

Interpretive differences do not detract from the book's meticulous archival research, and scholars should expand its insights into other regions to understand what elite English society looked like before the Civil Wars. Whether these were, as Cogan states, 'not a religious war' (p. 16) would be an ecumenical matter.

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Carlos Eire, *They Flew: A History of the Impossible*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2023, pp. 512, £30, ISBN: 9780300259803.

The canonization of the Capuchin Pio of Pietrelcina, commonly known as Padre Pio, in 2002 was the final step in the process of legitimizing a friar whose supernatural talents included levitation, bilocation (appearing in two places at once), gifts of prophecy, the ability to heal, and the receiving of the stigmata. This might seem extraordinary to modern sensibilities: how could phenomena such as bilocation and levitation be legitimized in the twenty-first century? Surely such things, in a post-Enlightenment world, should be considered impossible? It is exactly these sorts of questions (and assumptions) that are challenged in Carlos Eire's thought-provoking new book.

At its core, the book asserts that accounts of phenomena such as bilocation and levitation in the early modern world have been too quickly discarded or ridiculed by scholars, cast aside as oddities during a period many have characterized as transitioning away from superstition and towards enlightened, rational, and scientific modernity (with all the Weberian and Whiggish assumptions that details). Yet, as Eire notes in their introduction, it was at the dawn of the so called 'age of modernity' that accounts of these phenomenon reached their peak, challenging readers with a reminder that flying friars and bilocating and levitating nuns 'walked the earth and ostensibly hovered over it at the same time as Isaac Newton' (p. 19). Instead, Eire argues for the need to view belief in these impossible events as a very real and 'essential component of a culture's worldview' (p. 6). This moves beyond the reductionist question of 'did these events actually happen?' and towards a more nuanced analysis of 'the fact that some people believed that such things did happen' (p. 20).

Eire continues to challenge this assumption by arguing for the validity and importance of testimonies concerning these phenomena, also too often discarded as anecdotal with no point of reference beyond themselves. Instead, Eire argues that 'a history of the impossible is a history of *testimonies* about impossible events'. It is these testimonies that form the basis of the analysis of the book, with Eire insisting

the thousands of testimonies in which people swore they saw such supernatural events are important sources. As these were 'so widespread across time and geographical boundaries, and so closely linked to civil and ecclesiastical institutions', they should not be dismissed as unbelievable or circumstantial, but rather as containing valuable evidence of belief (pp. 4-5).

The book achieves this ambitious aim with aplomb. Across ten chapters Eire shows the value that accounts of these impossible phenomena bring to our understanding of religious belief in the early modern period. Hagiographical accounts seeking to defend the ecstatic levitating experiences of the Carmelite Teresa of Avila reveal the importance of such phenomena to defences of Catholic spirituality and doctrine under attack in Protestant polemics. Teresa's own self-positioning when writing about her experiences are suggestive of anxieties about agency and legitimacy, reflecting an insistence, which began in the medieval period, that such experiences were granted by God alone. Writings about the 'flying friar' Joseph of Cupertino reveal much about the post-Tridentine saint-making process and the baroque culture of the Catholic Reformation. Other accounts written about the bilocating nun María de Ágreda's appearances as a missionary amongst North American Indians reveal the anxieties of the Franciscan friars who wrote them, eager to promote the success of their missions to the Spanish king and the papacy. Not only does Eire show that these accounts make for fascinating and revealing reading, but also proves they can bring much to our understanding of the Catholic Reformation and its global missions. While most of the book concerns itself with Catholicism, the final few chapters also address the Protestant belief in the impossible, adding new understanding to the continuation of such beliefs after the Reformation.

The book is split into three distinct sections, the first dealing with levitation, the second with bilocation, and the third with belief in the devil and demons in both Catholic and Protestant circles. The first part, 'Aloft', begins with a chapter on the history of levitation from the time of the earliest Christians through to the Spiritualism of the nineteenth century. By the sixteenth century, Eire argues that holy levitations had become a 'common hallmark of genuine sanctity' within Catholicism, as the printing press had given rise to popular hagiographies and the Protestant Reformation had made such miracles and phenomenon 'markers of difference' between the denominations (pp. 51-52). As a result, many key Catholic Reformation figures can be counted among those who experienced holy levitations, including Ignatius of Loyola, Francis Xavier, John of the Cross, and Philip Neri.

Chapter two addresses accounts of the ecstatic levitations of Teresa of Avila, while chapters three and four address those of the Franciscan friar Joseph of Cupertino. Particularly fascinating is

Teresa's ambivalence towards such levitations, which she stated were uncontrollable. Both Teresa and Joseph were witnessed grasping for anything to anchor them down as they were raised from the floor, uncontrollable to the point that Teresa complained to God to request such phenomena to stop. 'Whether or not one believes Teresa or the eyewitnesses... is a moot point', Eire argues, 'the fact remains that we have many such testimonies and that she reified many Catholic beliefs that were being challenged in her day and age' (p. 96). Assumptions about exactly who would believe such phenomena are effectively challenged in the two chapters on Joseph. The friar was the main reason why the Lutheran Duke Johann Friedrich of Braunschweig-Lüneberg converted to Catholicism, having witnessed the aerial ecstasy in person. Despite this, the duke was 'no foe of reason and science', having the great Polymath Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz as his counsellor and librarian, 'linking the whole family to one of the most illustrious names in the Age of Reason'. Thus, Joseph is not only a useful case study of the 'polemical dimension of Catholic miracles', but also of the continued belief in such phenomena even by those in scientific circles (pp. 151-52).

The second section, 'Here... and Here Too' applies a similar treatment to the history of bilocation. Chapter five provides a brief history of the phenomenon as Eire grapples with what he calls a 'universal phenomenon in the history of the world's religions' (p. 177). Such a prelude provides an effective introduction to the case study of María de Ágreda, who turned her family home into a Discalced Franciscan convent belonging to the Order of the Immaculate Conception. As previously stated, Eire shows the importance of the nun's bilocation to Franciscan accounts highlighting 'the supernatural prowess of the Franciscan Order' to 'position it favourably for royal patronage' for its missions (p. 211). Chapter seven deals with the fallout of this, as María was investigated by the Inquisition on several occasions.

The third and final section, 'Malevolent', explores the opposite side of the coin, drawing our attention in chapter eight to three 'failed saints' all of whom claimed to have levitated and bilocated. These were Magdalena de la Cruz, who eventually confessed to being in league with the devil; María de la Visitación, who confessed to being a fraud; and Luisa de la Ascension, who despite being declared innocent of fraud by the Inquisition after her death, ended up 'consigned to oblivion through her humiliation' (p. 257). Chapter nine adjusts the focus to explore the overlap in viewpoints between Protestant and Catholics towards the impossible, as demonologists from both confessions scrutinized all claims of the impossible to discern whether they were divine or demonic in origin. They did so 'not in some abstract theological realm but in full engagement with real-world concerns and events'. While they eagerly turned their often contrary assessments into 'polemical

ammunition' against each other, Eire argues that both agreed that impossible acts like levitation or bilocation could occur, revealing 'a continuity- a shared mentality- that rubs awkwardly against all other discontinuities and core disagreements between these two competing branches', one which 'runs against the grain of the era's increasing skepticism and of the new worldview created by the rise of rationalism and modern empirical science' (p. 290). The final chapter, 'The Devil Himself', provides an exploration of the belief, both in Protestant and Catholic circles, that the devil was considered real in the early modern world. Eire concludes that 'Protestants continued to believe in a world peopled by evil spirits' and in fact did not 'make a clean break with the medieval past'. In doing so, Eire questions the usefulness of concepts such as 'modernity' and 'post-modernity' to our understanding of belief. 'Modernity, post-modernity, and post-post-modernity have many dimensions', Eire reflects, 'some of which tend to be ignored or summarily dismissed, often at an undetected cost' (p. 353).

This is a thought provoking, ambitious, and well written book that challenges assumptions about the study of impossible phenomena. It demands a reassessment of testimonies and accounts of such phenomena as an important element in the mindset of belief in the early modern period. As Eire hints at the very start of the book, 'the historical truth is that this mentality has not yet died and is still actually thriving and raving in the twenty-first century' (p. xv). Perhaps then, the canonization of Padre Pio in 2002 needs to be seen less as an incredulous anomaly to 'modern sensibilities', and more as the latest chapter in a long and rich history of the impossible.

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Simon Johnson, *The English College at Lisbon 1622–1972*. Leominster: Gracewing, 2023, pp. 224, £25.00, ISBN 978 085244 701 7

2022 marked the four hundredth centenary of the founding of the English College at Lisbon. To commemorate this anniversary the Bishops Conference of England and Wales charged Dr Simon Johnson with the unenviable task of compiling a history that would encompass the three hundred and fifty years in which the college functioned as a seminary. What has resulted is a thorough and scholarly (yet accessible) publication that will no doubt please many readers to see available on booksellers' lists.

Amongst the body of British and Irish 'Continental Colleges', the English College at Lisbon is one of the better served with regard to scholarly enquiry. Many readers of this journal will no doubt be