

## DISRUPTIVE POWER

Catholic Women, Miracles, and Politics in Modern  
Germany, 1918–1965

# GERMAN AND EUROPEAN STUDIES

General Editor: Jennifer J. Jenkins

MICHAEL E. O'SULLIVAN

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Catholic Women, Miracles, and Politics  
in Modern Germany, 1918–1965

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*To my Dad – my first and most beloved history teacher*

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# Introduction

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On 22 September 1963, forty thousand people travelled to the tiny town of Konnersreuth near the German border with Czechoslovakia. Their destination was the consecration of the “Convent of Adoration,” which was to be the new home for nine Carmelite nuns. Such an event might seem an unlikely source for a crowd usually reserved for football matches in post-war West Germany. It also formed a contrast with the ongoing Second Vatican Council where leading theologians fiercely debated the relationship of the church to modernity. At a time when many Catholic leaders sought distance from the emotive approaches to piety of the past, rural Catholics from Bavaria and around Europe oversaw the completion of stigmatic Therese Neumann’s final project one year after her death. The crowd to honour a German mystic illuminated the enduring faith in the miraculous by a group of powerful non-conformists who spent decades trying to reshape the Catholic Church in their own image.

The case of Therese Neumann (1898–1962) represents the most sensational instance of stigmata in the German-speaking world during the modern age. She became a religious visionary from 1926 until her death, hearing heavenly voices and bleeding from her eyes, feet, and hands before devoted followers for thirty-five years. She also allegedly spoke archaic languages during her trances, purportedly possessed clairvoyance, made prophecies, suffered vicariously for others, experienced miraculous cures, and subsisted exclusively on communion hosts. Although accused by many of fraudulence, she developed a group of advocates known as the Konnersreuth Circle and her beatification process began in 2005 after church authorities received forty-five thousand letters of support. Neumann became something of a media celebrity

as her wax statue featured for several years at Oktoberfest tents in Munich, while stories about her appeared in the German tabloid press for decades.<sup>1</sup> The sensational events of this woman's life form a seemingly ideal field of inquiry for historians examining religion during the rise and fall of democracy and dictatorship in Germany.

Therese Neumann represented only the most famous of numerous largely female mystics, visionaries, and seers who captured the popular imagination of German Catholics at the time. She was one of at least seven German stigmatics who gained popular acclaim during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Furthermore, Germany underwent a major proliferation of Marian apparitions, starting with visions in the town of Heede that attracted twenty thousand pilgrims in one day in 1938. From 1945 to 1954, the Virgin Mary appeared in at least twelve different West German locations in the Rhineland, the Palatinate, and Bavaria.<sup>2</sup> In sum, German Catholicism experienced a massive revival in miraculous faith from the aftermath of the First World War until the onset of the Cold War that most of the academic world has disregarded.

With Therese Neumann of Konnersreuth as a centrepiece, but not its exclusive focus, this book argues that these twentieth-century German Catholic miracles constituted both an upsurge in devotion and a revolt by traditionalists against mainstream religious and political leaders that ultimately contributed to the church's fragmentation and the transformation of Christianity's role in politics. By increasing the level of religious intensity around holy women and makeshift apparition shrines, conservative heretics challenged the orthodoxy and exclusive power of the clergy, the hierarchy, and many lay leaders just as the church balanced efforts to fight secularism and integrate into the modern nation state. Miracle towns became sites where peripheral seers, sophisticated theologians, and pious pilgrims contested the fraught place of Catholicism through decades of turbulent war and upheaval.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, these miracles disrupted three major elements of German history: religious secularization, Christian politics, and patriarchal gender roles. First, movements surrounding cures, stigmata, bleeding pictures, and visions of the Blessed Virgin highlighted the hybrid nature of German secularization. This reinvention of Catholic mystical customs tapped a vein in German popular culture, making increased religious devotion possible with an active set of believers. However, these zealous Catholics also unintentionally weakened elements of their church, acting as a catalyst for a personal spirituality independent of priests and

bishops whom they perceived as overly modern. Second, these miracles threatened Catholic political elites by challenging the unity of their electorate during the unstable aftermath of both world wars, providing a cultural counterpart to histories of the fall of the Centre Party and the fragile rise of Christian Democracy. Finally, the women at the centre of these popular visions endangered the exclusive control of men over the faith and women's bodies. They and their male advisors offer rich examples about how Catholics negotiated femininity, masculinity, and sexuality during decades of crisis in Germany.

The surprisingly ubiquitous twentieth-century miracles suggest that German Catholicism followed a "braided" and twisting rather than teleological course of secularization. A term with many meanings, secularization continues to cause enormous disagreement. This book defines it as the process by which religion became less central to the world views, mentalities, and institutions that shaped the everyday lives of modern historical subjects. Nonetheless, it also maintains the view that religion serves necessary communal functions by assisting the production of cultural meaning and orienting people socially. I will support those theorists who believe that secularization followed a hybrid path in the modern age where the secular and sacred existed side by side. While some aspects of devotion declined in twentieth-century Germany, other types of faith simultaneously thrived.<sup>4</sup>

Using occult phenomena to complicate the history of Catholicism in Germany, I depict calls for reform from religious conservatives that heightened piety at the same time that other Catholic elites sought either a secular or more mainstream confessional identity. The intensity of the revival described in this book and the persistence of worship at places like Konnersreuth indicate the slippery nature of historical accounts of religion. While many Catholic regions of Germany experienced decline in communion statistics, reductions in church association memberships, and an increase in interfaith marriages, the following of Therese Neumann and a series of Marian apparitions spiked. The latter of these developments strengthened faith among already devout Catholics – primarily from rural areas – who increasingly demanded a more parochial church with fewer accommodations to modern nation states and a less hierarchical faith community in which believers could initiate doctrine and have direct access to God. While the ensuing power struggle between mystical pilgrims and mainstream institutional elites led to a revival of early modern Catholic piety that contradicted secular developments, it also paradoxically added to the secularization

process by creating a more individualized sense of spirituality that depended less on priests and bishops than in the past. The tumultuous debates about these miracles within the Catholic Church's leadership and among the laity also reveal the fissures within a national religious community sometimes presented as a monolith. While some viewed the miracles as a sign of salvation in the midst of what they understood to be apocalyptic conditions, others devoted their lives to combatting a type of faith they felt inhibited the church's modernization and integration into a largely Protestant or secular national community. This exploration of Catholic mysticism illustrates the endurance of faith in a period where other indicators showed a decline of religiosity, but it also examines how the grass-roots nature of this religious passion unsettled the institutional power of the church during the already uncertain era of the world wars. Although many histories of the Catholic Church feature progressive change agents who served as antecedents to Vatican II, this study highlights the role of largely conservative reformers who frequently opposed efforts by church leaders to rationalize and modernize Catholicism.

While this cultural history of miracles relates to how Germany became pervasively secular, it also contributes to the remarkably impactful history of twentieth-century Catholic politics. While political Catholicism paradoxically both made and unmade Germany's first republican experiment after the First World War, Catholic politicians' ambiguous relationship with Nazism both facilitated the dictatorship and the dynamic democracy that followed in the West. With linkages to political Catholicism during the Weimar and Adenauer eras, the microhistories of these miraculous movements unveil some features of the downfall of the Bavarian People's Party (BVP) and Centre Party in 1933 and the rise of the Christian Democratic Union / Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) alliance during the early years of the Cold War. Groups like the Konnersreuth Circle intermingled with the larger Christian political establishment, sometimes repeating the tropes outlined by their leaders and occasionally innovating new directions that Catholic politicians would eventually adopt. Church reformers from the mystical movement contributed to the downfall of political Catholicism by adding to the fragmentation within the precarious alliance that held together the coalitions of the BVP and the Centre Party. These fervent provocateurs, however, provided an unlikely source of dissent against National Socialist principles during the Third Reich. After the war, the mixture of support for and rebellion against the new Christian

Democratic consensus highlights the inherent frailty in the CDU/CSU's rise to power and of the new Federal Republic.

Finally, the stories of these seers and mystics illustrate the complexity of gender within religious networks. Rural women and girls formed a majority of Catholic visionaries, posing a potential problem for a patriarchal church. They positioned themselves in relation to usually wealthier and more educated fathers, brothers, priests, and spiritual advisors, subtly seeking avenues to power through their spiritual gifts and popularity with predominantly female pilgrims. An analysis of how these women interacted with their male counterparts in the church and sometimes evaded sexual predators uncovers much about how pre-Vatican II constructs of femininity and masculinity shaped struggles for influence within spiritual communities. While female seers usually faced stern discipline from the men whose power they undermined, Therese Neumann illustrates how pious women negotiated spheres of power while embracing strict moral codes and paternal hierarchy. Simultaneously men of the Konnersreuth Circle and other mystical communities experimented with different models of masculinity that reconciled some of the dissonance between gendered expectations and their emotive brand of spirituality.

### **The Asymmetric Path to a Secular Germany**

A visit to Germany today reveals a remarkably secular society. Great cathedrals serve more as tourist attractions than houses of worship and the large Catholic minority seems to share the Protestant majority's apathy about weekly religious devotion and Christian doctrine. In fact, the greatest focal point for religious dynamism in the Berlin Republic is Germany's Muslim minority rather than its Christian majority. The situation for German Catholics could not have been any more different in the first decades of the twentieth century when they boasted a king-making political party, a vast spectrum of professional, political, and devotional associations, and a vibrant youth movement.<sup>5</sup> The German historical profession has understandably devoted much research to explaining this stunning transformation of the country's Catholic Church, especially given the disproportionate political impact of Catholic politicians on the fates of the Weimar Republic and the early Federal Republic of Germany.

In the last three decades, historians of Germany have discredited notions that faith disappeared from the modern world and many advance

the idea of a Catholic “milieu” to explain the institutionalization of power by the nation’s largest religious minority.<sup>6</sup> The milieu concept reached its highpoint in the 1990s when several scholars suggested that regionally fragmented religious cultures experienced a unique period of unity from the 1840s until the 1950s as a result of modern uses of organization, transport, and communication. These elements of modernity, however, paved the way for lay people to eventually seek even greater independence from the clergy by the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, these social historians also examined the Catholic milieu as a transitional phase in the modernization process where “elements of traditional society mixed with modern forms of production in bourgeois industrial societies.”<sup>8</sup> Mark Edward Ruff summarized the mainstream understanding of sheltered Catholic communities at their height in the early twentieth century in his renowned book about West German youth after 1945: “From the cradle to the grave, daily life in many southern and western regions of Germany was steeped in religion – in prayers, blessings, pilgrimages, festivals, and processions.”<sup>9</sup> Much recent work on the social history of Catholicism reinforces the hegemony of the milieu model and its new narrative of secularization.<sup>10</sup>

Some recent researchers either encourage a more flexible version of the milieu model that incorporates linguistic and gender analysis or argue for a complete break from the paradigm.<sup>11</sup> For example, Christian Schmidtman’s somewhat postmodern monograph about West German university students rejects exclusively structural histories of Catholicism and focuses on the competing cultural values and conflicting identities of diverse post-1945 students. Other work on the post-1945 era also creates a new narrative about the personalization of devotion by examining the ways in which Christian values persisted even after church attendance declined and Germans ceased adherence to doctrines and moral teaching.<sup>12</sup>

Robert Orsi’s concept of “lived religion” for secularization in the United States provides an interesting alternative for Germany. Orsi opposes accounts that view religious worlds, subcultures, and mentalities as isolated and separate from other aspects of society and experience.<sup>13</sup> He discourages religious narratives that only depict religious conformity to a “normative trajectory toward the modern.” Instead, we should look beyond the gradual subordination of belief in the supernatural to see how “the children and grandchildren of the modernizing generation rediscovered old devotional practices.” This method would be especially useful for examining German Catholicism after it

went into formal decline. The notion of a “braided narrative” does not eliminate the possibility of secularization. Rather, it draws attention to “improbable intersections, incommensurable ways of living, discrepant imaginings, unexpected movements of influence, and inspiration existing side by side.”<sup>14</sup>

The example of Bavarian visionary Bärbel Reuß illuminates how this multidimensional methodology makes room for the miracles studied in this book. As a sixteen-year-old in the village of Marienfried, Reuß first saw the Virgin Mary in 1940 at the start of the war, which encouraged her devotion to the rosary and prayers for the well-being of her “Fatherland.” When Mary appeared again in 1944, she offered Reuß hope for peace in war-torn Germany if its residents followed her instructions for prayer. Reuß became immersed in a women’s group devoted to the veneration of Mary inspired by the Rhineland’s so-called Schönstatt Movement. Building on this local following, she attracted many pilgrims at the end of the war and the start of the occupation.<sup>15</sup> This vignette demonstrates how the religiosity of such visions occurred against the backdrop of the lived experience of war. It also highlights how a small-town Marian circle countered the decline of formal Catholic social and political life under Nazism with a less institutionalized form of devotion. With millions of pilgrims, widespread press coverage, the interest of powerful theologians, and international relevance, the movements around Catholic ecstasy represent a dramatic counterpoint to the waning of confessional associations and church attendance documented by other studies.

The eccentricities of historical subjects such as Reuß prevented their complete penetration of the mainstream. They neither shaped the daily life of all Christian Schmidtman’s Catholic students nor halted the rejection of Catholic organizational life by Mark Ruff’s young subjects after the war. Nonetheless, the lived religion approach to secularization seems especially suited to such phenomenon. If we interpret Orsi’s narrative as a long rope with numerous braids of various sizes and volumes, it seems a useful way to integrate religious movements that existed outside the primary structures of power, yet achieved a significant cultural impact.

The study of twentieth-century German miracles highlights an upsurge of piety among a group of conservative rebels who simultaneously mobilized mass expressions of Catholic faith and weakened church orthodoxy and clerical authority. These events indicate a deeply ambiguous secularization process that created a pluralistic society

where Christian ideals competed indefinitely with other religious and secular beliefs and viewpoints.<sup>16</sup> This book argues that Catholic mystics and their adherents demonstrate this uneven and twisted path towards secular modernity. They provide empirical evidence of uniquely Catholic practices and world views that persisted, adapted, and created modern meaning in the most tumultuous moments of German history. The devotion of hundreds of thousands and sometimes millions of Catholics to relationships with heavenly figures contrasted sharply with the decline in male voters for Catholic parties and memberships in Catholic associations and youth groups. Despite showcasing the perseverance of an exclusively Catholic mysticism, Therese Neumann and other seers also unintentionally contributed to the fragmentation of Catholic doctrine, authority, and influence. By promoting a deeply personal piety and spiritualities that openly rejected the mediation of church institutions, these modern visionaries foresaw Germany's future devotion to new age religions, ecumenical experiments, and individual faiths that no longer adhered to the doctrines of one specific religious tradition.<sup>17</sup>

### **Miracles and Catholic Politics: From Centre Party to Christian Democracy**

After the First World War, the Centre Party and BVP simultaneously reached their zenith and started a rapid descent. These Catholic parties became the powerful coalition lynchpins of the Weimar parliamentary system. Germany's first republican democracy could not form governing coalitions without this steady Catholic voting block because the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the German Democratic Party (DDP), and the German People's Party (DVP) did not usually command a large enough share of the vote to pass legislation on their own. The nationalist parties of the right, which became more prominent at the end of the republic, also required help from the Centre Party up until their decision to work with the National Socialists in January of 1933. Despite their importance, the Centre Party and BVP watched their share of the national vote stagnate and decline throughout the 1920s. Suffering from immense internal diversity, the Centre Party in particular struggled to unite its working-class voters with its nationalist supporters, causing an exodus of male members to more secular alternatives. The internally fragmented parties finally ended their own existence by voting for the Enabling Act in 1933.<sup>18</sup> After such a contradictory past as both democratic cornerstones and abettors of totalitarianism, Catholic politicians



entered a similarly paradoxical phase after the Second World War. Numerous Catholic elites, led by West Germany's first chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, created the Christian Democratic Union and the Christian Social Union, both of which became the dominant right-of-centre parties based on confessional unity between Protestants and Catholics. However, these parties ultimately became very secular over time, abandoning many of the Christian principles upon which they were founded.<sup>19</sup>

Most existing studies of German Catholicism either analyse the realm of religious practice or Catholic politics but seldom combine the two in one book. The case studies of stigmata and visions of the Virgin Mary in this monograph provide a unique opportunity given the political activism of many advocates and opponents of these events. In order to bridge the gap between Catholic faith and politics, one must examine how everyday congregants incorporated the values of the church into their everyday lives and eventually their political behaviour.

Applying Pierre Bourdieu's ideas about a "religious field" of competition between representatives of religious institutions and members of the laity over legitimation and the "goods of salvation," this book uses miracles as a vehicle to better understand the transition of political Catholicism in Germany into Christian Democracy after the war.<sup>20</sup> First, several chapters connect the struggle between proponents and opponents of miracles to the decline of the Centre Party and the Bavarian People's Party during the Weimar Republic. The book presents adversaries of miracles as Catholics pursuing a rationalized faith to better integrate into the nation and facilitate the necessary compromises in a tenuous parliamentary political system. It portrays advocates of mysticism as seeking a Christian political utopia. This battle over how to be a modern Catholic damaged an already delicate political Catholic establishment at the end of the Weimar Republic. The political desires of Neumann's Konnersreuth Circle and the supporters of other stigmatics highlight the impossibility of creating a uniformly Catholic vision in a parliamentary system where Protestants constituted a majority and many Christians supported secular variants of liberalism, socialism, communism, and nationalism. Second, the book illustrates the difficulties between devout Catholics and National Socialism. For example, Barbara Weigand of Schippach, a seer close to death during the war, famously referred to Hitler as a "monster vomited from hell."<sup>21</sup> However, the monograph illuminates the inability of pre-Vatican II Catholics to oppose the imperial, racial, and anti-Semitic underpinnings of the Nazi state as well. Tracing subaltern movements in favour of Marian

worship and the resistance of many members of Neumann's Konnersreuth Circle against the Third Reich, my research also indicates the limits to dissent by miracle supporters who perpetuated the religious anti-Semitism of their church. Finally, the book examines how some of Konnersreuth's Weimar supporters anticipated Christian Democracy as a future political alternative and how the Cold War helped devotees of apparitions and stigmata after the Second World War to integrate their anti-communism, war trauma, and anti-consumerism into support for a more mainstream Christian rather than exclusively Catholic politics. Konnersreuth became a powerful place of German-American reconciliation during the 1950s and Neumann's brother pursued a career within the rising Christian Democratic wave, making these miracles case studies where one can assess the Catholic role in the erecting the post-1945 NATO consensus.

### **The Empowerment of Catholic Women**

Work about German Catholics frequently employs the "feminization of religion" narrative, which argues that the Christian churches combatted secularization by successfully recruiting women who in turn used the churches as tools for their own emancipation. While this concept attracted attention to the importance of marginalized female worshippers, it limited how we view the agency of religious and conservative women. Several academics concur that the Catholic minority in Germany became feminized. They suggest that nineteenth-century gender norms helped mothers and wives form a majority among practicing Catholics. As the bourgeois ideal of female domesticity became dominant, religious piety and instruction for children became a responsibility for the private sphere. Post-Enlightenment men with active professional lives had less time or desire to participate in religious life.<sup>22</sup> Bishops and priests emphasized "emotional" elements of Catholic piety, such as the cults of the Virgin Mary and Sacred Heart, which they believed would attract female congregants and prevent their participation in the women's movement.<sup>23</sup> Scholars of German Catholicism, however, disagree about whether the feminization of Christianity provided women opportunities for emancipation. While some research suggests that clergy maintained strict control over female associations and used them to inhibit women's engagement with progressive social forces, other work highlights access to new professional opportunities in charities, health care, and education

as well as the relatively egalitarian structure of convents.<sup>24</sup> Besides nuns, religious visionaries are also viewed as powerful figures who “inverted” the usual power relationship with men and priests in the village. Some academics even interpret them as “popular theologians” who introduced new elements to church teaching and practice.<sup>25</sup> Several convincing critiques challenge the feminization of religion thesis. For example, Patrick Pasture suggests it is “narrative fiction,” arguing that the increase in female participation in the nineteenth century was largely a cultural construct and that women experienced only minimal empowerment through the churches.<sup>26</sup>

On the surface, the life of Therese Neumann and the other mostly female seers of this book appear to confirm rather than contradict the feminization thesis. Building on institutional teaching about the Virgin Mary, the church sanction of the Portuguese Fatima apparitions from the First World War, and the canonization of Therese of Lisieux (Neumann’s favourite saint), these women apparently adopted the emotional and sentimental forms of piety prompted by the Vatican and its hierarchy. Furthermore, it would seem that they gained favoured status as religious figures, granting them power through their embrace of Catholicism. However, several factors complicated this narrative.

First, all of these religious women possessed dominant male spiritual mentors. This strong male presence in the immediate following of female mystics contradicts any notion of women exclusively dominating Catholicism in a realm presumed to be more effeminate than most. In fact, the supporters and opponents of Catholic miracles performed multiple competing ideals for religious masculinity. Critics of miracles presented the Catholic man as a beacon of scientific rationalism, meant to restrain the hysteria of feminine piety. Supporters espoused a mixture of emotional, muscular, and militaristic imagery in support of a direct relationship with heavenly figures but a necessarily less hierarchical church.

Within this context of rural patriarchy and hierarchical Catholicism, these female visionaries subtly negotiated restricted areas of authority, but this path to agency required an embrace of normative gender roles. This more complex route towards self-assertion illustrates the balancing act religious visionaries needed to perform in order to retain their spiritual power and still find room for their own autonomy. A natural tension existed in the relationship between female mystics and bishops that was not restricted to the twentieth century. Throughout the Middle Ages, the early modern era, and the nineteenth century, European

religious women claimed special status because of their visions and very few of them gained recognition. Only rare figures, such as Hildegard of Bingen, Gemma Galagni, and Bernadette Soubirous, gained formal sanction for their experiences. Bishops and sometimes clergy resisted when piety became miraculous because they viewed the stewardship of a coherent and consistent doctrine as a sacred duty. They needed to protect the church from fraud and the pagan rituals that mixed with everyday religion. They often doubted cases of miracles because they threatened both ecclesiastical authority and the well-being of the faith. Therefore, the numerous sacred women of the twentieth century risked harmful discipline from church authorities if they became too transgressive. Ursula Hibbeln of Bochum demonstrates this situation well. The wife of a streetcar conductor in the industrial *Ruhrgebiet* (Ruhr region), she lost eight of her nine children, and suffered regularly from medical ailments. This woman became empowered when she started to have visions and to communicate with dead souls in purgatory. She often expressed an excessive amount of respect for clergy, bishops, and the religious hierarchy. Despite her threat to priests' roles as mediators between God and worshippers, many church figures permitted her status as a local figure of reverence even if church officials never formally endorsed her miracles. This leniency allowed Hibbeln to become a community spiritual leader who provided comfort for the sick and grieving. Her small apartment a hub of activity for Catholics in her area, Hibbeln gained vocational fulfilment and spiritual power by submitting to the norms of Catholic patriarchy.<sup>27</sup> The interactions and unconscious struggle for power between female seers, female pilgrims, male spiritual mentors, and male admirers created a malleable dynamic that is too complex for the static feminization of religion thesis.

This study proposes a spectrum of strategies by religious women negotiating overlapping rural, religious, and political subcultures dominated by men. A few of these women submitted almost entirely to a combination of male advisors and ecclesiastical authorities – usually with disastrous results for the acceptance of their sanctity. Another handful of famous mystics became outspoken critics of male privilege, denouncing rules that prevented the ordination of women. This risky approach frequently ended in harsh church discipline or public humiliation. In the most sophisticated cases, Catholic visionaries worked from within existing gender norms that they reaffirmed to seek influence. The power they strived for could take different forms. Sometimes they used male elites interested in their spiritual gifts to improve the standing

of their family. Most of them sought a fulfilling spiritual vocation and official recognition of their status by the church. Through a direct connection with God, these women, who almost always suffered long-term illness before their visions, went from sick dependents to valued community leaders that were consulted by the suffering, the dying, and those in crisis. By ministering to a following they naturally threatened the clergy who usually filled these roles. Women like Therese Neumann gradually accumulated power and influence, spreading their interpretation of Catholic traditionalism and shaping the political and religious outlook of their localities. They were emboldened by the sense of purpose their religious mission provided them and the ability to mould society according to their values.

Finally, the stories and disputes surrounding the Catholic miraculous placed male and female sexuality in a central position. While strict morality became a common theme among all movements studied by this book, ambiguities persisted. Therese Neumann used her own lay celibacy as a compelling weapon in pursuit of power within a Catholic subculture and against the danger of sexual assault, but rumours of sexual perversion provided a consistent tool in rhetoric by both advocates and critics as they attacked one another in debates about miracles. This study highlights the role of gender in the struggle for power surrounding twentieth-century German miracles. It subverts depictions of piously Catholic women as anachronisms and instead presents them as empowered agents negotiating a perilous but evolving patriarchal power structure.

### **Catholic Miracles and Modern Germany**

Although European Catholic miracles have featured in much work about the medieval and early modern periods, they have gradually attracted more studies by historians of the modern era. Research about the visions of the Virgin Mary in the small French village of Lourdes by Bernadette Soubirous in 1858, and their ensuing popularity, depicts them as a symbol of Catholic resistance against liberal, socialist, and secular ideals. In fact, the Marpingen visions in Germany occurred in the context of a contentious *Kulturkampf* (culture war) over the place of the church in the newly unified state. Such miracles form the first half of what many scholars of religion call the Marian century from 1850 to 1950 to indicate a time when European clergy and congregants showed particular enthusiasm for veneration of the Virgin Mary.<sup>28</sup>

The Vatican revived the cult of the Virgin Mary in the late nineteenth century to mobilize support against secularization. As a result, rural girls throughout Europe claimed to see the Virgin Mary and sometimes the Vatican recognized the visions as legitimate if enough evidence indicated supernatural activity. Church leaders used famous and officially sanctioned apparitions in Fatima (Portugal, 1917) and Lourdes (France, 1858) to encourage devotion until the Second Vatican Council reforms of the 1960s.<sup>29</sup>

A broad and varied source base exists for this new history of twentieth-century German miracles. Many collections related to Therese Neumann and other visionaries are closed due to ongoing beatification processes. However, rich archival material remains available to researchers.<sup>30</sup> Several other dioceses contain open collections about ecclesiastical investigations of Neumann and other mystical phenomena. In addition to these church records, a voluminous public discourse existed in several popular books, periodicals, and newspapers. Finally, the state kept records about many of these movements. There are materials from police surveillance reports as well as documents from trials regarding the miracles. Finally, the personal papers of opponents of apparitions and stigmata from this age provide another interesting perspective. Such a rich source base creates an opportunity to contribute to the growing literature about Catholic miracles.

This book introduces three fresh interpretations to the existing work about German Catholicism and European miracles. First, it argues that Germany experienced a generally overlooked revival of faith in the miraculous from the 1920s until the 1960s. Corresponding roughly to Therese Neumann's life as a public figure, this period of intense supernatural faith by millions of usually traditionalist Catholics from Bavaria, the Rhineland, the Emsland, and the Palatinate presents an institutional church that was anything but monolithic. Rather the social and political upheaval of this era in modern German history splintered the Catholic population in a manner highlighted by faith in the miraculous. Furthermore, the present persistence of pilgrimage to places like Konnersreuth and Heroldsbach, albeit in much smaller numbers than before, suggests that a braided narrative of secularization functions well in the German Catholic context. A national and transnational movement in favour of the miraculous simultaneously perpetuated distinctly Catholic spiritualities while also damaging the strength of the bishops' authority through the promotion of personal piety that relied less on mediation by church elites. Second, this book depicts female

seers and their male supporters as equally divergent from typical academic portrayals of Catholic gender roles. Female visionaries and their pilgrims conformed neither to stereotypes of antimodern religious women at the beck and call of their priest nor to the depictions of Catholic feminist nuns who used the church for their own emancipation. Balancing a massive following made possible by modern media, cadres of patriarchal male advisors necessary for religious legitimacy, and their own self-interested desire for influence, these women charted a complicated and sometimes limited course for spiritual and cultural power. Their male followers also provide alternate examples of Catholic masculinity that competed with other more hegemonic models for manliness and laid the groundwork for the ascension of Catholic men to political leadership after 1945. Finally, the book affirms the central place of Catholic miracles to the politics of modern Germany. Contributing to the fall of political Catholicism, groups surrounding miracles became particularly important during the Third Reich. Although not well documented in the secondary literature, these mystics attracted negative attention from the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP or Nazi Party) and their interplay with the regime highlights the deeply ambiguous relationship between Catholicism and Nazism. Therese Neumann and a wave of Marian apparitions also became central to the German-American relationship and the Catholic encounter with the Cold War. Interacting with debates about the Nazi past, the nuclear age, the post-war refugee crisis, and the rise of American consumerism, movements surrounding Catholic miracles helped define the nature of Christian Democracy and Western integration.

While the book uniquely emphasizes the enduring popularity of Therese Neumann from 1926 to 1962, it also places her case in context by scrutinizing faith in Catholic miracles more broadly. [Chapter 1](#) investigates the existence of numerous now-forgotten miracles in the aftermath of the First World War. It surveys the rise of several stigmatics from the 1920s, focusing especially on Anna Maria Goebel from Bickendorf (near Trier), who emerged amidst the ruptures caused by the First World War. The chapter also studies the so-called "Aachen Blood Miracle," which converged with the series of miracles in France, Germany, and Belgium where believers claimed paintings of Jesus cried tears of blood. It closes with an in-depth assessment of eighty-three documented cures claimed by sick pilgrims to the Holy Shroud of Trier in 1933. Exploring debates within the church about unsanctioned miracles and gender relations in each case, the chapter illustrates that



Therese Neumann was far from exceptional when she burst into the public sphere in 1926.

[Chapter 2](#) traces the meteoric rise of Therese Neumann from an unknown rural woman stricken with health problems to a religious superstar. It analyses the formation of her Konnersreuth Circle, her intimate relationship with the parish priest, Father Joseph Naber, and the press war over her alleged sanctity. With deep ties to the BVP, famous theologians, aristocrats, and journalists, Neumann became a central but controversial figure to the church and the political Catholic establishment at the end of the Weimar Republic. Her case sparked a wide-ranging debate about the nature of modern Catholicism and factionalized church elites as they reconciled the frightful destruction of modernity with long-standing religious values. [Chapter 3](#) and [chapter 4](#) analyse the importance of Therese Neumann's miracles to the history of politics and gender during the Weimar Republic. They examine the relationship of the Konnersreuth Circle to political Catholicism, social democracy, and communism in the waning years of the Weimar Republic and situate the seer's activism and fame within the history of femininity, sexuality, and masculinity during the same era. [Chapter 5](#) assesses the fragile and at times tragic fate of supporters of Catholic miracles during the Third Reich. Focused mainly on the Konnersreuth Circle, the chapter illustrates how Neumann balanced her potential to disrupt both the church and the totalitarian state through her unfettered access to God with a desire to avoid either excommunication or imprisonment.

[Chapter 6](#) investigates the outbreak of Marian apparitions in Germany after 1945, focusing especially on the towns of Heroldsbach, Fehrbach, and Rodalben. Linking these events to struggles for power within the church, gender relations, memory of the Nazi past, and confrontation with the Cold War, the chapter illustrates how Catholic miracles shed light on the formation of Catholic identities during the era of Konrad Adenauer. Many German refugees, former POWs, and traumatized Catholics sought comfort in the Virgin Mary's stern warning and promises of salvation as the spectre of nuclear war emerged. Supporters of Marian apparitions clashed with leaders of the CDU, CSU, the Catholic hierarchy, and other aspects of the laity during a failed struggle for power within a reconstituted Catholic community in West Germany. Finally, [chapter 7](#) depicts the revival of Konnersreuth as a site for religious pilgrimage after 1945 and illustrates how Therese Neumann became a controversial figure of German-American reconciliation through the pilgrimage of 500,000 American GIs to her town.



In these trans-Atlantic encounters she emerged as a centrepiece for how Bavarian Catholics encountered the Cold War. She used connections with the American military, the new Christian Social Union (CSU), and the emerging economy to pursue several building projects to benefit the Catholic Church, Konnersreuth's economy, and her own legacy.

This monograph demonstrates the disruptive influence of Catholic miracles to the religious, gendered, and political narratives of modern Germany. The spectre of Konnersreuth, Heede, Bickendorf, and Heroldsbach as well as other miracle sites poses a counternarrative to the mainstream depictions of German secularization, while the men and women who made these movements complicate common notions about gender in Catholic Europe. Advocates of miracles also reflected and even shaped Catholic politics as they evolved from the Weimar Republic to the Cold War. Creating hope for salvation in times of great anxiety but also splintering the Catholic community with their fervent approach to the faith, the pilgrims and seers of Germany embodied the "shattered" narrative of their nation's history in the twentieth century.<sup>31</sup>

## Germany between Apocalypse and Salvation: Bloody Images and Miraculous Cures

On 8 May 1927 Margareta Lippert suffered a debilitating stroke that left her unable to walk, sit down, or use her left arm without assistance. When she heard the diocese of Trier would display the holy coat of Jesus for the first time in over forty years, she registered with pilgrimage leaders for a special blessing at the cathedral. She journeyed from Camberg to Trier and touched the relic in the middle of the night on 25 August 1933. She said, "I touched the holy coat and said: 'Dear God, if it is your will and good for me, please help me and make me healthy again' ... First when I was back in the car and sat in my place I began to feel a deep discomfort that I would compare to an electric storm. I turned to the nun who escorted me and said, 'Sister, I believe I can stand.'" From that moment forward, she could walk without a cane or crutches. When reflecting on her good luck, she uttered, "Dear God, am I worthy of your goodness to me?"<sup>1</sup>

This recollection of direct intercession by God constitutes just one of eighty-three people seeking recognition of a cure in the summer of 1933. Furthermore, these miracles came after several ubiquitous holy men and women rose to local and sometimes national prominence in the aftermath of the First World War. This wave of miraculous mysticism in Western Germany contributed to an upswing in personalized piety that weakened the formal political and religious institutions of the church; strengthened informal elements of spirituality; and highlighted regional, political, and gendered divisions among German Catholics.

In his landmark study about apparitions in Marpingen during the *Kulturkampf*, David Blackbourn suggests a major resurgence of German Catholic miracles after the First World War.<sup>2</sup> Research on the western front also highlights how soldiers at the front developed "spiritualism"