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Robert Muchembled, *A History of the Devil From the Middle Ages to the Present*. Translated by Jean Birrell. Cambridge: Polity, 2003. x + 349 pp. Notes, bibliography, filmography, and index. £55.00 U.K., \$62.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-7456-2815; £17.99 U.K., \$27.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-7456-2816-8. Originally published as *Une histoire du diable, XIIe-XXe siècle*. Paris: Seuil, 2000.

Review by Moshe Sluhovsky, Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

For the last twenty-five years, the French historian Robert Muchembled has been one of the more innovative and prolific historians of early modern French and European history. His works include one of the earliest major attempts to define the boundaries between elite and popular culture in Europe and the first articulation of the “acculturation thesis” that offered a theoretical framework as well as a social-historical account of the erasure of popular culture in seventeenth century Europe. Equally important have been his numerous works on the witch hunt, on early modern mentalities, on the interconnection between absolutism, the witch hunt, and new policing mechanisms, and on the birth of modern sensibilities and norms.[1]

Given the originality and breadth of Muchembled’s earlier works, his latest book to be translated into English, *A History of the Devil from the Middle Ages to the Present* was, at least for this reader, a disappointment. At the very beginning of the book, Muchembled argues that “the devil has been part of the fabric of European life since the Middle Ages, and has accompanied all its major changes. He has been an integral element in the continent’s dynamism and a dark shadow lurking in the background at every stage of the Western civilizing process ... an active player in a process that has seen the emergence and global triumph of a new way of being human, of a specific common way of leading life, of producing hope and of inventing worlds” (pp. 1-2). The devil, then, is as good a prism as any for an overview of European history. A history of the devil, then, is a history of western culture, and at its very core are the two processes that have been Muchembled’s main concerns throughout his career, namely, the witch hunt and the birth of modern man. Changes in western European views of the devil, argues Muchembled, unveil social, political, and cultural changes in the entire social system of Europeans, and, as such, the history of these changes can explain or shed light on the history of modernity.

Given the scope of the project, it is to be expected that some topics will be addressed more than others. Thus, Muchembled’s treatment of the early history of Satan prior to the twelfth century is very brief, as is his discussion of the witch hunt itself. Alas, even the topics that are addressed in more detail are far from presenting a convincing or even coherent argument, as will be elaborated upon below. The main body of the work deals with the early modern period, Muchembled’s area of expertise. But even in this section, there are confusing chronologies, contradictory statements, and idiosyncratic choices of examples to substantiate the arguments. The end result is a book that is too general for an academic audience and too incoherent and, at times, too specific for a general audience. Finally and crucially, Muchembled argues, repeatedly and convincingly, that pictorial representations of the devil are crucial for any attempt to trace his history and the diffusion of new ideas from elite groups to more popular segments of the population. Unfortunately, the book (in both its English and French editions) does not contain any visual images, and Muchembled’s analysis of some of the more important images is thus of very limited use.[2]

Let us look more closely at some of the Muchembled's arguments. Up until the twelfth century, Satan was "an unobtrusive presence" in Europe. He interested a few theologians and moralists, but for the majority of Europeans he was only one element within a polytheistic pantheon of gods, evil entities, fairies, and demonic powers. Different christian narratives, pre-christian mythologies, and folkloric traditions presented different devils, and the process of unifying them into one christian devil was long and arduous, terminating only in the high Middle Ages. In fact, even by the year 1200, the devil was still imagined as a trickster more than a figure of unspeakable terror. He was a deceiver who could also be deceived by human beings; he aroused contempt more than fear, and was often made fun of and dismissed. While theologians were busy developing a coherent concept of the devil, the political, social, and cultural fragmentation of the continent prevented the masses from absorbing this newly-developed Satan. The Antichrist was a distant concept, the satanic world lacked cohesion, order, or power, and, until the twelfth century, "the world was too enchanted for Lucifer alone to be the focus of dread, fear and anxiety. The poor devil had too many competitors to reign supreme" (p. 20).

The devil was only to come into his own when the political and social circumstances enabled it, namely following the emergence of new configurations of unifying powers. Only in the fourteenth century, with the emergence of the centralized powers of church and state and the retreat of feudalism, did Satan become a ruler in his own kingdom, a reverse mirror image of an Almighty God (and the Church) in the world at large, and of the king in his kingdom. Satan was now an instrument of power, which "encouraged not only religious obedience, but recognition of the power of the Church and State, cementing the social order by recourse to a strict moral code" and the fear of hell and damnation (p. 24). Using images, sculptures, sermons, books of hours, and other pastoral and educational means, the clerical and political elites propagated this new image of the devil within larger and larger segments of the population, and with it the idea of punishment for sins. This was nothing less than "the beginning of the modernization of Western behavior" (p. 24). It cemented a "triumphant culture, which integrated individual guilt, moral and religious in origin [sic], into a global interpretation defined by a sense of superiority and a desire for expansion. Europe invented the tools for its future world domination by abandoning the inertia of the enchanted universe and creating a fundamentally hierarchical social model, around a God even more powerful than the terrible Lucifer. It was a model that could be endlessly adapted to every sphere of human activity, so as to strengthen the power of individual guilt and make it a weapon of collective development" (p. 26).

These are extremely wide and all-encompassing statements, connecting as they do the nascent centralization and sacralization of political power, the invention of the notions of sin and guilt, European exceptionalism, the terror of Satan, colonialism and empire formation, and the civilizing process. Discussing each of these elements separately, Muchembled admits time and again that the process was not over until the late Middle Ages, or even later, and that we have no idea to what degree these elite notions penetrated lower strata of society. This, however, does not deter him from connecting all these processes into one multi-dimensional change that took place in one narrowly defined period. Obviously, Muchembled is right in the sense that there must have been some connection among all the processes that unfolded in the early modern period (such as European expansion and the civilizing process), in the eighteenth century (modernity as we know it), and events and processes that had predated them. But Muchembled's teleological perspective leaves no space for contingencies or for oppositional and centrifugal forces. This is Whiggish history at its worst.

By the twelfth century, then, Satan had made his entry, and by the fifteenth century he reigned supreme. In theological treaties and other forms of propaganda, a terrifying Satan acquired his familiar characteristics--his fundamental inhumanity (but also his physicality) and the idea that he could enter human bodies at will. The latter idea was a crucial part of and a result of transformations in the configuration of the body in the West. Drawing on his own research on the invention of modern man, Norbert Elias's notion of the civilizing process, and feminist historiography of the witch hunt of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, Muchembled devotes the major part of his book (chs. 2-4) to the

early modern period, the age of the systematic persecution of female witches (male witches play no role on Muchembled's narrative). Here, too, thoughtful insights and embarrassingly general and vague statements are mixed together, frustrating the reader who tries to delineate cause or effect, chronology, agency, or any order of priorities among the moving variables.

In the fifteenth century, according to Muchembled, the science of demons--demonology--was born as a direct result of the triumph of Catholicism. It took two hundred more years for the new ideas of this science to produce the human archetype of absolute evil, the female witch. Treading on ground that is very familiar to him, and that he has been one of the leading historians to research systematically, Muchembled describes the development of the image of the witch as a culmination of fear of sectarian heresies, its connection to the political struggles tearing apart the church in the first half of the fifteenth century, and the diffusion of the new image of the witch from Burgundy and the Western Alps to other parts of Europe, especially the Holy Roman Empire. He is less convincing in his attempt to connect the invention of the new witch with an alleged rejection of human (and mostly female) nudity that took place at the very same time. Muchembled's assertion that this shift in representation took place in the centuries of Michelangelo, Titian, and Rubens is strange, to say the least. Heinrich Kramer's *Malleus maleficarum* of 1487 was, indeed, a misogynistic treatise that portrayed women in general, and older women in particular, as vengeful servants of Satan. But the book predated the attack on nudity by more than a hundred years, and was itself a compilation of earlier misogynistic portrayals of women (Johannes Nider's *Formicarius* being its most important source). Kramer, Savonarola, and other members of some religious orders had attacked female nudity already in the last years of the fifteenth century, it was only in the second half of the sixteenth century that the Council of Trent recommended restrictions on visual representations of nudity. Nor does it make sense to connect the writing and publication of this book to the confessional battles that were to tear this area apart fifty years later (p. 53). Just a few pages later, Muchembled points out that the major persecutions of witches did not occur until the late sixteenth century, and were due to the confessional strife and subsequent retreat of the optimistic humanism of the Italian and Erasmian Renaissances. Put differently, according to Muchembled's own chronology, by the late fifteenth century, the very time when the *Malleus* was written, Europe was still "bathed by the rays of the Renaissance" (p. 54). What, then, accounts for the systematic, relentless, and extensive (Muchembled's terms) demonization of the world and of women in this particular period?

Be that as it may, by the late sixteenth century, a new demonology had crystallized a discourse that is described as "unified" (p. 62) but that equally "did not offer a completely unified theory" (p. 63), connecting death, the devil, and female sexuality. "In the Western imagination, sex and death had begun their close association" (p. 67). Religious and civil authorities enforced this new connection, artists, intellectuals, and theologians spread it, and the female body became the theater where this new configuration of evil manifested itself. Muchembled's discussion of the obsessive, repetitive, and somewhat sick and sickening discourse of contemporaries concerning the female body and its representations summarizes the main arguments of feminist historians of the witch hunt. His own contribution is by connecting this discourse to the popularity of the contemporary discourse on monsters. But statements such as "what was really at issue was women, their sexuality and the danger they carried in their womb when performing their natural function," and Muchembled's reading of *faits divers* and sensational *canards* as typical of the elite's view of women, generation, and monstrosity are unhelpful, to say the least (p. 83). Equally unconvincing are the author's generalizations that early modern theologians "disparage the senses as gateways through which sin could enter" (p. 97), and that "the demonization of the lower half of the body was chronologically synchronous with the great witch craze" (p. 105), especially given the fact that Muchembled himself admits that this demonization did not impact even the most privileged until the later half of the seventeenth century, just when the witch trials were over.

Muchembled argues that the reformed churches (both protestant and catholic) of Europe enforced their new notions of fear and sin on the people of Europe. Recognizing the internal abyss and internalizing

the new notions of guilt and sin, Europeans searched for proofs that God had not abandoned them. Hence christian heroism, foreign missions, colonialism, and modernity à la Weber. Furthermore, it was Satan, no less, who was responsible for “the emergence, within a fragmented Europe of a cultural conception” and a new identity (p. 110). Muchembled further connects the demonization of the world to a new pessimism that overtook Europe between 1550 and 1650, replacing the earlier optimism of the Renaissance. Reading a few major French literary texts, he argues that the sense of tragedy that characterized French literature in the period was a direct result of the processes previously described. Again, Muchembled’s chronology is confusing. He ascribes the name Mannerism to this post-Renaissance artistic movement, and argues that one of its characteristics was “the theatricality of gestures” (p. 117), having described the same time period as the time of the civilizing process, whose rules of conduct taught people to avoid violent gestures and untimely bodily manifestations (p. 97). Arguing, as he does, that the guilt of the age of French authors François de Rosset and Jean-Pierre Camus was external to the thinking person, and that the devil, as he was portrayed by these tragic authors, was equally external, also confuses the reader, who may remember Muchembled’s own descriptions of the very same time period as the time of general anxiety due to the internalization of guilt and the ability of the devil to possess and control bodies from within (pp. 100-9). Further complicating the issue is the argument that by the 1630s witch trials all but ceased in the areas under the jurisdiction of the Parlement of Paris due to a change that had already taken place in the mental attitudes and the modes of feelings and thoughts of the Parisian elites (p. 154). The same elites, we may assume, who read the tragedies and whose pessimism was allegedly responsible for more, rather than less demonic angst.

One way or another, by 1650 the terrifying devil of the previous 300 years was on his way out. “Western societies were gradually detaching themselves from the grip of religious symbolism,” and in France, “the Louis-quatorzian state constructed its own logic of domination, separating politics, wholly devoted to the expression of a monarchic sacrality, from religion” (p. 155). Growing trade, a new “desire for sweeter life” among the elites, and new norms of self control and gentility made society less susceptible to fear of the devil (p. 148). Religious dogmatism gave place to more peaceful relations between humans and God (Jansenism and Pietism are not addressed), and rationalist ideas were paving inroads, leading to the Enlightenment and to the death of Satan. Descartes, Newton, Spinoza, and Leibniz dug his grave, or worse, turned him into a caricature of himself. Satan was no longer a threat. He was recast by Freud and others as a figure of human imagination, reduced to being manipulated by authors, ridiculed and dismissed by human beings, before his demise and final expulsion to the world of dreams, fashionable literary schools, and Hollywood movies. Analyzing novels and movies, Muchembled describes this demise, but, unfortunately, the second part of the book does not pursue the stated goal of connecting the different stages in Satan’s career to social, political, and cultural developments.

A History of the Devil, could indeed, as Muchembled rightly points out, serve as an interesting angle to view history of Western notions of good, evil, power, gender, life and death. But the history of each and every one of these elements is itself nothing if not multi-dimensional and contradictory. And any attempt to create one narrative that connects all of these histories into one coherent story is doomed to fail.

NOTES

[1] Among his many works are the following: *Culture populaire and culture des elites dans la France moderne: XVe-XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1978); English translation: *Popular Culture and Elite Culture in France, 1400-1750* (Baton Rouge, 1985); *La Sorcière au village: XVe-XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1979); *L’invention de l’homme moderne: sensibilités, moeurs et comportements collectives sous l’Ancien Régime* (Paris, 1989); *Le temps des supplices: de l’obéissance sous les rois absolus, XVe-XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1992); *Le roi et la sorcière: L’Europe*

des bûchers, XVe-XVIIIe siècle (Paris, 1993); and *La société police: politique et politesse en France du XVIe au XXe siècle* (Paris, 1998).

[2] For a good recent use of images to trace the history of the witchhunt see Charles Zika, *Exorcising Our Demons: Magic, Witchcraft and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003).

Moshe Sluhovsky
Hebrew University of Jerusalem
msluhovs@csulb.edu

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