenomenon in the West from Antiquity to the present” (1–2), a statement that

immediately gives rise to many questions. Why privilege magic over witchcraft? Is it legitimate to consider magic and witchcraft together? What should we understand by “the West”? Can a single cultural phenomenon be studied meaningfully over such a long chronological span? Wisely, Collins chooses not to answer these questions but to present the volume as a sort of library of different approaches to the historiography of magic and witchcraft; he allows the scholars to speak for themselves. It is therefore less troubling than it might otherwise be to encounter completely different views of magic in the same volume, such as Sabina Magliocco’s definition of New Age and neopagan magic as “a set of techniques for altering consciousness and bringing about personal transformation” (635), which contrasts with Daniel Schwemer’s “belief in the unlimited power and effectiveness of human actions” (18). Collins provides an admirable overview of the existing literature on magic and witchcraft and, although he acknowledges the profound difficulties thrown up by attempting to define “magic” or differentiate it from religion (6), he attempts no overarching interpretation.

This absence of a heavy editorial hand allows intriguing historical paradoxes to emerge. Helen Parish, in her chapter on “Magic and Priestcraft,” outlines the deployment of magical practices by priests in sixteenth-century England. “The proximate activities of priest and sorcerer” (419) coalesced in the popular mind with the aid of Reformation propaganda. At virtually the same time, however, as Louise Burkhart demonstrates, Jesuits were engaged in iconoclasm and the denunciation of idolatry and magic in the Americas (433–34). This is one illustration of the extent to which the history of magic can illuminate the history of religion, since a defining feature of Counter-Reformation orders such as the Society of Jesus which distinguished them from pre-Reformation clergy was their hostility to unauthorized practices that could be construed as “superstitious” and their determination to spread a purified form of the Catholic faith.

Whilst magic in the ancient world, the Middle Ages, and the early modern world are generally well-served by scholarship, Collins is to be congratulated for defying the usual reluctance to explore the history of witchcraft and magic after 1700. The final section of the book, and especially Owen Davies’s superb chapter on continuing belief in magic and the changing status of magic and witchcraft in law, is a particularly important contribution to a field that still struggles for recognition alongside medieval and early modern studies. David Harvey’s chapter on magic in the nineteenth century expertly surveys the interrelationships between literature, occultism, theosophy, spiritualism, and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, thereby shedding light on a period in the history of magic