

# 'PREACHING FOR THE EYES'

## Review of *Faith in a Beam of Light*

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*Faith in a Beam of Light: Magic Lantern and Belief in Western Europe, 1860-1940*

Edited by Sabine Lenk and Natalija Majsova

Brepols Publishers, Turnhout, Belgium, 2022

292 pages, illustrated

ISBN 978-2-503-59908-3 hardback, €75 (but see special offer below)

ISBN 978-2-503-59909-0 e-book, free download from [www.brepolsonline.net](http://www.brepolsonline.net)

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"The vast majority of people have no time to read and do not like sermons" (Abbot Georges Aillaud, 1899, quoted on p. 19). "The vast majority of people have no time to read and do not like sermons" (Abbot Georges Aillaud, 1899, quoted on p. 19).

I think it's fair to say that there's never been all that much interest in religious slides among modern-day collectors. There are perhaps several reasons for that: a general decline of organised religion over the 20th century; a dislike of the sometimes rather didactic or 'preachy' nature of the stories and sermons that go with them; or the fact that such slides tend to be mass-produced and not of the wood-and-hand-painting genres that look so attractive to our eyes. Perhaps, also, it's just that we don't know very much about them or how they were used, so it's too easy to disregard the many and varied thousands of such slides as 'just' a homogenous mass of nothing very interesting.

Another area that's not been well covered in 'the literature' (at least, in the English language) is production and use of slides in non-English-speaking countries, particularly the Francophone world. This is another deficiency that *Faith in a Beam of Light* deals with well. Some areas of the subjects it deals with have been covered well by French scholars (Laurent Mannoni and Patrice Guérin come to mind), but the wider lack of discussion of these subjects in English presents a continuing handicap to understanding and knowledge in the non-French-speaking scholarly world of these important aspects of international culture.

So this is a book that addresses two 'long-felt wants' at once. It's a collection of 17 fairly short essays by 18 different authors, most of whom have been connected with the B-magic project that is now drawing to its close. It's not a 'report' on the project as such but there's a clear aim to highlight the various strands of research that have been emerging over the past four years in Belgium. The articles are gathered in four sections: interpretations of some of the collections studied; modern accounts of historic uses of projection, especially in Catholic educational settings; a more theoretical section on the position of religious materials in relation to more secular areas (science education, popular entertainment, even Freemasonry); and finally a couple of reprints of important historical texts from the 1900s. Like many multi-authored works, it reads as a collection of case studies, rather than a smooth continuous single-voice narrative, but that allows the reader more freedom to make (or not) the connections between the topics in their own way. Perhaps it works as a kind of taster menu – relatively short snippets of many different interesting subjects, leaving the reader sated by some but wanting to know much more about others.



Of course in a largely Francophone context much of the religion being discussed is Roman Catholic. One thing that means is that the uses of projection discussed are often in the context of something quite subversive being introduced to a very conservative institution (as late as 1912 projections were banned in churches in France "for fear of misuse and confusion with a concert hall" (p. 35)) which is quite a contrast to the enthusiasm for lantern projection evident in some Anglican and English-speaking non-conformist circles of the same time. If you've read Mannoni's *Great Art of Light and Shadow*, you'll recognise some of the names that recur here – for example, Abbé Moigno makes regular appearances, along with the Maison de la Bonne Presse, Elie Mazo and Molteni/Radiguet et Massiot. But there are also a lot of people, places, institutions and other case studies that were new to me and probably to others like me, and that makes this a rich and rewarding tour of a less familiar lantern world.

On the whole, although the styles and approaches vary between the various contributors, it's all very nicely researched and well written up. There are lots of telling details in the way of contemporary quotes – "how powerful preaching for the eyes can be" (p. 58) and "those instruments that must be used to project the true light" (p. 59) to pick only two examples from Bart Moens' instructive (but too short!) summary of the importance of the Maison de la Bonne Presse. Perhaps there are occasional tiny suggestions that not all the contributors (or possibly their translators) are completely *au fait* with the world of magic lanterns – nothing wrong with that, of course, but once in a while a minor detail catches the eye and breaks the flow slightly – "old glass



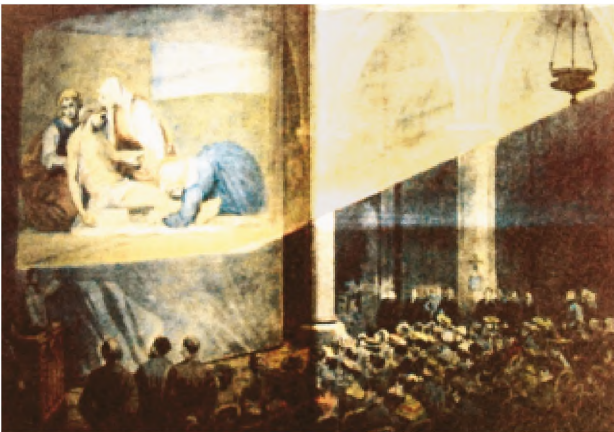
Slide showing Masonic symbolism – sword, heart, sun, moon, stars and the All-seeing Eye



Slide from a religious song set, *Je suis Chrétien*, by an unidentified manufacturer



*Interior of the slide stockroom of the Maison de la Bonne Presse, c.1910 – a well-organised large-scale slide hire business handling tens of thousands of slides*



*Projection in a Parisian church, 1905 – the image being projected is by Fra Bartolomeo, with the suggestion that classical art was more acceptable to the conservative elements of the church*

plates" (on p. 69), meaning 'slides', feels like a slightly over-literal rendering of *plaques de verre*, but never mind.

In spite of all the efforts of the MLS and others over the past however-many decades, what to call things can still be a bit hazy – a section heading 'From the Magic Lantern to Luminous Projections' (p. 20) is another case in point. 'Luminous Projections' of course is a straight translation of the French terminology *projections lumineuses*, but is that different from the 'magic' lantern, and if so how and why? The implication is the familiar one of a move away from the 'old' superstitious uses of

the *magic lantern* to the 'modern' rational and scientific uses of the *optical lantern*, and that's an interesting tension to set up in a book that's about the place of projection in organised religion, but all the same there's no clear consensus as to what to call the concept.

And sometimes the summaries of collections and usages may seem a little like similar accounts I've read elsewhere of other collections and usages – but of course that simply reflects the fact that similar institutions in different national contexts were likely to put together broadly similar collections. If one was being unkind, one might feel that there was a little reinventing the wheel going on, or at least that all the researchers in different countries aren't necessarily familiar with each other's work. But (apart from the unkindness) that kind of negativity would also miss the most important point – what's interesting here is the amount of similarity and connection between the different contexts, which in turn makes us focus more on the small nuances and differences that do exist, and begin to try to puzzle out why the differences exist and what they might mean.

That perhaps also reflects some of the subject matter. As Wouter Egelmeers remarks in his interesting piece on use of the lantern in a Belgian Catholic girls' school, "when optical lanterns were introduced to Belgian public schools from the 1880s onwards, Catholic educators were not immediately won over by the instrument – possibly because of its initial association with science teaching and the teaching policies of the Liberals." The overlap between religion and education was very strong in most developed countries of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the position of the projected image as one of the binding forces in that overlap is important. If *Faith in a Beam of Light* were to provoke a few more studies like these in other contexts (not least, the still under-examined connections between British projection, religion and education) that would be a very worthwhile achievement.

It's worth commenting as well on the more real-world aspects of the book. It's the first volume of several (the next two are already in production) arising from B-magic, which the Belgian academic publisher Brepols will publish within their existing *Techne* series on cultural skills and technologies. It's a beautifully produced hardback volume, with high-quality colour illustration throughout. It's not cheap, of course, though compared to some of the more mainstream academic publishers, it's a relative bargain at 75 Euros (roughly £65 or US\$75 at the time of writing), with a generous special offer for MLS members as mentioned above. But more significantly, if you don't need to have your own physical copy, you can download the contents for nothing(!) from [www.brepolonline.net](http://www.brepolonline.net). However that has been managed financially doesn't matter to me as much as the recognition that work like this deserves to be as widely available as possible, and (along with the book's interesting and varied content) that gets a loud and sustained round of applause from me.