

David J. Collins, S.J. ed. *The Sacred and the Sinister: Studies in Medieval Religion and Magic*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019. 292 pp. ISBN: 978-0-271-08241-7. \$74.95 (hardcover) / \$39.95 (paperback).

Modern scholarly discussions of religion, science, and magic in the Middle Ages agree in general that the holy and the unholy are not opposed entirely; they are rather connected and even blended. This approach became more common after medievalist Richard Kieckhefer's claims regarding the tight entanglement between religion, science, and magic. He challenged the conventional understanding of magic—which posited that magic can be understood separately from religion and science—in his monumental book *Magic in the Middle Ages* (1989, 2014). *The Sacred and the Sinister* starts with the ambiguities that Kieckhefer so famously emphasized. The contributors further develop his arguments of ambiguity and ambivalence in understanding the holy and unholy. However, this volume also moves things forward. It argues that even if the distinctions between magic, science and religion are ambiguous, as Kieckhefer argues, medieval people did differentiate between categories—the holy and unholy; heaven and hell; sacraments and magics; saints and demons; spirits and materials; sacred and profane; religion and cult. A more thorough understanding of this process of differentiation, the volume contends, may lead us to clarify Kieckhefer's ambiguities.

This anthology reminds the reader that observing the ambivalence between holiness and unholiness is meant not to conclude anything, but to open more fervent scholarly discussions on the medieval dynamics in religious culture. The ten authors argue in their own ways that medieval people must have had ways to differentiate the holy and unholy, which might seem indistinguishable at first sight for us. For medieval people, this religious dilemma was not only related to matters of uncertainty, but of differentiation: how they could separate spiritual and demonic beings so that they could embrace or reject their beliefs

and practices on the communal or individual levels. These cognitive efforts to understand new phenomena and to include them in the boundaries of the conventional systems of beliefs and rituals should be understood as processes, which each author discusses in different periods and regions.

This volume consists of ten chapters distributed in four parts discussing holiness, unholiness, and magic, spanning from something traditionally accepted to something likely condemned as heretical or demonic by the medieval church. The editor, David J. Collins, starts his “Introduction” by referring to Kieckhefer’s article “The Holy and the Unholy: Sainthood, Witchcraft, and Magic in Late Medieval Europe” (1994) to show that this eminent scholar’s interest in medieval saints and witches of contingent “competing identifications” (1), and different understandings of observers’ religious backgrounds, is shared by contributors discussing various topics from the most respected saints to demonic magic. Although the edited volume is very much steeped in Kieckhefer’s scholarship, readers interested in Kieckhefer’s writings might be surprised to learn that *The Sacred and the Sinister* considers a much wider range of topics, not just Christian struggles with magic but also violence, extreme sanctity, extraordinary physical states, conflicts with space and religious meanings, madness, and so on.

For example, in the first chapter of Part I (two chapters), “Traditional Holiness,” Claire Fanger suggests that the categories of holy and unholy are not crystal-cut in the hagiographies of Christina Mirabilis (1150–1224) and Francis of Assisi (1181–1226). She guides readers to the self-mortification of the saints who lived and received fame for extreme sanctity even before the fourteenth-century self-mortifying saints that Kieckhefer focused on. Sainthood and extreme sanctity allow Fanger to show ambiguities and distinctions convincingly by comparing and contrasting the processes of these saints’ abnormal holy behaviors, such as flying or extreme forms of penance, with the church’s efforts to normalize them within the tradition. In Part II (three chapters), “Conflicts over the Holy” by Elizabeth Casteen analyzes the word “raptus” in the mixed-

use of rape and rapture by the Holy Spirit, which can be confusing to modern readers. She argues that “*raptus*” often meant mystical rapture as a form of feminine piety in religious writings, especially the High and Late medieval hagiographies; by contrast, in a secular sense, *raptus* was associated with sexual violence. Casteen claims close connections between mysticism and violence. She also argues for rational logic behind the common usages of this word, showing that femininity was not only linked to the object of *raptus* but also connected to the vulnerable body of Jesus, which contributed to empowering feminine piety even though the law and literature still depict women as the victim of violence.

Clarifying ambiguities is continued in the third (three chapters) and fourth (two chapters) parts of this book, discussing unholiness, which is not entirely separable from the first and second parts’ discussions of holiness. In one of the chapters from Part III, “Identifying and Grappling with the Unholy,” Anne M. Koenig brings an example from the magicked madness of late medieval Germany, suggesting that medieval observers acknowledged the links and distinctions between possession and madness. According to her scholarly distinction, magically induced madness was understood as separate from naturalistic or medical reasons and treated as communally meaningful. This approach clearly presents that medieval people also standardized different treatments based on different causes between natural science and magic. Sophie Page, in turn, discusses demons trans-crossing their boundaries in the ninth chapter of Part IV, “Magic and the Cosmos.” This chapter explains the eventual acceptance of demons and magic by the church. This acceptance did not lead to a blending of the spheres of God and demons; on the contrary, this embrace of the new tradition was a part of the process to secure the celestial sphere’s separation from the demonic power present in this world.

Granted that this review cannot capture ten chapters thoroughly, it is essential to note that the authors demonstrate the gradual process of distinction where medieval people tried to resolve ambiguity in beliefs and practices. The

ambiguities could be the temporary by-product of their efforts to build new traditions of holiness in a wider scope, encompassing certain traditions that used to belong to the realm of magic and demons and were condemned by the church. By showing the efforts in part of medieval theologians, practitioners, and observers to create distinctions, the authors successfully demonstrate that the ambivalences in medieval Christian traditions of holiness and unholiness had to be explained eventually by the people living in this ambiguity. Simultaneously, these ambivalences also need to be explained by historians observing them with modern understandings despite that there is still some room to leave things temporarily intermixed during social and religious changes. In this view, the project can be seen as the by-product of the dialectical approaches that acknowledge the complexities of religion, magic, and science. Therefore, this volume, despite its diverse topics and approaches, should be understood as inheriting Kieckhefer's inspiring tasks to "strive to draw out the coherent from that seemingly incoherent and, at the very least, to explain the changes through time, the consistencies and variations between and across cultures, and the distinctive perspectives across social strata" (2).

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