

H-Net Reviews

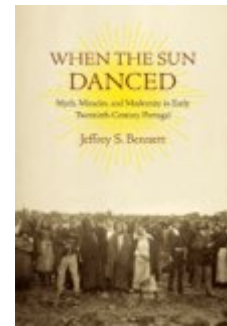
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jeffrey S. Bennett. *When the Sun Danced: Myth, Miracles, and Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century Portugal*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012. x + 238 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-3248-4; \$24.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8139-3249-1.

Reviewed by Agnieszka Halemba (University of Warsaw)

Published on H-SAE (August, 2012)

Commissioned by Michael B. Munnik



The Power of a Miracle

Can a miracle influence the course of political history? In his detailed study of the initial years following one of the best-known Marian apparitions worldwide, Jeffrey S. Bennett responds to this question in the affirmative. Fatima, until 1917 a small and unknown Portuguese village, is at present one of the biggest and most well-known pilgrimage sites in the Catholic world. The apparitions that took place there in 1917 are among the few declared by the Vatican as “worthy of belief.” Bennett, however, is not interested in Fatima as an internationally renowned pilgrimage place and a site of visions that periodically electrify the Catholic world even today. He is also not interested in the development of Fatima beyond the first couple of decades after the initial sightings, nor does he devote much space to the political meanings spread through the apparitional narratives that go beyond Portuguese national history. The above should not be taken as criticism of the book—every author must and is free to make choices regarding the scope of his or her work. The book is about “Fatima” as a site of Portuguese national struggles and does not concern the site’s international significance.

In academic literature concerning supernatural interventions within the Catholic world, it is widely accepted that apparitions of the Virgin Mary happen in times of crisis, whether personal, social, political, or economic. Such claims are in line with devotional literature—after all, is it not plausible that God intervenes precisely in such moments? Bennett also follows this line of argu-

ment, skillfully linking individual, social, and political factors that formed the background of the apparitional events. He takes one additional step that most works to date have not dared to make—he focuses on the political effects of the Fatima apparitional claims and crafts his book as an attempt to explain how the reported visions of the three peasant children influenced the course of modern Portuguese history. Not only are apparitions the effects or symptoms of underlying crises, but they are also effective ways of dealing with them and avenues of political change. Moreover, dealing with crises in this manner cannot, according to Bennett, be understood primarily as a case of political manipulation, either on the part of the church or on the part of secular authorities. Yes, Fatima apparitions were subsequently instrumentalized by many actors—either as a sign of divine grace or as an instance that proved the wickedness and malevolence of one’s political opponents. The events in Fatima, experiences of visionaries as well as pilgrims, were eventually turned into what Bennett calls “Fatima,” in other words, a symbolic reality that influenced political life in Portugal at the beginning of the twentieth century. Still, as he writes, “the apparition cult was not a Jesuit invention. It was the offspring of ordinary women and men, who were primarily concerned with a productivity of their smallholdings, the protection and moral cohesion of their families and villages, and the availability of resources to cope with existential crises of various sorts” (p. 19). Despite these important but humble origins, Fatima became a site of concentration and intensification of what Ben-

nett (quoting Gregory Bateson) calls “symmetrical schismogenesis”: “Fatima” epitomized the divisions and enmities between monarchists and republicans, conservatives and liberals, clericals and anticlericals; and it became a historically transformative event.

The book aims to answer the following detailed questions: How were the private experiences of three rural children translated into public realities that captured the national imagination? How did debates over the nature and meaning of the apparitions figure in Portugal’s transition from democracy to dictatorship? How did the apparition cult expand to become virtually coextensive with the cultlike New State (Estado Novo) in the 1930s? Bennett summarizes his arguments in the introduction and provides detailed analysis in five chapters.

Chapter 1, “Signs of the Times,” provides a glimpse into Portuguese history with an aim to facilitate readers’ understanding of how the atmosphere, in which the apparitional events extended beyond the three children’s private experience, came into being. Nevertheless, it is not a historical chapter *sensu stricto*. Instead, it presents vignettes from the lives of several historical figures who, at the end of the nineteenth century, were publicly resurrected and presented as potential Portuguese national heroes. The significance of this chapter resides in the ways it skillfully exposes the divisions that ran through the Portuguese political scene at that time, showing that attitudes to religion and church were among the most important markers by which political allies and opponents were defined.

In chapter 2, “Revolutionary Republicanism,” Bennett briefly sketches the political events immediately preceding the apparitions, in particular the 1910 Republican revolution and its aftermath. One of the most important legislative changes was the total separation of church and state and accompanying anticlerical measures, such as banning of religious orders, expulsion of Jesuits and papal nuncio, restriction of religious worship, removal of clergy from educational institutions, and confiscation of church property. The Catholic Church, with its allegiance to the infallible pope and to the laws ordained by God, was viewed as a threat to the secular nation-state. For the revolutionaries, the Catholic Church came to represent an obstacle to change. Nevertheless, Bennett underlines that structurally the ideology and symbols used by the Portuguese Republican Party (PRP) derived from the religious (and political) system, the very same system that the PRP sought to dismantle. Although in 1914 the new Republican government loosened its position to-

ward the church, by 1917, the country was bathed in riots, demonstrations, assassination attempts, and—among the poorest—hunger. This was the context in which the apparitions in Fatima took place.

In the following chapter, “A Modern Miracle,” Bennett describes the village of Fatima and its surroundings as well as the sightings of six apparitions that took place between May 13 and October 13, 1917. In light of the book’s argument, the turning moment was the apparition of October 13, the day of the so-called Miracle of the Sun, after which Bennett entitled his work. On that day, pilgrims who gathered at the apparition site saw the sun behaving in apparently abnormal ways—casting strange light, spinning, and zigzagging toward the earth. This vision became known as Miracle of the Sun and was taken as proof that the witnesses were telling the truth. According to Bennett, the fact that so many people perceived the strange behavior of the sun as a miracle established Fatima apparitions as socially and culturally instituted events that reconfigured Portuguese realities in ways that had wide-ranging and irreversible historical consequences. Barely one month later, the Republican government was overthrown.

Chapter 4, “Reenvisioning Mary,” which supplies interpretations of the material presented in chapter 3, should be treated as the book’s core chapter. Firstly, it introduces a psychological interpretation of the visionary experiences of the three seers, showing how their cultural and social background, their creativity, and the interactions between them made apparitional events possible. This is the weakest part of the book, making too many assumptions about psychological states and processes that probably cannot be adequately investigated on the basis of available material. Secondly, Bennett shows that local pressures and plots were applied to make the children revoke their initial claims. Subsequently, using Victor and Edith Turner’s work as a starting point, Bennett uncovers multiple mechanisms that led to translocalization of apparitions and the specific dynamics of pilgrimage, of which Fatima quickly became a focus. Importantly, he notes that the very complexity of the apparitional drama made it into a durable source of social revelation and a potent ideological weapon. On the national level, the apparition catalyzed a new religious movement that became a site of clashes between clerical and anticlerical forces, but mostly for those operating outside state and church structures. If for the government it was difficult to respond to the events at Fatima that were focused around three peasant children, it was equally difficult for the Church to take a position. Ac-

According to Bennett, the severely weakened Church could not afford to risk any further damage that might occur if any undesirable events had taken place at or around the apparitional site after church support had been granted. According to Bennett, it was the Miracle of the Sun, witnessed by hundreds of people, that changed how ordinary people experienced and understood life in the world. He writes, “things would never be the same in Portugal after the sun danced” (p. 164).

The last chapter, “Times and Signs,” shows how Fatima transformed Portuguese national life between 1918 and 1935, and how, after the collapse of the First Republic in 1926, it became the spiritual capital of the country. Moreover, Bennett describes a process of institutionalization of the cult of Fatima within the Church, careful management of existing resources and provision of new ones to the emerging shrine, and attacks on the shrine that included bombing attempts. He states that by 1933 both the Church and the New State instrumentalized “Fatima” to promote an antimodern version of religious nationalism and political authoritarianism in Portugal.

Bennett writes about instrumentalization of the apparitions that could be traced in the activities of some church representatives, who carefully managed the emerging devotion. He also characterizes “Fatima” as a powerful force that produced social and political effects

that went far beyond any management strategies on the part of any organization involved. One can say that, for Portugal—largely rural at that time—Fatima acted as a catalyst of a nation-building process, the features of which were similar to analogic processes in countries where the Virgin Mary had not intervened. The pilgrimages brought together people of different classes and backgrounds, who, through those encounters, could realize their commonalities; at the same time, rural people were constructed as especially “authentically” Portuguese and chosen—by the Virgin. The apparition site also triggered establishment of new media, especially the newspaper *Voz da Fatima* that by 1929 was distributed nationwide in over one hundred thousand copies and through which a new vision of the Portuguese nation was promoted.

This is clearly a fascinating book. As a social anthropologist working on Marian apparitions, but in no way a specialist in Portuguese history, I have some difficulty with evaluating the foundations and validity of Bennett’s bold conclusions concerning the significance of Fatima for the Portuguese nation-building process. However, if we accept his view of Fatima as a transformative historical event, his approach importantly changes the usual avenue of interpretation of Marian apparitions in academic literature. Instead of being a response to crises, Marian apparitions can become a powerful force that is capable of shaping political futures.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-sae>

Citation: Agnieszka Halemba. Review of Bennett, Jeffrey S., *When the Sun Danced: Myth, Miracles, and Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century Portugal*. H-SAE, H-Net Reviews. August, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36515>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.