

English Catholics and the Supernatural, 1553-1829

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Post-reformation English Catholicism continues to be a flourishing and popular field of enquiry. In recent years this upsurge of interest has been paralleled by an increasing body of work on early modern 'superstition' and popular religion. Francis Young brings these two literatures together, and his survey of English Catholic responses to the supernatural world is a wide-ranging, ambitious account that deservedly earned Young a PhD by Special Regulations from Cambridge University.

The introduction quickly solves the problem of explaining the pervasive and, as Young acknowledges, quite anachronistic term 'supernatural' with a definition that includes: 'all spiritual powers – good, evil, or neutral – on the grounds that beliefs in the immanence of spiritual power in the world, whether for good or evil, tend to correlate. Likewise, in the early modern period, scepticism concerning miracles tended to go hand-in-hand with scepticism concerning demonic activity' (p. 5). Young's analysis of the phenomena over the subsequent six chapters is built upon his primary research question: whether English Catholic attitudes were conditioned by their early modern English context, or by the specific doctrinal considerations of Counter-Reformation Catholicism. Young indicates his thesis from the outset; English Catholics were primarily influenced by the culture of early modern England and were 'not significantly different from their non-Catholic neighbours' (p. 2). *English Catholics and the Supernatural* therefore adds to the emerging scholarly literature on post-Reformation English Catholicism that firmly rejects the notion that English Catholics were culturally or intellectually 'other'.

'When' early modern English Catholicism began is a debate that has characterised the field since John Bossy's epoch-making *The English Catholic Community, 1570–1850* (1975).⁽¹⁾ Young positions himself alongside the recent challenge to Bossy made by Eamon Duffy, who asserted we should consider the community from the Marian restoration of Catholicism in 1553.⁽²⁾ In this Young is not unconvincing, and his analysis is 'primarily a social and intellectual history of the leaders of the Catholic community: priests, gentry patrons and the literate laity' (p. 20). However there is certainly a strong case to be made for a later turning point, for just as historians have argued that by the 1580s England was becoming a more Protestant country both in practice and in a more meaningful cultural sense, so too were Catholics becoming more 'Catholic'.⁽³⁾ Indeed as Young acknowledges in the first chapter, when he explains that even by the 1570s adherence to Catholic beliefs was not enough to identify a person as 'Catholic'. Instead '[s]elf-conscious

Catholics ... were obliged to participate in a world of clandestine mission' (p. 38).

English Catholics and the Supernatural is based predominantly on printed polemical, normative and didactic texts only available to the social and spiritual elite, and it was disappointing to see that very few manuscripts had been consulted, from either Catholics or Protestants,⁽⁴⁾ especially as Young himself alludes to the important difference between printed and manuscript sources on the supernatural, citing Alexandra Walsham when he explains for example that 'published Catholic martyrologies tended to present a cautious approach to the supernatural while manuscript accounts that circulated amongst the faithful were full of the miraculous' (p. 19). The lack of manuscript material then might cause some hesitation for the reader when considering Young's general conclusions.

Young is perhaps most successful in firmly integrating the experiences of continental English Catholic exiles alongside their counterparts in England. Moreover, Young's analysis reveals a great deal about the internal stresses and anxieties of the community. Such tensions are visible from the first chapter in the examination of 16th- and 17th-century definitions of 'superstition'. Young is certainly talented in making complex scientific and intellectual discourse easy to follow as he compares Catholic and Protestant views, and challenges a 'historiography that sees everything in the early modern world as an expression of religious conflict [which] has led some to assume that beliefs essentially unrelated to Catholicism were an expression of religious survival' (p. 35). Young also traces a persistent strand of moderate scepticism from the early modern to an era of 'Catholic Enlightenment' in chapter two, which was visible in the debates between Jansenists, Jesuits, Blackloists, Cisalpines and Ultramontanes.

Chapter three explores Catholic encounters with ghosts, considering narratives and oral traditions from the Reformation to the Romantic. Ghosts are noted to have issued warnings and prophecies, and such accounts have been interpreted by scholars such as Keith Thomas as upholding social norms and promoting certain moral behaviours. Yet Young highlights that often accounts, whilst remaining didactic, were recorded for the purposes of a self-conscious demonstration of life after death. Most pointedly, Young finds little difference between Catholic and Protestant interpretations of ghostly apparitions, particularly from the 17th century. He reveals that ghost stories rarely incorporated explicit doctrinal elements, and highlights the problem with the assumption among contemporary Protestants that people believed in ghosts because of the Catholic belief in purgatory, by emphasising the possibility that it might have been the other way around, i.e. the doctrine of purgatory allowed the church to accommodate 'folkloric' beliefs about ghosts that people held anyway (p. 89). Moreover, Young emphasises that English Catholic writers on purgatory made little mention of ghosts (p. 97) but when they did the stories were most often intended to confirm the faith of Catholics rather than convert. Young brings to our attention a 'new kind' of ghost narrative within the Catholic community in the 18th century, which came to 'reassure and comfort as much as admonish and avenge' (p. 104). This continued into the beginning of the next century, as ghost stories often were intriguing 'curiosities' as much as 'fearful testimonies of divine providence' (p. 114).

Chapters four and five explore the reactions of the Catholic community to witchcraft and magic. Chapter four investigates the distinctive internal Catholic perspective of witchcraft, alongside the external perceptions of the relationship between witchcraft and Catholics by non-Catholics. Young challenges the assumption that the fear of witchcraft in England from the 1560s was linked with anxieties concerning missionary priests. Instead, Young claims the inverse is true, and he presents the case that, unlike some Protestants who might self-identify as victims of the devil, English Catholics were extremely reluctant to draw attention to themselves. Young also explains the composite of English and continental influences that shaped Catholic attitudes to witchcraft, and draws attention to the similarities between Protestant and Catholic works on witchcraft across Reformation Europe. Intriguingly, Young mentions that a characteristic feature of English witchcraft beliefs that appear in Jesuit accounts include 'the manifestation of the devil in the form of animal familiars, a belief not shared on the Continent' (p. 156). Young does not elaborate, and the unique occurrence of animal familiars in witchcraft narratives in England is an area that would certainly warrant further enquiry.⁽⁵⁾

Chapter five continues the investigation of Catholic attitudes in an age of ‘Enlightenment rationalism’, which ultimately ‘deprived witchcraft of a space in which to exist’ (p. 163). Young notes that few English people, regardless of their confessional persuasion, were excessively preoccupied with witches after 1700. However Young argues that a passive belief in witchcraft continued within the community until at least the early nineteenth century. The chapter also includes a detailed analysis of the Benedictine Gregory Greenwood’s *Three Discourses of Witches and Witchcraft* from 1730, the only treatise dedicated to witchcraft penned by an English Catholic, and it has been reproduced in an appendix. Greenwood’s *Three Discourses* had previously puzzled scholars for its seemingly eccentric and incongruous choice of a treatise on demonology as a framework for pastoral exhortations. However, Young emphasises that the treatise must not be dismissed as merely bizarre and explains how Greenwood was influenced by the French demonological tradition. Young also demonstrates the treatise’s resonances with High-Church anti-sceptic literature and concludes the work should therefore be viewed as representative of the conservative anti-sceptical tradition that was still alive in the 1730s.

The final chapter considers Catholic exorcisms and ‘dealing with the devil’. Young presents a table of reported exorcisms in another appendix, which demonstrates how more exorcisms were reported by Catholics than by Protestants. This fact is utilised by Young to suggest that exorcism accounts were ‘primarily an instrument of Catholic evangelism’ rather than a Protestant slur. Jesuits were especially interested in using exorcism to evangelise the Catholic and non-Catholic laity. Indeed, more might have been made of the exorcisms by Jesuits on non-Catholics in 1604 and 1640 (p. 206) but particularly the occasion in 1596, where Young describes how a non-Catholic Nicholas Starkie, concerned about possession in his Lancashire household, actively sought the services of a ‘Seminarie Priest’ to perform the exorcism (p. 195). The chapter surveys the multifaceted responses to, and forms of exorcism, within the Catholic community during the period, from reports of individual possessions by evil spirits after receipt of communion in the parish church (p. 203) (presumably publicised to promote Catholic recusancy) to accounts of haunted houses (p. 217). Young also emphasises the political background to the revival of exorcisms immediately prior to emancipation in the early 19th century, which occurred as a response to natural scepticism in the face of an unquestioning reliance on the church’s authority.

This reviewer’s final criticism is also a compliment, as I was shocked and disappointed when the last chapter ended so abruptly. The work would certainly have benefitted from a short conclusion, which would have underlined the contribution the author has made to the field. *English Catholics and the Supernatural* certainly provides some fascinating insights and I would recommend it to anyone interested in the history of Catholicism, the intellectual and religious history of post-Reformation England, and early modern engagement with the supernatural.

Notes

1. John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community, 1570–1850* (London, 1975) vs. Christopher Haigh, ‘The fall of a church or the rise of a sect?’, *Historical Journal*, 2 (1978), 181–6; ‘The continuity of Catholicism in the English Reformation’, *Past and Present*, 93 (1981), 37–69; ‘From monopoly to minority: Catholicism in early modern England’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 31 (1981), 129–47; and ‘Revisionism, the Reformation, and the history of English Catholicism’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 26 (1985), 394–406. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Eamon Duffy, *Fires of Faith: Catholic England under Mary Tudor* (New Haven, CT, 2009). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Later Reformation in England* (2nd edn. New York, 2001), pp. 95–101 and pp. 113–19; Peter Marshall, *Reformation England* (2nd edn. New York, NY, 2012), pp. 157–86. [Back to \(3\)](#)

4. For one example see British Library Add. MS 38599, which contains descriptions of supernatural 'signs', and a ghost narrative.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Gabriela Leddy is in the process of completing her PhD on this phenomenon at the University of York.
[Back to \(5\)](#)

The author thanks Emilie Murphy for her review and does not wish to comment further.

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