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Miracles in the Shadow of the Economic Miracle: The “Supernatural ’50s” in West Germany*

Monica Black

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

This essay explores the overlapping worlds of spiritual healing, everyday magic, popular religion, and witchcraft beliefs in West Germany in the 1950s. It takes seriously the subjective experiences of supernatural phenomena described in contemporary sources, but it is equally concerned with the friction those phenomena caused in that segment of the population that did not credit their reality. Historians have recently begun to revise long-standing portrayals of “society” in West Germany as an aggregate of labor and living-standard statistics, institutional church ties, and party-political affiliations—portrayals that had assumed a blandly conformist, consumerist, culturally undifferentiated, politically quiescent collectivity. Recent scholarship has often specifically highlighted the divisions and sources of antagonism in West German society—especially those surrounding gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, aesthetics and consumerism, youth and popular culture, and the introduction of millions of ethnic German refugees and expellees into the Federal Republic.¹ Still quite exceptional, however, are works that seek to uncover the

* I acknowledge very gratefully the generous advice and help of Paul Betts, Ellen Boucher, Alon Confino, Jennifer Evans, Dagmar Herzog, Shelly Matthews, and Till van Rahden on this essay, and I thank the *Journal of Modern History*'s two anonymous readers for their exceptionally insightful and valuable suggestions. I presented a version of this article at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia, and I thank Joe Davis, Jennifer Geddes, and the audience in the seminar for their probing questions. Another version was presented in the seminar of the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies at Princeton University; the seminar's theme, “Authority and Legitimation,” influenced my thinking in this essay considerably. I thank the participants in the seminar for their expert questions, as well as my wonderful colleagues in the Davis Center: Sabrina Mervin, Mary Morgan, Mridu Rai, Rachel St. John, Hugh Thomas, Katherine Verdery, and Eric Weitz. I thank Dan Rodgers and Yair Mintzker especially. I also thank the inimitable Peter Brown, who suggested this essay's title. Matthew Gillis's help was, as always, inspiring and utterly indispensable.

¹ A representative sampling of this expanding literature might include Daniel Fulda, Dagmar Herzog, Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, and Till van Rahden, eds., *Demokratie im Schatten der Gewalt: Geschichten des Privaten im deutschen Nachkrieg* (Göttingen, 2010); Atina Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany* (Princeton, NJ, 2007); Dagmar Herzog, *Sex after Fascism: Memory and*

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emotional, metaphysical, and existential chaos left behind by Nazism, the powerful undercurrents that boiled just below the seemingly placid surface of everyday life and the equally powerful impulses that struggled to contain them.² In the very midst of the Economic Miracle, West Germany was positively deluged with other wonders: mysterious healings, end-time prophecies, religious visions, and fantastic and marvelous tales of divine or ghostly interventions in the mundane world.³ These phenomena touched off vigorous and sometimes caustic debates about enlightenment and science, medicine and the occult, spirituality and charlatanism. Some commentators found the otherworldly beliefs of their fellow citizens so strange and provoking as to threaten the very foundations of the republic. “Mysticism,” one Heidelberg physiologist warned darkly in 1953, had “wide circles of the people” in its grip. Thus, he concluded, “the time no longer seems far off when the masses’ lack of discrimination and the mystification of the thinking of broad strata of society” might portend the abandonment of “positive legal norms.”⁴ If we are

Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany (Princeton, NJ, 2007); Paul Betts, *The Authority of Everyday Objects: A Cultural History of West German Industrial Design* (Berkeley, 2004); Elizabeth D. Heineman, *What Difference Does a Husband Make? Women and Marital Status in Nazi and Postwar Germany* (Berkeley, 2003); Hanna Schissler, ed., *The Miracle Years: A Cultural History of West Germany, 1949–1968* (Princeton, NJ, 2001); Uta G. Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley, 2000); Robert G. Moeller, ed., *West Germany under Construction: Politics, Society, and Culture in the Adenauer Era* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1997); Heide Fehrenbach, *Cinema in Democratizing Germany: Reconstructing National Identity after Hitler* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1995); and Robert G. Moeller, *Protecting Motherhood: Women and the Family in the Politics of Postwar West Germany* (Berkeley, 1993).

² I took inspiration on this question from Till van Rahden, who has called in his essay “Clumsy Democrats: Towards a History of Moral Passions in the Federal Republic” (*German History* 29, no. 3 [September 2011]: 485–504) for a moral history of postwar Germany that “provoke[s] . . . a historical awareness of particularities, of individualities, oddities, discontinuities, contrasts, and singularities, of diverse ways of belonging and being a citizen in the postwar Germanies” (496). For a brilliant example of one of the ways historians are just beginning to explore the existential dissonances of the 1950s, see Svenja Goltermann, *Die Gesellschaft der Überlebenden: Deutsche Kriegsheimkehrer und ihre Gewalterfahrungen im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Munich, 2009).

³ On West Germany’s “postwar surge in Catholic miracles,” see Michael E. O’Sullivan’s excellent “West German Miracles: Catholic Mystics, Church Hierarchy, and Postwar Popular Culture,” *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History*, Online-Ausgabe 6 (2009), H. 1, <http://www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/site/40208894/default.aspx>. On rumors of the end of the world in the late 1940s, see Alfred Dieck, “Der Weltuntergang am 17. März 1949 in Südhannover,” *Neues Archiv für Niedersachsen* 4 (1950): 704–20.

⁴ Herbert Schäfer, *Der Okkultäter: Hexenbanner—Magischer Heiler—Erdentstrahler* (Hamburg, 1959), 9.

fully to appreciate the historical entity we call “West German society” in the decade or so after World War II, I argue in this essay, we must acknowledge the sharp diversity of its religious attitudes, mentalities, and spiritual perspectives; the passionate conflicts those diversities aroused; and why they did so.

The robustness of the beliefs described below is likely to surprise even many experts on this period. Although these beliefs briefly captured the attention of a small number of specialists, mostly ethnographers and folklorists, in the 1970s and 1980s, they have not been integrated into analyses of postwar history and society.⁵ Nor do they square with much of the received wisdom about modern Europe and its supposed disenchantment. In recent years, historians have produced outstanding work on the occult revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This work has tended to focus on intellectual history and contemporary debates about the boundaries between esoteric phenomena and natural science, while seeking at the same time to demonstrate the “modernity” of the occult.⁶ My purpose in the present essay is different: I hope to contribute to writing what we might call the everyday history of the supernatural in Europe by exploring how ordinary West Germans lived and thought with otherworldly phenomena, day to day, in the broadest sense, in the middle of the twentieth century.⁷

⁵ See Eberhard Wagner, “Hexenglaube in Franken heute,” *Jahrbuch für fränkische Landesforschung* 30 (1970): 343–56; Inge Schöck, *Hexenglaube in der Gegenwart: Empirische Untersuchungen in Südwestdeutschland* (Tübingen, 1978); Joachim Friedrich Baumhauer, *Johann Kruse und der “neuzeitliche Hexenwahn”: Zur Situation eines norddeutschen Aufklärers und einer Glaubensvorstellung im 20. Jahrhundert; Untersucht anhand von Vorgängen in Dithmarschen* (Neumünster, 1984); and Cornelia Paul, “Und da waren plötzlich über Nacht die Pferde gezopft’: Vom Hexenglauben in einem oberschwäbischen Dorf,” *Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften* 5, no. 5 (1993): 103–18.

⁶ Sofie Lachapelle, *Investigating the Supernatural: From Spiritism and Occultism to Psychical Research and Metaphysics in France, 1853–1931* (Baltimore, 2011); Heather Wolffram, *Stepchildren of Science: Psychical Research and Parapsychology in Germany, c. 1870–1939* (Amsterdam, 2009); John Warne Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France* (Ithaca, NY, 2007); Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago, 2004); Corinna Treitel, *A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern* (Baltimore, 2004).

⁷ Recent works contributing to a similar project—in history, folklore, anthropology, and other disciplines—include Nils Freytag and Diethard Sawicki, eds., *Wunderwelten: Religiöse Ekstase und Magie in der Moderne* (Munich, 2006); Willem de Blécourt and Owen Davies, eds., *Witchcraft Continued: Popular Magic in Modern Europe* (Manchester, 2004); Christine D. Worobec, *Possessed: Women, Witches, and Demons in Imperial Russia* (De Kalb, IL, 2003); Thomas Hauschild, *Magie und Macht in Italien: Über Frauenzauber, Kirche und Politik* (Gifkendorf, 2002); Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark, eds., *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia, 1999); Owen Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic, and Culture, 1736–1951*

In this essay I also want to make an appeal to scholars of recent European history to recognize the presence and significance of forms of magical thinking in the twentieth century. Like people in other parts of the world and across time, groups of West Germans in the 1950s sought methods of direct access to the divine. They, too, lived with angels and the spirits of the dead, conducted exorcisms, cast spells, and watched nature for signs of a world to come. By revealing the prominence of witchcraft beliefs, faith healing, and magic in West Germany in the 1950s—and the fears expressed in debates about those phenomena—this essay will attempt to contribute to a more fully integrated, diachronic, and human history of the supernatural, a project now in its early stages.⁸ Such a history is essential, I would argue, not only to provincializing Europe but also to provincializing modernity.⁹

But the specificities of time and place are crucial to any history of the supernatural. West Germans appealed to otherworldly forces to accomplish specific things for them. In vast numbers, they entreated the divine to heal their bodies and liberate their souls; they posed specific questions to the wise women, holy men, and healers whose counsel they sought. Their appeals and questions were rooted in a particular moment and in the needs, fantasies, desires, and fears of that moment—as were the debates those appeals and questions sparked. What makes the idea of West Germany's "supernatural

(Manchester, 1999); and T. M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge, MA, 1989). Slightly older but exceedingly valuable ethnographic works include Schöck, *Hexenglaube in der Gegenwart*; and Jeanne Favret-Saada, *Les mots, la mort, les sorts* (Paris, 1977), translated into English by Catherine Cullen as *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage* (Cambridge, 1981).

⁸ See, e.g., Wolfgang Behringer, *Witches and Witch-Hunts: A Global History* (Cambridge, 2004); and S. A. Smith and Alan Knight, eds., "The Religion of Fools? Superstition Past and Present," special issue, *Past & Present*, no. 199, suppl. 3 (2008). As indispensable as these works are, however, they have not brought modern Europe as fully into the picture as one might hope. Although Behringer conceives of witchcraft as a "universally existing pattern" (7), his analysis gives relatively little attention to recent European history. Similarly, the section "Superstition in the Modern World" in the *Past & Present* special issue—which is dedicated to a diachronic and transcultural look at "superstition" the world over—is notably missing any essay on modern Europe. Writing a transcultural history of miracles, by contrast, suffers from a lack of empirical studies of the meaning of miracles in non-Christian contexts. See Alexander C. T. Geppert and Till Kössler, "Einleitung: Wunder der Zeitgeschichte," in *Wunder: Poetik und Politik des Staunens im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Alexander C. T. Geppert and Till Kössler (Berlin, 2011), 41 n. 60.

⁹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ, 2000).

'50s" historically significant is not merely the unexpected presence of certain beliefs and practices but also why those beliefs and practices suddenly became a matter of broad public awareness when they did, and what they meant in a society living with the many legacies of war and Nazism.

HEALING THROUGH THE SPIRIT

Whereas Adalbert, whose acts and infamous opinions have been read to us, saw fit to call himself an apostle and to distribute his own hairs and fingernails to the people as relics, leading them astray with various errors and summoning demons to his aid under the guise of angels, let him be deprived of all priestly functions, doing penance for his sins, and let him no longer seduce the people. (*Acts of the Roman Synod*, 745)¹⁰

The magical healer Gr. [Bruno Gröning] offers as remedies amulet-like aluminum-foil balls [containing his hair and fingernails] that he has charged with his special powers before giving them to his customers. . . . Attendants from his entourage mix among the crowds [around him] and tell of the latest wondrous healings of the lame, the blind, [and] the deaf. (HERBERT SCHÄFER, *Der Okkulttäter*, 1959)¹¹

In 1949, a man named Bruno Gröning suddenly burst on to the West German scene and into the consciousness of millions. In his hands, his legions of followers said, lay the power to heal. That year, an engineer named Helmut Hülsmann and his wife, Anneliese, who lived in the Westphalian town of Herford, invited Gröning to come and see their ten-year-old son, Dieter, who suffered from a muscular disorder that made him unable to walk. Gröning responded to the Hülsmanns' invitation, and while he was the family's guest, Dieter's condition improved. Many, including the child's parents, took this to be miraculous, and news of the Wonder of Herford began to spread with extraordinary speed. Gröning became an overnight sensation.

From across Germany and far beyond, enormous crowds—an estimated five thousand people a day—began to descend on Herford and the Hülsmann home in the hopes of seeing him.¹² One contemporary described the scene:

¹⁰ Boniface, *Letters of Saint Boniface*, trans. Ephraim Emerton (New York, 1940), 106, letter no. 47, *Acts of the Roman Synod*, October 25, 745.

¹¹ Schäfer, *Der Okkulttäter*, 159.

¹² The basic details of Gröning's biography can be found in Traugott Bautz, ed., *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon* (Nordhausen, 2005), bd. 24, s.v. "Gröning, Bruno." By far the most archivally comprehensive account of Gröning's life and impact in West Germany is Florian Mildenberger's "Heilstrom durch den Kropf:

“By the thousands they came, the sick and the ailing, . . . in buses, trucks, and cars, by train and on foot, in wagons and on bicycles, . . . in wheelchairs and ambulances. . . . From every corner of Germany they streamed in, the hopeless and the aggrieved, the young and the old, women, girls, children from every stratum of society[,] . . . lame, blind, and deaf, a society of suffering and distress.”¹³ The press dubbed Gröning “the Miracle Doctor,” and shortly the term “Gröning effect” entered the vernacular to describe both the impact of his sudden fame and his mysterious and inexplicable powers. In the words of one commentator, Gröning shot “like a comet across the republic’s postwar heavens.”¹⁴

The man at the center of this unfolding drama was in many ways an unlikely protagonist. Born Bruno Grönkowski in Danzig in 1906, he trained halfheartedly for a number of different professions in his youth but experienced little success. In the early 1930s, he changed his name and joined the Nazi Party. Later, he served a stretch in the Wehrmacht, did time in a Soviet POW camp, and was among the millions of Germans expelled from Poland at the end of World War II who were forced to make a new home for themselves in West Germany.¹⁵ If none of these details from his pre-1949 biography were uncommon for men of his generation, there remained much about Gröning that was unusual, and distinctly so. From birth, it seems, people had believed he was “different.” His devoutly Catholic parents, *Der Spiegel* reported in July 1949, were convinced from his birth that he might be possessed by the devil, and his mother had busied herself with sprinkling holy water around their apartment in Bruno’s infancy.¹⁶ But it was also said that even when he was a child, some sick people felt better just by being near him.¹⁷ The adult Gröning stood apart in other ways, too. Amid his closely cropped and conservatively dressed countrymen, he wore his hair long, went without a tie, and dressed all in black, striking a shamanic pose.

As word of his ability to heal spread in the spring of 1949, so too did reports of his unorthodox and even wondrous curative methods. Gröning sometimes used

Leben, Werk und Nachwirkung des Wunderheilers Bruno Gröning (1906–1959),” *Zeitschrift für Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 92, no. 1 (2008): 35–64.

¹³ A. Kaul, *Das Wunder von Herford* (1949), 4–5; originally published as a pamphlet in West Germany, this work is available online at https://www.bruno-groening-stiftung.org/images/stories/bgs-media/pdf/broschueren/1949-00-00_kaul_das-wunder-von-herford_text.pdf.

¹⁴ Helmut Schulz, “Der Wunderdoktor aus Deutschland: Der Fall Bruno Gröning,” in *Der neue Pitaval*, bd. 15, *Hexenjagd*, ed. Hermann Mostar and Robert A. Stemmler (Munich, 1969), 171–220, quote on 171.

¹⁵ Mildenerger, “Heilstrom durch den Kropf,” 37.

¹⁶ “Wer ein Schnitzel findet, ist geheilt,” *Der Spiegel*, July 7, 1949.

¹⁷ Schultz, “Der Wunderdoktor,” 174.

mediums—his male and female followers—to perform long-distance diagnoses over the telephone. He carried out mass healings for huge crowds, and he infused objects—such as crosses, canes, and rosaries—with what he called his “healing current” (*Heilstrom*). He also worked very closely with individual persons, practicing the laying on of hands and telling those under his care to close their eyes and observe very carefully what was happening in their own bodies.¹⁸ Sometimes he simply commanded those under his care to believe and act as if they were well, insisting that this would make them so. On one occasion, Gröning apparently cured a young boy of asthma simply by being in the boy’s proximity.¹⁹ On another, a badly disabled veteran who had been mute since the First World War regained the ability to speak by writing—but not actually sending—a letter to Gröning.²⁰ The Miracle Doctor was often to be seen crumpling bits of aluminum foil into tiny balls—sometimes with pieces of his hair or fingernails in them—which he then distributed to his followers, who derived healing power from them. In this sense, we can find parallels to the practices of healers in earlier times, like those of Adalbert, the eighth-century Frankish bishop whose censure in 745 is quoted above, in the first epigraph to this section. Like Gröning, Adalbert distributed his hair and fingernails to those whom he sought to heal, and both men challenged the boundaries of religion and superstition, magic and medicine—each in his own age.²¹

However extraordinary they may have seemed to observers in the year 1949, Gröning’s practices, and his ideas about health and healing, were predicated on a powerful but not altogether unconventional Christian cosmology in which an earthly war between the demonic and the divine figured mightily. To blame for human suffering, illness, and conditions as diverse as asthma, muteness, muscular dystrophy, rheumatism, neurosis, and neuralgia were two fundamentally intertwined problems: humanity’s alienation from God, and the presence of evil on earth. Gröning maintained that most people—some 90 percent, he estimated—were “prisoners of evil.”²² “The power of evil can take control of anyone’s body [and cause illness], if we distance ourselves from God,” he said.²³ For Gröning, evil was a living and palpable presence in the world. Recalling an early Christian theme, he once ordered a tree to be cut down

¹⁸ Kurt Trampler, *Die große Umkehr: Fragen um Bruno Gröning* (Seebruck am Chiemsee, 1950), 12, 15, 38.

¹⁹ Schulz, “Der Wunderdoktor,” 178.

²⁰ Trampler, *Die große Umkehr*, 8.

²¹ Matthew Innes, “‘Immune from Heresy’: Defining the Boundaries of Carolingian Christianity,” in *Frankland: The Franks and the World of the Early Middle Ages; Essays in Honour of Dame Jinty Nelson*, ed. Paul Fouracre and David Ganz (Manchester, 2008), 101–25, esp. 111–13; Aron Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Perception and Belief* (Cambridge, 1989), 63–73.

²² Trampler, *Die große Umkehr*, 75.

²³ Schulz, “Der Wunderdoktor,” 220.

because he was convinced that it was inhabited by Satan and therefore to blame for the “suffering and . . . devil possession of all the sick people living nearby.”²⁴ Humanity, according to Gröning, was enduring a particularly dangerous and trying time and people were living “under the influence of evil spirits.” For this reason, one had to “have faith” and the confidence to “take up [the] cross.”²⁵ Yet healing, in Gröning’s point of view, was not only about curing the sick body now, on earth; it was also about saving all of mankind through a spiritual reunion with God and nature: “It is this, that humanity is missing: nature. Back to nature! Back to our Lord God, back to the belief in the Lord God and to the belief in the good in humanity.”²⁶

It is clear that Gröning had a tremendous effect on his devotees, as scores of testimonies to his cures bear witness.²⁷ A rapturous atmosphere often prevailed among the thousands in various sites who gathered to meet him, and people would sing religious songs and have ecstatic experiences.²⁸ Some believers at such assemblies could be heard to shout, “Thy kingdom come!”—unambiguously linking Gröning’s appearance to the reign of Christ.²⁹ Kurt Trampler, a Munich journalist and one of Gröning’s closest disciples, believed that the faith healer not only had the power to cure illness but also was responsible for initiating a new and more godly age. Trampler described Gröning greeting a crowd who had waited for hours to see him in Munich in 1949: “An unending stillness streamed from the man,” creating a “peculiarly ceremonial atmosphere” full of “quiet, patience, and confidence.” For the group gathered around Gröning, Trampler continued, it was as though “the materialistic twentieth century had fallen away and an age had emerged in which other laws, other values than ours applied.”³⁰ However extravagant Trampler’s depictions may seem, other believers imputed even greater wonders to Gröning. “I read in the newspaper that you can raise up the dead,” one

²⁴ “Wer ein Schnitzel findet,” 7.

²⁵ Trampler, *Die große Umkehr*, 106.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

²⁷ See Egon-Arthur Schmidt, *Die Wunderheilungen des Bruno Gröning* (Berlin, 1949), 84–99; Ingrid Geupel, “Bruno Gröning: Das Phänomen eines Wunderheilers” (PhD diss., Institut für Geschichte der Medizin, Technischen Universität München, 1988), 64–66; Walter-Wilhelm Busam, ed., *Die Akte des Dr. rer. Pol. Kurt Trampler und Bruno Gröning* (Berlin, 2001); Kaul, *Das Wunder von Herford*; and Trampler, *Die große Umkehr*. Various testimonials regarding Gröning’s ability to heal can also be found in Staatsarchiv München (StAM), Staatsanwaltschaften 3178a.

²⁸ Kurt Böhme, *Wunderheilungen: Lourdes—Gesundbeter—Gröning* (Berlin, 1950), 15.

²⁹ Trampler, *Die große Umkehr*, 92.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

woman wrote to him in a letter in 1949, imploring the healer to bring her childhood friend, who had recently died, back to life.³¹

Yet if his fans were legion, so too were his detractors. Gröning offered a charismatic religious vision that linked nature and God and placed signal importance on the problem of evil. What concerned some church authorities even more, perhaps, was that Gröning's vision existed outside official control. The Protestant church superintendent Herrmann Kunst claimed to be impressed by Gröning's Christian belief, though he regarded it as "primitive." He also warned that believers ought best to pray to God for their healing rather than trust in strange prophets whose abilities to heal might come from "powers below."³² Another commentator, Kurt Böhme, was disturbed by Gröning's claim that there are "good" and "bad" people in the world, those whom God would deem "worthy" of saving, and those whom he would not. This view, Böhme wrote, placed Gröning "dramatically in conflict with Christian doctrine."³³

However unorthodox his methods and thinking may have been according to his critics in postwar Germany, Gröning did tap into a counterworld of powerful belief there, one that formed a stark contrast to prevailing ideas about science and medicine, faith and healing. His frankly demonological view of the universe disturbed even some Christians, not to mention those for whom God and Satan were metaphorical concepts or those who liked their religion suitably disenchanted and placed at a respectful remove from the day-to-day business of living life. As for the popular press, it tended to describe Gröning simply as a charlatan or as crazy, or both. Whether he was best understood as a messiah, a sorcerer, or a Rasputin, as one pamphleteer suggested, the newspapers maintained that Gröning was certainly "primitive," his practices "medieval."³⁴ The "atmosphere" around him reminded one *Der Spiegel* journalist of something out of Edgar Allan Poe. Journalists fixated on Gröning's penchant for wearing head-to-toe black, chain-smoking Chesterfields, attending cocktail parties, and consuming coffee "by the gallon," suggesting an apparent lack of asceticism that offended contemporary notions of how a spiritual healer should act.

In the eyes of the press, the crowds surrounding Gröning were equally undependable, anxiety-provoking, "fanaticized masses."³⁵ On the cover of an issue of *Der Spiegel* in 1949, Gröning's acolytes were depicted as exclusively female, even though his close associates and the crowds that followed him from place to place seem to have been composed equally of men and women.

³¹ Schmidt, *Die Wunderheilungen des Bruno Gröning*, 11–12.

³² Mildenerger, "Heilstrom durch den Kropf," 41.

³³ Böhme, *Wunderheilungen*, 14.

³⁴ Jens Bergfeldt, *Herfords Wunderdoktor: Der Fall Gröning* (Wiedensahl and Minden, ca. 1950); Schulz, "Der Wunderdoktor," 200.

³⁵ "Wer ein Schnitzel findet," 7.

Figure 1 shows Gröning in an almost priestly or apostolic pose, hovering above crowds populated exclusively by what appear to be religiously awed women.³⁶ This evidence suggests that the real issue, again, was control and the authority to define right faith, right thinking, right medicine, and right religion. To a society attempting to reestablish a certain ideal of patriarchy, the emotionally charged and feminized crowds around the faith healer may have posed a particular challenge.³⁷ As a long-haired rustic often accused of speaking “bad” German and espousing unauthorized theories about God and evil and health, Gröning was no one’s ideal of masculine sobriety and firm, disciplined rationality. Perhaps even more disturbing were the vast crowds pressing in close to touch the hem of his garment; only a few years removed from the Third Reich, these were, for some, an uneasy reminder of the striking power of charisma, emotion, ideas, and desire to bring the multitudes to their feet. The image in figure 1, after all, is not at all unlike images of Hitler among thunderstruck, worshipful assemblies.

Be that as it may, the crowds around Gröning continued to grow over the spring and summer of 1949, to the alarm of local officials. In early May of that year, the Herford city government ordered him to desist from his activities.³⁸ This was followed, shortly after, by the state government of North-Rhine Westphalia’s ban on his public appearances.³⁹ With huge crowds trailing behind, he moved on to Hamburg in July. His renown was so great by that time that some of the hundreds of letters he received there daily were addressed simply “to Herr Gröning, Hamburg.”⁴⁰ Yet that city would prove no more hospitable to Gröning than others had been. He was denied a permit to appear publicly not just in Hamburg but in the state of Schleswig-Holstein as well. Each ban on his appearances produced a flood of angry and despairing letters from the public. “I can only wish to those who have forbidden Herr Gröning to practice . . . that they be afflicted for just four weeks with my sickness, and that they would have to sit in a wheelchair, the way I have to,” one man wrote in May 1949.⁴¹ Compelled to move on again in August, Gröning journeyed to Munich. There, the multitudes of sick, maimed, blind,

³⁶ I thank *Der Spiegel* for granting me permission to use this image.

³⁷ Works that thematize postwar Germany’s “crisis of masculinity” include Frank Biess, “Survivors of Totalitarianism: Returning POWs and the Reconstruction of Masculine Citizenship in West Germany,” in Schissler, *The Miracle Years*, 57–82; Heineman, *What Difference Does a Husband Make?*; Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels*; and Fehrenbach, *Cinema in Democratizing Germany*. See also Robert G. Moeller, ed., “The ‘Remasculinization’ of Germany in the 1950s,” forum, *Signs* 24, no. 1 (Autumn 1998): 101–69.

³⁸ Mildenerger, “Heilstrom durch den Kropf,” 40.

³⁹ Bautz, *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon*, s.v. “Gröning, Bruno.”

⁴⁰ Schulz, “Der Wunderdoktor,” 184.

⁴¹ Mildenerger, “Heilstrom durch den Kropf,” 42.

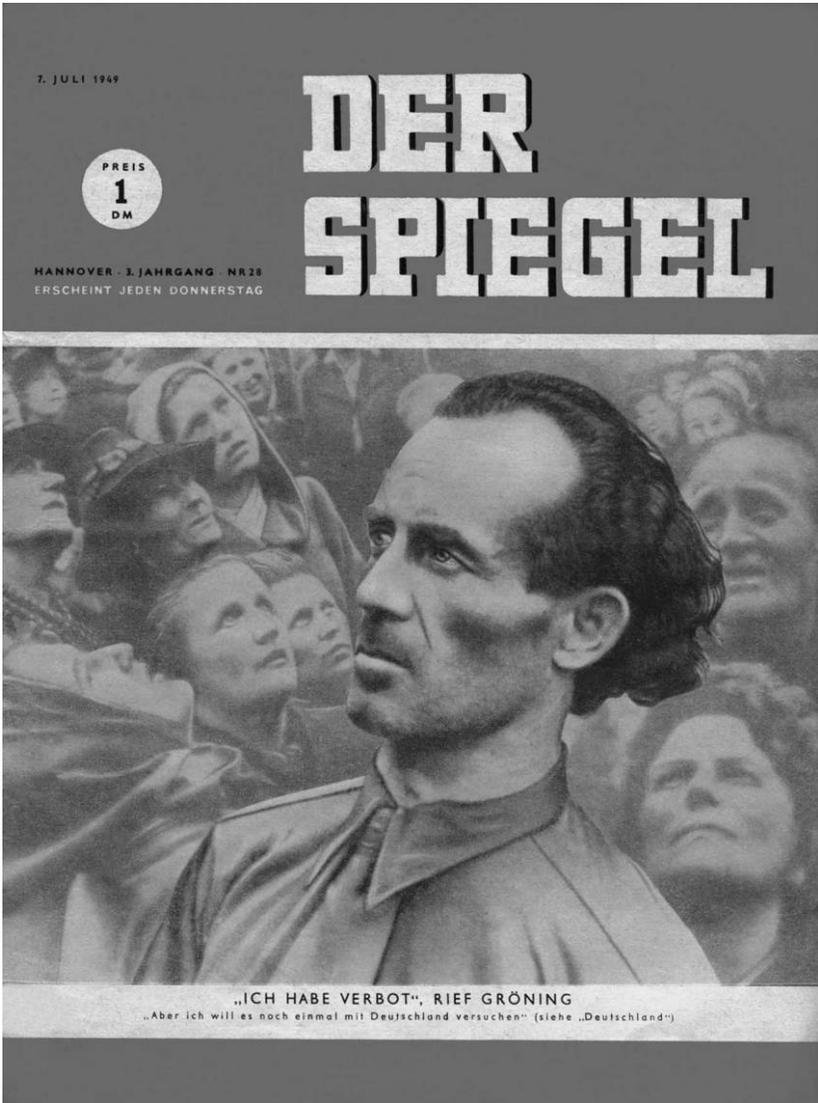


FIG. 1.—“‘Ich habe verbot,’ rief Gröning. ‘Aber ich will es noch einmal mit Deutschland versuchen’” [I have been banned, Gröning cried. But I want to try one more time with Germany]. Cover, *Der Spiegel*, July 7, 1949. Reproduced by permission of SPIEGEL-Verlag Rudolf Augstein. Color version available as an online enhancement.

and deaf people that gathered in the hopes of seeing him grew so large that the Red Cross had to set up emergency tents to house them.⁴² People began to refer to the site as the Bavarian Lourdes.⁴³ Stories proliferated of scenes straight out of the gospels, in which the blind were made to see and the lame began to walk.

Whether intentionally or not, Bruno Gröning pulled back a curtain in postwar West Germany to reveal a world of distress and a population in need of healing of all sorts. Gröning brought individuals in pain into public view in the tens of thousands—people who had been maimed in the war, people in wheelchairs and on stretchers, blind and deaf children, and ailing men and women. It was a disquieting sight. One local official tellingly described the crowds in Munich as resembling “an army camp,” certainly a vivid image for many Germans in 1949.⁴⁴ The crowds in Munich were composed of people whom German society and its authorities, churches, institutions, and doctors could not heal and perhaps wanted to forget. No less unsettling—as suggested by the level of vitriol directed against Gröning—was the cluster of ideas and practices that he and his followers revealed to the mainstream West German public. Here, again, we find suggestive parallels between Gröning’s practices, the methods of healers in earlier times, and the ways both were received. As did the heretic bishop Adalbert, Gröning believed himself to be a healer working in the service of God. Just as medieval church authorities saw Adalbert as a heretic encouraging superstition and false belief, so too did a variety of West German commentators condemn Gröning, seeking to discipline him and his followers by accusing them of primitivity and countering with the congenial rhetoric of civilization and modernity.

Nonetheless, Gröning’s successes did garner him some supporters outside the circle of sufferers who sought his aid. The Bavarian minister president Dr. Hans Ehard saw no harm in the healer’s work and wanted to give him a license to practice.⁴⁵ Among the ranks of the medical community, most seem to have regarded Gröning as a quack or worse, though a few doctors in Hamburg and Munich publicly stated their conviction that healing “through the spiritual power of belief” was possible for a few sick people.⁴⁶ Others even brought their most intractably ill patients to Gröning, as a last resort if nothing else.⁴⁷ A Dr. M. theorized that Gröning’s healings broke through to a “layer of the unconscious or subconscious that in many people is covered over by an

⁴² *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴³ Schulz, “Der Wunderdoktor,” 199–200.

⁴⁴ Geupel, “Bruno Gröning,” 12.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁶ Schulz, “Der Wunderdoktor,” 186.

⁴⁷ Trampler, *Die große Umkehr*, 16.

overemphasis on the intellect."⁴⁸ At the 1949 Munich Psychologists' Congress, a doctor argued that Gröning corresponded to the archetype of a healer, in a Jungian sense, and that this explained his abilities. Two physicians in the Ludolf-Krehl Clinic in Heidelberg said he was a "born psychiatrist [*Seelenarzt*] of great talent."⁴⁹ In general, however, positive assessments of Gröning from within the medical community seem to have met with sharp criticism.⁵⁰ In 1950, Dr. Julius Ahlhorn, acting on behalf of the state's attorney in Oldenburg, went to see Gröning address a crowd; Ahlhorn declared Gröning "farcical" and described him assuming a "pose that uncomfortably recalled Hitler." Gröning, Ahlhorn insisted, was "crazy," "paranoid," and "psychopathic."⁵¹ Although his supporters were prepared to follow him almost anywhere, it is clear that for others Gröning was a dangerous man, a heretic, and his practices and devotees alike embarrassing manifestations of fanaticism and mysticism, incompatible with modernity's most cherished dogmas.

CHRISTIAN HEALING, UN-BEWITCHING, AND MAGIC

Some time later there was brought to [the holy recluse] Hospicius a woman who, on her own admission, was possessed of three devils. He laid his hand on her and blessed her, marking the sign of the cross on her brow with consecrated oil. The devils were driven out and the woman went away cured. (GREGORY OF TOURS [d. 594], *History of the Franks*, book 6, chapter 6)⁵²

Although Bruno Gröning's personal fame and charisma made him extraordinary, he was actually only the most famous example of a much larger and more diffuse set of phenomena. A number of individuals in West Germany in the 1950s claimed—as Gröning did—to be endowed with an ability to heal by banishing evil, and scores of individuals sought out their counsel and gifts. Indeed, there appears to have been a veritable explosion in the 1950s of the intimately related practices of imploring the divine to cure illness by casting out devils and removing hexes and accusations of witchcraft. These accusations became a matter of enough public concern by the late 1950s that West Germany's major polling institution, the Allensbach Institute for Demoscopy, began asking respondents whether they believed in witches—a question the

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵⁰ Mildenerger, "Heilstrom durch den Kropf," 44.

⁵¹ StAM, Staatsanwaltschaften 3178, Abschr. von Dr. med. Julius Ahlhorn, "Erfahrungsbericht," February 9–10, 1950.

⁵² Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (London, 1974), 336.

institute had not posed before.⁵³ Meanwhile, the German Medical Information Service estimated that around seventy cases were being brought annually before West German arbitrators and courts in which one party either alleged witchcraft against another or had brought suit to stop accusations of witchcraft. These “witchcraft trials” became frequent fodder for the newspapers not only within West Germany but internationally as well, as did the activities of specialists in the art of *Hexenbannung*, or “un-bewitching.” Considering that there were some ten thousand self-proclaimed *Hexenbanner* operating in the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1950s, the driving out of devils could be said to have become a virtual cottage industry.⁵⁴

If the shamanic Gröning and the ailing, feminized, and “fanaticized” crowds surrounding him unsettled some observers, the phenomenon of witchcraft accusations in West Germany proved downright subversive. Just as Gröning opened a window for the broader public onto the practices of “healing through the spirit,” so the case of a farmer named Hannes Bading introduced the mainstream of the republic to everyday magic and witchcraft beliefs. Bading hailed from Barum, in Lower Saxony. As *Der Spiegel* reported in 1951, and as Joachim Baumhauer has shown, Bading had been brought before a local court for beating the postman’s son with a cane and for striking the postman himself with a shovel. Bading was convinced that evil was afoot in Barum and that some of its residents—including the postman and his son—were in league with it. He blamed the witchcraft of his neighbors for his livestock’s falling sick and other mysterious and unexpected maladies.⁵⁵

Bading’s fears of witches and other evildoers stirring trouble and bringing misfortune to Barum were not altogether unusual in this period. As we have seen, Gröning and many of his acolytes experienced life as permeated by a variety of otherworldly forces—some divine, some demonic—that acted within the everyday world of men and women in tangible and perceptible ways. The publicity generated by the Bading case and others like it would soon reveal that many West Germans—northern and southern, Protestant and Catholic, men and women—were engaging in a variety of practices designed

⁵³ Compare the entry for “Mentalität” in *Jahrbuch der öffentlichen Meinung 1947–1955* (ed. Elisabeth Noelle and Erich Peter Neumann [Allensbach am Bodensee, 1956], 114–31) to the entry for “Mentalität” in *Jahrbuch der öffentlichen Meinung 1957* (ed. Elisabeth Noelle and Erich Peter Neumann [Allensbach am Bodensee, 1957], 117–40).

⁵⁴ Statistics from the German Medical Information Service are cited in Baumhauer, *Johann Kruse*, 72. Two instances in which witchcraft in Germany in the 1950s and early 1960s made international news are cited in Owen Davies, *Grimoires: A History of Magic Books* (Oxford, 2009), 345 n. 104. One was an Associated Press report from Hamburg to the *Dallas Morning News* (June 16, 1963); the other was a Reuters dispatch from Bonn to the *Los Angeles Times* (July 31, 1955).

⁵⁵ “Bis das Blut kommt,” *Der Spiegel*, April 4, 1951; cited in Baumhauer, *Johann Kruse*, 315 n. 248.

to invoke the power of the supernatural to ward off evil, obtain access to the curative and benevolent power of the divine, keep the effects of the devil and his agents on earth at bay, heal intractable illness, find love, answer significant questions, and properly understand and interpret events. West Germans used a variety of tools to accomplish these aims. They kept soil from churchyards in their pockets. They wore amulets made from acorns and coffin nails, dogs’ paws, the tips of cats’ tails, and boars’ teeth. Some pinned bits of paper with special symbols or words on them to their clothing. They bought products like “Devil’s Tail” (*Teufelsschwanz*) and “Bad People’s Nuisance” (*Böser-Menschen-Ärgernis*), which, along with *asa foetida* (*Teufelsdreck*, or “devil’s dung”), were commonly sold in pharmacies.⁵⁶ They bought magic books, such as *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*, that contained information about casting spells or warding them off and that often appeared in multiple editions.⁵⁷

Yet despite these efforts, evil flourished, as witches, the devil’s agents on earth, proliferated. While cases related to witchcraft had been brought before courts in the Weimar and Nazi periods, they appear to have been only a small handful compared to the number of such cases after the war.⁵⁸ Witchcraft cases generally involved offenses against the *Heilpraktikergesetz* (a 1939 law regulating the practice of nonmedical healing) or against laws pertaining to disturbing the dead, defamation, or slander. But they could also include charges of arson or, as in Bading’s case, bodily harm.⁵⁹ When public opinion researchers in the late 1950s asked West Germans whether they believed in witches or not, some 8 percent of the individuals polled—representing perhaps 3 to 4 million people—said either that they did exist, full stop (1 percent), or that they very well might (7 percent).⁶⁰ Yet official statistics concerning witchcraft were also quite equivocal: the German Medical Information Service showed that in the Lüneburger Heide in the 1950s as many as 65 percent of the population believed in witches, while in the Bodensee 70 percent did.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Johann Kruse, *Hexen unter uns? Magie und Zauberglauben in unserer Zeit* (Hamburg, 1951), 20–21.

⁵⁷ Davies, *Grimoires*, 247–61.

⁵⁸ Of the nearly 100 court cases involving witchcraft examined by Herbert Schäfer for the period from the 1920s through the late 1950s, only around 20 percent were from the Weimar and Nazi periods. See Schäfer, *Der Okkulttäter*, x–xi.

⁵⁹ Hans-Joska Pintschovius, “Heute wie zu allen Zeiten . . .”—Hexerei vor deutschen Gerichten,” in *Hexen Heute: Magische Traditionen und neue Zutaten*, ed. Dieter Harmening and Dieter R. Bauer, (Würzburg, 1991), 79–85, esp. 81.

⁶⁰ Noelle and Neumann, eds., *Jahrbuch der öffentlichen Meinung 1957*, 131, s.v. “Mentalität.”

⁶¹ Baumhauer, *Johann Kruse*, 72. For an illuminating discussion of the usefulness (or, better, unusefulness) of statistics on modern European witchcraft beliefs, see Willem de Blécourt, “The Witch, Her Victim, the Unwitcher, and the Researcher: The Continued Existence of Traditional Witchcraft,” in Ankarloo and Clark, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, pt. 3, esp. 144–45. Behringer (*Witches and Witch Hunts*, 21)

In truth, village magic and *Hexenbannung* had probably been around in some form for as long as anyone in Barum—or outside it—could remember. But in 1951, an obscure Hamburg schoolteacher named Johann Kruse published a book that would ultimately be instrumental in bringing those practices to a wide audience. The book was entitled *Hexen unter uns? Magie und Zauberglauben in unserer Zeit* (Witches among us? Magic and magical beliefs in our times). Kruse, a longtime Social Democrat and anticlerical, had been a self-styled “antisuperstition” crusader since the Weimar Republic. Working mostly in his native Schleswig-Holstein, and using local newspaper reports and personal interviews with villagers and townspeople, he had collected evidence for decades of what he called a “ghastly witch craze” that he believed had seized “control of broad strata of [German] society.”⁶² Kruse believed that Germany was permeated—to its ruination—by witchcraft beliefs. These could be found, he insisted, among all classes, from rural West Germany to “the gates of Hamburg,” and were unwittingly promoted by the law, medicine, elementary education, and scholarship—especially folklore.

However “ghastly” or extensive the phenomena it described, *Hexen unter uns?* found little initial resonance. Shortly after its publication, it was slated to be pulped.⁶³ But the Bading case helped change that. Journalists eager to interpret the case—or, at least, eager to confirm what they already believed about it—immediately latched on to Kruse’s work. Under its influence, they declared farmer Bading, along with various practitioners of magic, graphologists, soothsayers, and card readers to be the “scum of the magical occult,” hopelessly mired in “the Middle Ages,” and products of what they construed as a nightmarish rural world, consisting of Germany’s “solitary heaths, moorlands,” and “lonely mountain villages [in the south] with lots of inbreeding.”⁶⁴

But for many *Hexenbanner*, wise women, and their clients, casting out devils and healing those afflicted by them was Christian practice, plain and

describes how differently West Germans in the 1970s and 1980s responded to questions about their witchcraft beliefs depending on how questions about them were posed.

⁶² Kruse, *Hexen unter uns?*, 7. Kruse donated his collection, Archiv zur Erforschung des neuzeitlichen Hexenglaubens [Archive for research into modern witch beliefs], to the Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg [Hamburg ethnological museum] in 1978. Thomas Hauschild, in “Johann Kruses Beitrag zur Erforschung des neuzeitlichen Hexenglaubens” (*Mitteilungen aus dem Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg* 10 [1980]: 139–57) offers an overview of the archive’s materials. At the time the present article was written, the archive was closed to researchers, unfortunately, and there was no indication of when it would reopen.

⁶³ Herbert Auhofer, *Aberglaube und Hexenwahn heute: Aus der Unterwelt unserer Zivilization* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1960), 9.

⁶⁴ “Bis das Blut kommt,” 10.

simple. The Austrian folklorist Rudolf Kriß, who wrote extensively about a series of thousands of apparitions of the Virgin Mary that took place in the Franconian village of Heroldsbach between 1949 and 1952, offers a striking example.⁶⁵ Even after the apparitions ceased, Kriß reported, pilgrims and seekers, scholars and the merely curious continued to journey to the village. While conducting fieldwork there in 1954, Kriß observed a man performing an exorcism for a woman possessed by a “particularly stubborn devil.” She was the third in a generation in her family to suffer from this condition. With a variety of incantations, prayers, and rites, the exorcist—ironically named Herr Unsinn (it is not clear that he gave Kriß his real name; *Unsinn* means “humbug”)—called on the Holy Trinity, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph to save his client—and to liberate humanity from its sins.⁶⁶ As unexpected as this homespun lay exorcism may have seemed to Kriß, Herr Unsinn clearly saw himself acting as a faithful Christian. Even as he instructed his client to remove her shoes, so that the bad spirit could leave her body easily, and touched her with various crosses and ritually sprinkled her with holy water, he called on the Holy Spirit and other agents of God to liberate her from possession by “hellish demons.”⁶⁷ Even as he prayed for her individual salvation, he implored God to redeem all of humanity.

For the exorcist Unsinn and his unfortunate client, as for those who feared witchcraft and sought the counsel of *Hexenbanner*, the world was burdened with consequence and filled with potential dangers. Dense signals emanated from the spiritual and natural worlds that required constant interpretation. But the world might also reveal its secrets and liberating power if tapped into by the right people with the right tools—the right *Christian* tools.⁶⁸ Saving one’s soul, warding off evil, healing sickness, finding a spouse, or gaining knowl-

⁶⁵ On these apparitions, and dozens of others, see O’Sullivan, “West German Miracles.” Concerning Heroldsbach specifically, see Cornelia Göksu, *Heroldsbach: Eine verbotene Wallfahrt* (Würzburg, 1991).

⁶⁶ Rudolf Kriß, “Heroldsbach, Statistiken und jüngste Entwicklung,” *Bayerisches Jahrbuch für Volkskunde 1955* (Regensburg, 1955), 116; see also Rudolf Kriß, “Heroldsbach: Eine verbotene Wallfahrt der Gegenwart,” in *Kultur und Volk: Beiträge zur Volkskunde aus Österreich, Bayern und der Schweiz; Festschrift für Gustav Gugitz*, ed. Leopold Schmidt (Vienna, 1954), 210–11.

⁶⁷ Kriß, “Heroldsbach, Statistiken,” 116.

⁶⁸ My understanding of the overlapping worlds of Christian magic and faith healing in West Germany has been influenced by the fascinating work of Karen Louise Jolly on early medieval popular religion. Jolly describes textual and verbal formulas for curing or warding off the harmful effects of elves, demons, and “other mind-altering afflictions” in late Saxon England. Elf charms, she argues, were not pagan leftovers “still” circulating in ninth- and tenth-century Anglo-Saxon medical and religious texts but expressions of a historically and culturally distinctive Christianity. See Karen Louise Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996), (132).

edge that was necessary for living could mean praying to the Holy Spirit *and* wearing an amulet made from a coffin nail.

It is certainly ironic that the intersecting worlds of everyday magic, Christianity, and witchcraft were brought to the attention of a wider West German public by Kruse, who so passionately opposed them. Baumhauer's rich and fascinating study of Kruse has shown that the antisuperstition campaigner's work began to stimulate an "immense flood of articles" on witchcraft in the press, and these continued to appear throughout the 1950s. Many directly referenced Kruse's work.⁶⁹ As journalists publicized Kruse's ideas and message, they not only made the broader public more aware of witchcraft beliefs but also contributed to a perception that such beliefs were dramatically on the rise—which was, of course, Kruse's belief to begin with. As frequent media attention brought *Hexenbannung* and magic to broader audiences, they inspired both lurid interest and growing unease. In 1954, a cabinetmaker named Waldemar Eberling was brought to court by a neighbor who alleged that Eberling had harmed his reputation by labeling him a witch. Eberling, it seems, acted both as a *Hexenbanner* and as a local healer. In fact, for him the two jobs were nearly identical: his work as a healer included administering natural preparations for such ordinary ailments as rheumatism, headaches, and circulation problems.⁷⁰ But he also used his gifts to treat "bad luck," mysterious sufferings that medical methods had not cured, and unaccountable disturbances in children. His services were contracted as well by those who wished to determine whether their illnesses (or those of their children or livestock) had supernatural causes.⁷¹

Eberling's perception of himself as a healer was characteristic of many *Hexenbanner*, as was his belief that he had received from God the ability to thwart bad magic.⁷² Prior to his trial, two psychiatrists from the University Clinic in Kiel interviewed Eberling. They described his worldview as dominated by polarities: God/devil, healer/witch. "Eberling experiences the world as a fullness of magical connections," the doctors noted; "In his world, next to logically, causally, and empirically grounded perceptions, there is another knowledge a priori, an experience of irrational connections, an observing and meaning-making of affective certitude."⁷³

In describing himself, Eberling noted that from early in his life he had the gift of prophecy. He had predicted a neighbor's death, the bombing war against Germany, and Germany's loss of World War II. In 1953, he dreamed of a coming war between "East and West" in which he saw tanks approaching, "the Russians"

⁶⁹ Baumhauer, *Johann Kruse*, 73–74.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 215–16.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁷² Schäfer, *Der Okkulttäter*, 93.

⁷³ Baumhauer, *Johann Kruse*, 220.

pressing forward, and “the whole street . . . full of blood.” But Eberling had visions of God and the “cross of Christ” from an early age, too, and had heard a voice instructing him to “help other people.” Of these youthful experiences, he said: “Even then I felt a duty inside, which came from God. I am totally connected to God; [healing] is a calling.” He described this calling as a “godly vocation,” which he contrasted with serving the devil.⁷⁴ Other healers shared this conviction. A “cunning woman” (*weise Frau*) from Schleswig who spoke with Kruse told him that it was God’s commandment to combat devils and witches; to do otherwise was to be unfaithful to God. A *Hexenbanner* from near Kiel told Kruse, similarly, “Christ drove out evil powers. Why should I not do the same?”⁷⁵ Years of studying the practices of *Hexenbanner* convinced the criminologist and fellow antisuperstition campaigner Herbert Schäfer that un-bewitchers believed they performed their roles at the behest of “divine instruction.”⁷⁶

Not surprisingly, members of the press rehearsed familiar themes in reporting on Eberling, depicting their distaste for him, as they had for Gröning, in the familiar rhetoric of civilization and enlightenment. Under the 40-point headline “Der Hexer von Sarzbüttel” (The warlock from Sarzbüttel), the *Hamburger Abendblatt* described Eberling in 1954 as “a piece of the deepest Middle Ages” having “revealed itself as the appalling backdrop to our ostensibly so enlightened era.”⁷⁷ It seems the courts agreed that he and those who sought out the counsel of *Hexenbanner* were in need of liberation from their retrograde views of the world. The judge in Erberling’s case directed that the proceedings of the court should be broadcast on the radio “in the interest of science and for the enlightenment . . . of the population.”⁷⁸

In the end, however sanctified his motives from his own perspective, Eberling was convicted of fraud, of violating the *Heilpraktikergesetz*, of defamation, and of negligent bodily harm. On appeal, he received a short jail term. Yet he emerged triumphant. From across Germany, as well as from Scandinavia and the United States, he received letters asking him for healing. Whole busloads of people sat in front of his house in hope of meeting him.⁷⁹ For those who had seen him in the courtroom and heard him testify on the radio, Eberling was an “educated man,” a person possessing wisdom at once godly, magical, and medical.⁸⁰ Like a lot of West Germans in the 1950s—Bruno Gröning and his devotees alike—the *Hexenbanner* Eberling saw the divine at work in the world and himself as its instrument. Un-witching, magic,

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁷⁵ Kruse, *Hexen unter uns?*, 40.

⁷⁶ Schäfer, *Der Okkulttäter*, 93.

⁷⁷ “Der Hexer von Sarzbüttel,” *Hamburger Abendblatt*, October 9/10, 1954.

⁷⁸ Baumhauer, *Johann Kruse*, 221.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 221–22.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 226–27.

and Christian healing were all interconnected, all expressions of God's will, all part of a spiritual pact with the divine to dispel evil from the earth.

For believers, *Hexenbanner* and other spiritual healers like Gröning could do things that doctors, judges, and scientists could not do and knew things they could not know. They had access to power—divine power, the power of nature—that far exceeded ordinary skills. The world of the healer was a world of belief, a world in which God reached out through his instruments on earth to make the lame walk and the blind see. This world thrived on forms of knowledge alternative to those offered by the modern state, modern science, and modern theology, and it pledged fealty to very different sources of authority. It no doubt galled Johann Kruse that even as he strove with all the zeal of enlightened reform to ferret out and abolish superstition, hundreds of West Germans wrote him letters asking for magical advice because they assumed he was an especially gifted sorcerer.

WITCHCRAFT, FAITH HEALING, AND THE NAZI PAST

Bans on Gröning's public appearances led him largely to withdraw from public life in Germany by the early 1950s. This process was hastened by his mounting legal troubles. In 1952, a case was brought against him, and then quickly closed, for violations of the *Heilpraktikergesetz*. He began traveling more often outside West Germany, making trips to France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and the United States.⁸¹ But in 1957, his legal difficulties became much more dramatic. He was tried not only for violating the *Heilpraktikergesetz* but also for negligent homicide. He had allegedly told a young woman under his care to stop medical treatment; she subsequently died. He was acquitted in that case but was tried again in early 1958 and convicted. Before the proceedings against him were concluded, however, Gröning himself died—paradoxically, some found, of cancer. By then, he had all but disappeared from view within the Federal Republic; in February 1959, the *Bild Zeitung* ran a picture of his family standing at his grave under the caption “Forgotten.”⁸² The obituary for Gröning in *Der Spiegel* resorted, typically, to the language of progress and civilization in trying to understand the phenomenon he helped create: “His life was an answer to the question, what has the Enlightenment bequeathed us? It has bequeathed us almost nothing. The Middle Ages live on.”⁸³

Almost as precipitously as he had arrived, Gröning vanished from public view and, apparently, from public consciousness. But he was to have an

⁸¹ Schulz, “Der Wunderdoktor,” 208.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 171.

⁸³ “Bruno Gröning, 31. Mai 1906 bis 25. January 1959,” *Der Spiegel* 13, no. 6 (February 4, 1959): 65; cited in Mildenerger, “Heilstrom durch den Kropf,” 61.

interesting afterlife of sorts. With the upsurge of interest in Kruse’s book and the press’s attention to witchcraft over the course of the 1950s, a number of other authors began, late in the decade, to interpret the Gröning phenomenon, *Hexenbannung*, and magic as part of a distinctive social problem—and one that might have long historical roots. The Catholic author Herbert Auhofer saw Gröning as the ultimate *Hexenbanner*: “Much more so than was true of the miracle healers of past decades, his practice was witchcraft; the mass psychosis around him superstition.”⁸⁴ In his 1960 book *Aberglaube und Hexenwahn heute* (Superstition and the witch craze today), Auhofer went on to suggest a connection between the “medieval witch trials” and recent West German witchcraft accusations. Similar was the thinking of Herbert Schäfer, who studied dozens of witchcraft-related trials between the 1920s and the 1950s. Schäfer not only found connections between faith healers, un-witchers, and the popular use of magic books but also suggested ways these phenomena might in turn be linked to fervent religious belief. In 1953, Schäfer found, a woman who belonged to a Heroldsbach prayer circle reportedly was told by the Virgin Mary that her neighbor was a witch. Suffering under these accusations, the accused woman later committed suicide.⁸⁵

Such phenomena were especially disconcerting to Kruse, who by the early 1960s had become convinced that *Hexenbannung* and villagers’ accusing their neighbors of witchcraft were no mere “superstitions” but something much more sinister. The persecution of the Jews in the Third Reich, Kruse now argued, had clear parallels to the witch hunt; “modern witchcraft beliefs” were, in effect, both “relics of fascism” and part of the mental world that had led to the Holocaust.⁸⁶ For his part, Schäfer insisted that the Federal Republic stood at the brink of a “retreat from the rationalist worldview,” and he too, in his own way, suggested a connection between “superstition” and “the old blood-and-soil mythology of the ‘Third Reich,’” noting that leading figures in the Nazi establishment had been given to occult beliefs.⁸⁷ At a gathering of the Stuttgart association “Doctor and Pastor” in 1964, various participants contributed essays for what would later be published as the volume *Massenwahn in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Mass hysteria in history and today). Influenced by reigning ideas about totalitarianism, a number of the essays explored brain washing and Bolshevism, while others, such as the contribution of the Buchenwald survivor and Catholic antifascist Eugen Kogon, looked at racism as a form of mass hallucination or insanity. The volume’s editor, Jungian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Bitter, viewed “superstition”—along with fervent religiosity, racism, class antagonism, and fascism—as parts of a deviant whole. All

⁸⁴ Auhofer, *Aberglaube und Hexenwahn*, 62.

⁸⁵ Schäfer, *Der Okkulttäter*, 124.

⁸⁶ Baumhauer, *Johann Kruse*, 81.

⁸⁷ Schäfer, *Der Okkulttäter*, 5.

were forms of “mass hysteria,” symptomatic of an “illusionary relationship to reality.”⁸⁸

Suddenly, it seems, the apparent resurgence of supernatural thinking in the 1950s had gained a new meaning. At the height of the Cold War, prevailing ideas about totalitarian “mass man”—deindividualized, his thought controlled by an elaborate and omnipresent propaganda apparatus—converged with fears of “superstition.”⁸⁹ By the early 1960s in the Federal Republic, some commentators had begun to interpret occult phenomena, magic, faith healing, and *Hexenbannung* as dark-age fanaticisms and, simultaneously, as harbingers of a possible recursion to fascism. Like superstition, fascism mystified “the individual” and stripped him of his ability to act and think freely.

By the early 1960s, Gröning and witchcraft beliefs had begun to represent an almost existential predicament to activists like Kruse. Meanwhile, Auhofer suggested that the crowds around Gröning had been as dangerous and potentially violent as a lynch mob.⁹⁰ For enlightened reformers like these, the reaction against what they called “superstition” was also a reaction against the profoundly disturbing—and fantastic—history of the Third Reich and the power of unruly, wrong-thinking masses to shape history. For those eager to root them out, *Hexenbanner* became a “multifaceted symbol for failed dreams of [German] omnipotence smashed in [World War II] as well as for Nazi mass murder.”⁹¹ Creating a redeemed, postfascist Germany hence meant counteracting the effects of Nazi phantasms with a dose of republican realism. But we might also say that by the early 1960s, a certain vision of West Germany—as a modern, striving, reconstructing, and, above all, “normal” nation—actually required Gröning and Eberling and their clients and devotees as things against which to measure the Federal Republic’s own progress and enlightenment.

The apparent explosion of supernatural beliefs among some of their countrymen in West Germany in the 1950s opened a space, by the end of the decade, for a certain kind of limited discussion of Nazism and the Holocaust. Having put some distance between themselves and the events of the Third Reich, some authors wanted to talk about what Nazism had meant—and

⁸⁸ Wilhelm Bitter, “Einleitung,” in *Massenwahn in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Wilhelm Bitter (Stuttgart, 1964), 10–12.

⁸⁹ Anna Krylova, in “The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies” (*Kritika* 1, no. 1 [Winter 2000]: 119–46), discusses the cultural construction of “Soviet man”—an indoctrinated automaton thoroughly under the state’s control—by American scholars of Stalinism during (and after) the Cold War.

⁹⁰ Auhofer, *Aberglaube und Hexenwahn*, 52.

⁹¹ Thomas Hauschild, “Hexen in Deutschland,” in *Der Wissenschaftler und das Irrationale*, bd. 1, *Beiträge aus Ethnologie und Anthropologie*, ed. Hans Peter Duerr (Frankfurt am Main, 1985), 537–64, quote on 560.

what had happened to it.⁹² Yet this was accomplished in a deeply condescending way that effectively transferred responsibility for genocide to rural folk and to "uneducated" and "fanaticized masses." This left German culture—understood as enlightened, Western, progressive, scientific—entirely unscathed.

Supernatural thinking struck a profoundly subversive note in the early history of West Germany. Would the language used to characterize Gröning and his followers have been as barbed if these figures had not followed upon Nazism? The question becomes more meaningful if we consider the language used to discredit Gröning: he was both "like Hitler" and a relic of the "Middle Ages." To invoke the Middle Ages was, of course, to call to mind a time when people's thinking was supposedly mystified and primitive, obfuscated by superstition. But invoking Hitler was a related move, which simultaneously transformed Nazism from a twentieth-century political system to a "dark age" fanaticism, neatly distancing the present from the past. By tacitly equating the crowds around the faith healer with the "fanaticized masses" who had only recently clamored to hear Hitler speak, Gröning's most vocal critics sought to chasten and discipline their fellow citizens, to insist on normative behavior and belief, and to suppress strong emotion and alternative visions of reality. This insistence was both a relic of Germany's recent authoritarian past and an

⁹² This timeline—or what Axel Schildt refers to as the "caesura around 1960"—corresponds to many historians' view of the end of the 1950s as the moment in which a more critical phase of engagement with the Nazi past emerged in West Germany. Obviously, that engagement took novel and quite selective forms. See Axel Schildt, "Der Umgang mit der NS-Vergangenheit in der Öffentlichkeit der Nachkriegszeit," in *Verwandlungspolitik: NS-Eliten in der westdeutschen Nachkriegsgesellschaft*, ed. Wilfried Loth and Bernd-A. Rusinek (Frankfurt am Main, 1998), 19–54, quote on 53. See also Helmut König, *Die Zukunft der Vergangenheit: Der Nationalsozialismus im politischen Bewußtsein der Bundesrepublik* (Frankfurt am Main, 2003), 17–32. Other historians would push the timeline back to the earlier 1950s; see Peter Reichel, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung in Deutschland: Die Auseinandersetzung mit der NS-Diktatur von 1945 bis heute* (Munich, 2001). More recently, scholars have challenged the idea of a progressive project of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* ["overcoming" or "working through" the past] from different perspectives. A. Dirk Moses, in *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past* (Cambridge, 2007), emphasizes how tortured debates about the presence of the past have been in every decade of German history since 1945. Jeffrey K. Olick's *In the House of the Hangman: The Agonies of German Defeat, 1943–1949* (Chicago, 2005) argues that remembrance, as an act of representing the past, is always dialogic, always a commentary on all previous forms of remembering. Neil Gregor's *Haunted City: Nuremberg and the Nazi Past* (New Haven, CT, 2008) focuses on the social history of remembering, interpreting the perceived "silence" of the early postwar period (which, in some accounts, is considered to have yielded to a more robust confrontation in the 1960s) in terms of the "faint echoes of . . . violence . . . , the slight traces of appalling events . . . [that] were not simply unsayable . . . but for ordinary people often defied narration" (22).

attempt to contain that past. Theories about Gröning and witchcraft beliefs were used to construct difference in West Germany, between properly disenchanting people, who knew the correct (meaning, chastened and dispassionate) place of religion in their lives and separated it from magic and charlatanism, and “others,” who did not. Those theories were also used to reify marginal groups—women, children, those in pain, the “masses,” the mentally ill, rural folk, people with deformed limbs and war wounds, the “uneducated”—and to manage cultural norms by identifying deviance, subversion, and heterodoxy in its many manifestations.⁹³

CONCLUSION

Reflecting back from a vantage point twenty years removed from World War II, the Austrian folklorist Leopold Schmidt recalled that the curtains had barely closed “on the theater of the last war” when “there suddenly appeared on the stage . . . an entire society of charlatans: palm readers, astrologers, quacks, faith healers, and also . . . witches and sorcerers and their antagonists, visionaries, miracle seekers, and cult founders of all types.” And yet Schmidt also held out the possibility that various forms of what he called “folk belief” had not actually increased since the war but had simply become more visible in the 1950s because of the frequent attention they were paid in the popular press.⁹⁴ It would be very difficult to determine whether the supernatural 1950s represent a moment in which engaging with the otherworldly and the unseen reached new heights or whether the apprehensions of the media and a variety of reformers—in the medical community, among clerics, in the ranks of the antisuperstition activists, and so on—simply made it appear that way.

As noted above, there do appear to have been more “witchcraft trials” in the 1950s than in preceding decades. One potential explanation has been put forward to clarify this phenomenon: perhaps the increase in accusations of evildoing and witchcraft was a social consequence of the massive influx of ethnic German refugees into West German society after World War II. The newcomers’ ways of living, religious practices, and customs were sometimes markedly different from those of their new neighbors, and this may have contributed to tensions and accusations of malevolence and harmful magic on both sides.⁹⁵ One source contends that Gröning was particularly sought out by

⁹³ I found very helpful on this point Randall Styers’s Foucauldian-inflected discussion of magic as religion’s enduring antithesis. See Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (Oxford, 2004).

⁹⁴ Leopold Schmidt, “Die Wiederkehr des Volksglaubens: Versuch einer Umschau nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg,” in *Volksglaube und Volksbrauch: Gestalten, Gebilde, Gebärden*, ed. Leopold Schmidt (Vienna, 1965), 280, 282.

⁹⁵ Schöck describes one such case; see *Hexenglaube in der Gegenwart*, 177–90. See

refugees.⁹⁶ A less socially functionalist account, however, might take seriously the fact that evil, to some West Germans, seemed to be gaining the upper hand in the 1950s. Did this sense grow out of the acute moral, metaphysical, and emotional disarray of the postwar years—a time of terrible dissonance, haunted by so many wild ghosts that multiplied even as the semblance of "normalcy" and bourgeois propriety and orderliness was obsessively maintained?⁹⁷

At the same time, however, West Germans in the 1950s had a variety of significant questions that society and its authorities—churchly, political, medical, and journalistic—often proved woefully inadequate to address. Will my body be healed? What happened to my mother, husband, or brother in the war? Why is my child ill? Is my neighbor in league with the devil? Do the dead live on? Yet, on the other hand, Schäfer believed that it was in fact the "rich good life" following the 1948 currency reform—widely deemed responsible for stabilizing occupied West Germany's economy—that had brought in its wake an "upsurge of superstition."⁹⁸ In other words, it might have been precisely the upturn in West Germany's fortunes in the 1950s—the Economic Miracle, an expanded sense of well-being and prosperity—that put some people in a mood to expect more and to ask for more from God and from the spirit world, too.⁹⁹

These matters will not be easily or conclusively clarified. And, in any case, we still must explain the response of people like Johann Kruse and those who rallied to his antisuperstition standard. Whether or not there was, empirically speaking, more supernatural activity and belief in the 1950s, it certainly appeared that way to some observers. This, in itself, is a matter of historical interest and importance. Otherworldly claims, phenomena, and experiences seem to have produced considerable apprehension in the 1950s among those

also Schmidt, "Die Wiederkehr des Volksglaubens," 282; and Baumhauer, *Johann Kruse*, 205–6. On social tensions between newcomers and natives in the early Federal Republic, see Albrecht Lehmann, *Im Fremden ungewollt zuhaus: Flüchtlinge und Vertriebene in Westdeutschland* (Munich, 1991); and Andreas Kossert, *Kalte Heimat: Die Geschichte der deutschen Vertriebenen nach 1945* (Berlin, 2008).

⁹⁶ Pintschovius, "Heute wie zu allen Zeiten," 82.

⁹⁷ My thinking here is inspired by van Rahden, "Clumsy Democrats," as well as by the character Fred Bogner in Heinrich Böll's *Und sagte kein einziges Wort* (Cologne, 1953), translated into English by Leila Vennewitz as *And Never Said a Word* (New York, 1978). Fred cannot maintain the outward appearance of bourgeois normalcy demanded by German society in the 1950s and so spends his days at loose ends, finding comfort among the dead, visiting cemeteries, and attending the funerals of people he never knew.

⁹⁸ Schäfer, *Der Okkulttäter*, 5.

⁹⁹ Many thanks to Peter Brown for this provocative suggestion.

who rejected their reality. This raises a question as to whether we might be able, in looking back through German history, to identify moments in which supernatural and occult phenomena and powerful public demonstrations of religious piety (variously understood) may have caused more social friction in some moments than in others and why. David Blackbourn's famous account of the Kulturkampf in Marpingen showed how a group of young girls' visions of the Virgin Mary set in motion social, cultural, and political contention not only at the level of the Prussian state but throughout German society as well—in the liberal press, among carriers of “advanced” opinion, and among both churchmen and ordinary Catholics.¹⁰⁰ But, of course, fervent religious beliefs and supernatural encounters of different kinds were hardly confined to the era of the Kulturkampf. During World War I, soldiers “had their own doctrine of angels.”¹⁰¹ They carried elaborate talismans into battle or had good-luck charms sewn into their uniforms by their mothers and wives.¹⁰² Soldiers' loved ones conducted séances and visited spirit mediums in the hope of contacting the fallen beyond the grave.¹⁰³ In the streets of Weimar Berlin, barefoot prophets multiplied, preaching the end-time.¹⁰⁴ It is true that the occult was a matter of concern to the churches and, sporadically, to the state. But how generalized such anxieties may (or may not) have been in Weimar is not clear. Though some World War I-era psychiatrists treated soldiers' magical practices and popular religious beliefs as symptoms of psychosis, most doctors were more concerned, ultimately, with the ways those practices and beliefs might subvert or undermine the goals of a distinctly masculine military discipline, social integration, and patriotism.¹⁰⁵

But the 1950s were a deeply uneasy time. The sources of this unease were many, but among them was a dread that forces of irrationality and superstition were in danger of running amok in a country working very hard to refashion itself as “normal.” To many contemporaries, “normal” meant enlightened, rational, and scientific—all things that Nazism, according to certain contemporary interpretations of the recent past, was imagined to have opposed. The people who sought answers to life's questions in the realm of the supernatural almost surely represented the margins of West German society and posed

¹⁰⁰ David Blackbourn, *Marpingen: Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in a Nineteenth-Century German Village* (New York, 1995).

¹⁰¹ Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1995), 64.

¹⁰² Christine Beil and Ralph Winkle, “‘Primitive Religiosität’ oder ‘Krise der sittlichen Ordnung’? Wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Anmerkungen zur Aberglaubensforschung im Ersten Weltkrieg,” in *KriegsVolksKunde: Zur Erfahrung durch Symbolbildung*, ed. Gottfried Korff (Tübingen, 2005), 150.

¹⁰³ Winter, *Sites of Memory*.

¹⁰⁴ Ulrich Linse, *Barfüßige Propheten: Erlöser der zwanziger Jahren* (Berlin, 1983).

¹⁰⁵ Beil and Winkle, “‘Primitive Religiosität,’” 165–72.

little, if any, threat to liberal German reconstruction and national reinvention. They practiced magic in the 1950s—perhaps in somewhat greater numbers, perhaps not—as they had done for as long as anyone could remember. They saw evidence of evildoing and prayed for healing as their fathers and mothers had done before them. But the unease of the 1950s, a powerful desire for normalcy, and, most important, the great pressure to distance West Germany from the Nazi past made superstition seem an especially potent and dangerous enemy. What might have been perceived as old-fashioned “folk belief” in another, less haunted, era now appeared to be evidence of subterranean, lurking Nazism.

In response, members of the West German press, the medical establishment, some clergy, local officials, and antisuperstition activists used various intentionally public mechanisms to discipline and discredit the bearers of those supernatural beliefs and to contain their embarrassing enthusiasms. Bruno Gröning was repeatedly castigated as “primitive,” an artifact of the Dark Ages, a Rasputin, a Hitler; the antioccult crusader Johann Kruse warned that figures like *Hexenbanner* Eberling were relics of the kind of thinking that had brought the Nazis to power. Eberling’s trial, moreover, was broadcast via radio because the judge in the case wanted to use the proceedings to enlighten the West German population about the dangers of unreason.

* * *

The story told here is rooted in the specifics of time and place, but it is by no means a German story alone. Gröning received numerous invitations from followers in Switzerland, Brazil, Sweden, England, and the United States, among others; Eberling received letters from throughout Scandinavia and the United States.¹⁰⁶ Of course, responses to faith healing and *Hexenbannung* in the 1950s in West Germany bore the marks of that time and place. But it is also important to acknowledge that related beliefs can be found in many parts of the world and at various points in time. Viewed anthropologically, witchcraft—like religion—is a human universal.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, if we begin to integrate the magical past of the “modern West” into that of the rest of the world, many of the beliefs and experiences described in this essay, far from appearing as exotica or as strange outliers, instead look quite ordinary. As noted above, more fully acknowledging their presence might be one way of provincializing Europe.

But what I have called “provincializing modernity” also seems a worthy project.¹⁰⁸ I have tried to signal various moments in which we can perceive a certain overlap in practice and ideas between the medieval and the modern. A

¹⁰⁶ Schulz, “Der Wunderdoktor,” 196; Baumhauer, *Johann Kruse*, 221.

¹⁰⁷ Behringer, *Witches and Witch Hunts*, 7.

¹⁰⁸ My thinking on this subject is influenced by Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and*

certain ideal of modernity, of course, has been bound up with the insistence that marvelous beliefs and magical practices belong to a past that has been overcome, superseded by a more progressive age. Modernity is fundamentally hostile to what its partisans deem irrational, but the existence of modernity is itself also predicated on identifying some phenomena, some practices, as unreason and stamping them out. Yet medieval Europeans policed the boundaries of acceptability in popular culture and belief no less energetically than their modern counterparts do and debated vigorously which extraordinary events were miracles and which the work of the devil, what was superstition and what true religion.¹⁰⁹ Thinking more diachronically about the supernatural—while remaining fully cognizant of the differences between past and present—can help us better understand how various communities “conceive of and categorize relations to the supernatural and to each other.”¹¹⁰ After all, whatever boundaries obtain between the rational and irrational, superstition and truth, health and sickness, religion and magic, good and evil, they are always unstable and under construction in every age.

Sovereignty: How Ideals of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time (Philadelphia, 2008).

¹⁰⁹ Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2000); Bernadette Filotas, *Pagan Survivals, Superstitions, and Popular Cultures*, Studies and Texts 151 (Toronto, 2005); Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark, eds., *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 2002); Valerie Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton, NJ, 1991).

¹¹⁰ Esther Eidinow, “Patterns of Persecution: Witchcraft Trials in Classical Athens,” *Past & Present*, no. 208 (August 2010), 9–35; quote on 11.