

A Late-Medieval Crisis of Superstition?

By Michael D. Bailey

The medieval church had always been concerned about superstition. In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries—the waning years, as some would have it, of the European Middle Ages—certain theologians and other clerical authorities became obsessed with it. Authors from Iberia to the Low Countries and from Paris to Vienna turned their attention to this topic, and particularly in the first half of the 1400s a wave of tracts and treatises explicitly *de superstitionibus* issued from their pens.¹ For these men, superstition was a serious error, not the typically harmless foolishness that modern use of the term tends to convey.² In the theology of the age, *superstitio* meant most basically an excess of religion, literally “religion observed beyond proper measure.”³ Since human beings could not possibly offer a superabundance of proper worship beyond what God, in his perfection, deserved, this excess necessarily implied improper religious rites and observances. Superstition meant either performing elements of the divine cult incorrectly or, worse still, offering worship to entities other than the Deity.⁴

Such sweeping definitions could encompass a multitude of practices, and had done so in the long course of Christian history.⁵ For the authors of the early

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¹ Many are touched on in Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, 8 vols. (New York, 1923–58), 4:274–307; see also Françoise Bonney, “Autour de Jean Gerson: Opinions de théologiens sur les superstitions et la sorcellerie au début du XVe siècle,” *Le moyen âge* 77 (1971), 85–98; and Jan R. Veenstra, *Magic and Divination at the Courts of Burgundy and France: Text and Context of Laurens Pignon’s “Contre les devineurs” (1411)*, Brill’s Studies in Intellectual History 83 (Leiden, 1998), pp. 137–53.

² On medieval versus modern conceptions of the term see Dieter Harmening, *Superstitio: Überlieferungs- und theoriegeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur kirchlich-theologischen Aberglaubensliteratur des Mittelalters* (Berlin, 1979), p. 5.

³ The most widely accepted definition was from Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2.2.92.1: “dicatur enim superstitio esse religio supra modum servata,” drawing on the *Glossa ordinaria* to Colossians 2.23. See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 6 vols. (Rome, 1894), 3:659; and *Biblia Latina cum glossa ordinaria: Facsimile Reprint of the Editio Princeps, Adolph Rusch of Strassburg 1480/81*, 4 vols. (Turnhout, 1992), 4:393.

⁴ “. . . sed quia exhibit cultum divinum, vel cui non debet, vel eo modo quo non debet”: Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2.2.92.1, 3:660. See also Thomas Linsenmann, *Die Magie bei Thomas von Aquin*, Veröffentlichung des Grabmann-Institutes 44 (Berlin, 2000), pp. 278–79, for a summary of Aquinas’s thought.

⁵ An overview can be found in Michael D. Bailey, *Magic and Superstition in Europe: A Concise History from Antiquity to the Present* (Lanham, Md., 2007).

fifteenth century, concern over superstition tended to focus on common spells, charms, methods of divination (including both relatively simple means of fortunetelling and learned, systematic astrology), and other more or less magical practices. In the post-Enlightenment world of the modern West, and certainly in most elite, educated discourse, all aspects of magic are typically dismissed as ineffectual and irrational, completely disconnected from the scientific principles by which the universe is understood to operate.⁶ For medieval authorities, of course, the situation was profoundly different. While they might judge some spells or charms to be “vain” or ineffectual, they considered most such practices to be fully in accord with understood systems of causation and capable of producing very real results, albeit by corrupted means. Their concerns, therefore, were very real indeed. Chief among them were fears that demonic power lurked behind erroneous practices and that such rites might mask the adoration or veneration of wicked spirits.⁷

Concern over superstition was rising already in the later fourteenth century, culminating in 1398, when the theological faculty of the university at Paris issued a decree condemning twenty-eight articles of magical arts and sorcery.⁸ Yet the Paris decree dealt mainly with elite magical rites, whereas later works on superstition would typically include common practices as well. Concern seems to have radiated out from Paris, as Jean Gerson, the influential chancellor of the university, produced a half-dozen brief works criticizing various forms of superstition and magic.⁹ To the first of these, *De erroribus circa artem magicam* (1402), he appended the list of the 1398 condemnations, which he had helped orchestrate.¹⁰ He was followed by the Heidelberg theologian Nikolaus Magni of Jauer, who wrote a major treatise on superstition in 1405, himself inspired by a case brought

⁶ Martin Pott, *Aufklärung und Aberglaube: Die deutsche Frühaufklärung im Spiegel ihrer Aberglaubenskritik*, Studien zur deutschen Literatur 119 (Tübingen, 1992); Roy Porter, “Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment, Romantic and Liberal Thought,” in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (Philadelphia, 1999), pp. 191–274. Stuart A. Vyse, *Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition* (Oxford, 1997), categorizes superstitions as either “benignly” irrational or more damaging in that they “waste time, effort, and money and prolong ineffective responses to uncertainty” (p. 23). Judith Devlin, *The Superstitious Mind: French Peasants and the Supernatural in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, Conn., 1987), is less dismissive than Vyse, but her framework, too, is indicative of the modern mentality, ultimately analyzing superstitious beliefs and practices as (sometimes useful) “psychological techniques” (p. 215).

⁷ Thanks to the Thomistic notion of tacit as well as express pacts (Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2.2.92.2, 3:661; see also n. 70 below), any action conceived as drawing on demonic power could be associated with worship. On growing concern over demonic power and association of magic with diabolism in the fourteenth century see Alain Boureau, *Satan the Heretic: The Birth of Demonology in the Medieval West*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago, 2006). Specifically in relation to superstition see Michael D. Bailey, “Concern over Superstition in Late Medieval Europe,” in *The Religion of Fools? Superstition Past and Present*, ed. S. A. Smith and Alan Knight, Past and Present Supplement 3 (Oxford, 2008), pp. 115–33.

⁸ Heinrich Denifle, ed., *Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1891–99; repr. Brussels, 1964), 4:32–36. See also n. 10 below. For analysis see Jean-Patrice Boudet, “Les condamnations de la magie à Paris en 1398,” *Revue Mabillon* 12 (2001), 121–57.

⁹ Collected in Gerson, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. P. Glorieux, 10 vols. (Paris, 1960–73), 10:77–143. Brief attention is given in Brian Patrick McGuire, *Jean Gerson and the Last Medieval Reformation* (University Park, Pa., 2005), pp. 91 and 308–9.

¹⁰ Gerson, *Œuvres complètes*, 10:77–90, condemnations appended at pp. 86–90.

before the Heidelberg theological faculty.¹¹ That same year, another Heidelberg theologian, Johannes of Frankfurt, produced a *quaestio* about whether demons could be compelled or controlled by certain words, figures, or written characters.¹² This addressed a central issue in authorities' debates over superstition, for if demons could be commanded by various rites, rather than supplicated and venerated, then the exploitation of their power might not entail superstitious error.

Over the next few decades, a steady stream of works appeared, mainly in central Europe. Around 1415 an anonymous author, perhaps a theologian from Cologne, wrote against superstitious divination.¹³ A decade after that, the Cologne theologian Heinrich of Gorcum (modern Gorichem, in the Netherlands) produced a short tract on superstition.¹⁴ Also around this time, probably in 1423, the Vienna theologian Nikolaus of Dinkelsbühl dealt with superstition in a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments: since, authorities believed, superstitious practices so frequently entailed diabolism, they clearly fell under the first commandment's ban against idolatry.¹⁵ Over a decade later, in 1438, another Vienna theologian, Jo-

¹¹ On this case see below, p. 643. The work has never been edited. I have used Nikolaus Magni of Jauer, *Tractatus de superstitionibus*, University of Pennsylvania, MS 78, fols. 35r–63v, checked against Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 3041, fols. 188r–219r, and Clm 4721, fols. 202r–220r, as well as Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Pal. Lat. 679, fols. 164r–205r, and Pal. Lat. 719, fols. 64r–77v. On Nikolaus see Adolph Franz, *Der Magister Nikolaus Magni de Jawor: Ein Beitrag zur Literatur- und Gelehrten-geschichte des 14. und 15. Jahrhunderts* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1898), and, more recently, Krzysztof Bracha, *Teolog, diabeł i zabobony: Świadectwo tractatu Mikolaja Magni z Jawora "De superstitionibus" (1405 r.)* (Warsaw, 1999); a German translation of Bracha's book is under way.

¹² Johannes of Frankfurt, *Quaestio utrum potestas coercendi demones fieri possit per caracteres figuras atque verborum prolationes*, edited in Joseph Hansen, *Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Hexenwahns und der Hexenverfolgung im Mittelalter* (Bonn, 1901; repr. Hildesheim, 1963), pp. 71–82. Hansen's edition is not entirely free from error, but it is not discernibly inferior to the three manuscript copies I checked it against: Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 3417, fols. 43v–48v; Clm 15320, fols. 150r–155r; and Clm 18142, fols. 330r–336r. Hansen misdates the *quaestio* to 1412, following Franz, *Magister Nikolaus Magni de Jawor*, p. 85 n. 7 (unfortunately I repeat this error in my *Magic and Superstition in Europe*, p. 127). Dorothea Walz dates the work to 1405 in *Johannes von Frankfurt, Zwölf Werke des Heidelberger Theologen und Inquisitors*, ed. Dorothea Walz et al., *Editiones Heidelbergenses* 29 (Heidelberg, 2000), pp. 227–30. See also n. 54 below.

¹³ Anonymous, *Tractatus de divinacionibus*, Trier, Stadtbibliothek, MS 265, fols. 164r–183r. Excerpts are given under the title *De daemonibus* in Hansen, *Quellen*, pp. 82–86.

¹⁴ Heinrich of Gorcum, *Tractatus de superstitionibus quibusdam casibus*, excerpted in Hansen, *Quellen*, pp. 87–88. I have used the early printing in Heinrich of Gorcum, *Tractatus de superstitionibus quibusdam casibus, Tractatus de celebratione festorum, Omelia beati Johannis Crisostomi de cruce et latrine* (Blaubeuren, ca. 1477), fols. 1r–6v. The only manuscript copy with which I have been able to compare this printing is dated to 1478: Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 7644, fols. 78r–83v. Based on textual similarities, it is possible that this manuscript was copied from the printing.

¹⁵ Nikolaus of Dinkelsbühl, *De preceptis Decalogi*, in his *De dilectione Dei et proximi, De preceptis Decalogi, De oratione Dominica . . .* (Strasbourg, 1516), fols. 22v–49r. I have checked this printing against two manuscripts: Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 3024, fols. 91r–133r, and Clm 3417, fols. 179r–225v. On dating see Alois Madre, *Nikolaus von Dinkelsbühl Leben und Schriften: Ein Beitrag zur theologischen Literaturgeschichte*, Beiträge zur Geschichte des Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters 40/4 (Münster, 1965), p. 171. An edition of a German version of the sermons is given in Karin Baumann, *Aberglaube für Laien: Zur Problematik und Überlieferung spätmittelalterlicher Superstitionenkritik*, *Quellen und Forschungen zur europäischen Ethnologie* 6, 2 vols. (Würzburg, 1989), 2:503–680.

hannes Nider, likewise dealt with superstitious spells and charms in his treatise on the Decalogue.¹⁶ Sometime in the 1430s or 1440s the Leipzig theologian Johannes of Wünschelburg wrote his treatise *De superstitionibus*.¹⁷ In 1452 the Erfurt Carthusian Jakob of Paradise dealt with superstition in his work on the power of demons.¹⁸ Also around the middle of the century Denis the Carthusian wrote *Contra vitia superstitionum*,¹⁹ and the Zurich canon Felix Hemmerlin, trained in law, wrote several brief tracts on spells, charms, blessings, and exorcisms.²⁰ Later still, most likely in the third quarter of the century, Martin of Arles, a canon of Pamplona, wrote yet another treatise entitled simply *De superstitionibus*.²¹

By that time, authorities' concerns about superstition were coming to be subsumed (though never entirely) in the new obsession with diabolical witchcraft that

¹⁶ Johannes Nider, *Preceptorium divine legis* (Milan, 1489). For dating see Michael D. Bailey, *Battling Demons: Witchcraft, Heresy, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages* (University Park, Pa., 2003), p. 153. On Nider generally, see Bailey, *Battling Demons*, and Werner Tschacher, *Der Formicarius des Johannes Nider von 1437/38: Studien zu den Anfängen der europäischen Hexenverfolgungen im Spätmittelalter* (Aachen, 2000).

¹⁷ Johannes of Wünschelburg, *De superstitionibus*, Wrocław, Biblioteka Uniwersytecka we Wrocławiu, 239 (I F 212), fols. 228r–258v; compared with Wrocław, Biblioteka Uniwersytecka we Wrocławiu, 6098 (Mil. II 46), fols. 418r–445r; and Dresden, Sächsische Landesbibliothek–Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, Cod. P.104, fols. 1r–38v. A very brief excerpt, based on the Dresden manuscript, is given in Hansen, *Quellen*, p. 104, along with a discussion of dating.

¹⁸ Jakob of Paradise, *De potestate demonum*, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 18378, fols. 245r–272r; compared with Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 9105, fols. 167r–211r; Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Cod. Lat. Qu. 919, fols. 1r–30r; Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Cod. Theol. Fol. 668, fols. 298r–320r; and Augsburg, Staats- und Stadtbibliothek, 2^o Cod. 338, fols. 177r–198v. For dating see Dieter Mertens, *Iacobus Carthusiensis: Untersuchungen zur Rezeption der Werke des Kartäusers Jakob von Paradise (1381–1465)*, Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 50, Studien zur Germania Sacra 13 (Göttingen, 1976), p. 40. Most recently on Jakob see Krzysztof Bracha, “Die Kritik des Aberglaubens, der Irrtümer und Mißbräuche im Kult bei Jacobus Cartusienensis,” in *Bücher, Bibliotheken und Schriftkultur der Kartäuser: Festgabe zum 65. Geburtstag von Edward Potkowski*, ed. Sönke Lorenz, Contubernium: Tübinger Beiträge zur Universitäts- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte 59 (Stuttgart, 2002), pp. 151–63.

¹⁹ Denis the Carthusian, *Contra vitia superstitionum*, in his *Contra Alchoranum et sectam Machometicam libri quinque, De instituendo bello adversus Turcas, et De generali celebrando concilio, Contra vitia superstitionum* (Cologne, 1533), pp. 598–628. On Denis see Dirk Wassermann, *Dionysius der Kartäuser: Einführung in Werk und Gedankenwelt*, Analecta Cartusiana 133 (Salzburg, 1996).

²⁰ Felix Hemmerlin, *De benedictionibus aure cum sacramento faciendis*, in his *Varie oblectationis opuscula et tractatus* (Strasbourg, ca. 1497), fols. 100r–103r; *Tractatus de exorcismis*, *ibid.*, fols. 103v–106r; *Alius tractatus exorcismorum seu adiurationum*, *ibid.*, fols. 106r–110v; *De credulitate demonibus adhibenda*, *ibid.*, fols. 111r–115v. On these works see Balthasar Reber, *Felix Hemmerlin von Zürich, neu nach den Quellen bearbeitet* (Zurich, 1846), dating at p. 336. Also on dating see Catherine Chêne, *Juger les vers: Exorcismes et procès d'animaux dans le diocèse de Lausanne (XVe–XVIIe s.)*, Cahiers Lausannois d'Histoire Médiévale 14 (Lausanne, 1995), pp. 24–25.

²¹ Martin of Arles, *Tractatus de superstitionibus contra maleficia seu sortilegia quae hodie vigent in orbe terrarum* (Rome, 1559). Dating of the original composition is imprecise. Hansen, *Quellen*, p. 308, assumed a date ca. 1515, just prior to what he thought was the first printing in 1517 (in fact, it was 1510). Henry Charles Lea, *Materials toward a History of Witchcraft*, ed. Arthur C. Howland, 3 vols. (Philadelphia, 1939), 1:297, suggests a date in the “third quarter of the fifteenth century” based on content. Similarly Julio Caro Baroja, *The World of the Witches*, trans. O. N. V. Glendinning (Chicago, 1964), p. 145, suggests a date shortly after 1466. Fabián Alejandro Campagne, *Homo Catholicus, homo supersticiosus: El discurso antisupersticioso en la España de los siglos XV a XVIII* (Buenos Aires, 2002), p. 90, places it in the “last decades of the fifteenth century.”

developed in the course of the fifteenth century, for which these slightly earlier and then contemporary critics of superstition are often seen as precursors.²² Martin of Arles, for example, demonstrates great concern over witchcraft, and he uses the label *maleficium* as often as he does *superstitio*. Heavily reliant on the earlier author Johannes Nider, Martin draws as much from Nider's *Formicarius*, a seminal treatise on witchcraft, as from the more general discussion of magic and superstition in Nider's Decalogue commentary. Still, Martin remains more a "superstition" than a "witchcraft" author because, even when discussing *maleficium*, he remains focused on the improper or misunderstood nature of particular magical rites rather than recounting gruesome stories of demonic sabbaths or other extravagant aspects of diabolism that authorities increasingly associated with witchcraft. I do not intend here to focus at length on the complex relationship between superstition and witchcraft discourse in the fifteenth century. The clear existence of that relationship, however, is relevant to my larger point.

Rising anxiety on the part of clerical authorities and an increased drive to scrutinize and control common beliefs and practices, growing fear of the devil and demonic operations in the world, the first sparks of witch-hunting: these seem very much the hallmarks of crisis in late-medieval religious culture, evidence of forms of thought declining into senility.²³ But was that really the case? The image of the decrepit late Middle Ages painted so evocatively by Johan Huizinga (and in less resplendent colors by others) remains powerful, despite numerous scholars' efforts to subvert it.²⁴ It also seems readily apparent for an age bracketed by plague and schism on one end and religious reformation on the other. Yet while fifteenth-century authors certainly knew the crises their world had weathered, they had no conception of the tumults to come. Here I want to examine criticism of superstition in the early fifteenth century on its own terms, to see whether it indeed provides evidence of some crisis.

Since superstition was such a long-standing issue among Christian authorities, reaching back to the very earliest days of the church, we must first examine the long tradition of Christian discourse on superstition and how fifteenth-century writers related to it. While basic rhetoric about superstition could appear stable and even self-perpetuating, authors always deployed that rhetoric with an eye toward contemporary contexts. Fifteenth-century treatises presented superstition as a growing problem, a conviction that would seem to be grounded in the church's increasing pastoral and catechetical efforts among the laity in this period. Yet authorities did not regard superstition, even at this greater level of intensity, as a fundamentally new threat or crisis. Next we will explore the issues and anx-

²² Tschacher, *Der Formicarius*, pp. 269–91; Edward Peters, "The Medieval Church and State on Superstition, Magic and Witchcraft: From Augustine to the Sixteenth Century," in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Middle Ages*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (Philadelphia, 2002), pp. 173–245, at pp. 228–29.

²³ Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, trans. Rodney J. Payton and Ulrich Mammitzsch (Chicago, 1996), pp. 286–87, mentions rising fear of witchcraft as one of the indicators of late-medieval decline.

²⁴ A number of these works will be mentioned at the end of this article; see especially nn. 154, 156, 157, and 166.

ieties at the heart of fifteenth-century concerns. Conditioned by the Scholastic theology and natural philosophy of preceding centuries, authors had to consider the potential demonic, divine, and natural operations that might be implicated in certain rites. Their fear that common people would not understand the important distinctions they drew between those operations masked the fact that they themselves often came to different conclusions on particular points. Their concerns, therefore, give evidence of an intellectual structure beginning to strain under the pressure of its own complexities but which, importantly, is not yet seen to be exhausted or breaking down. While authorities might disagree on some details, their faith in their basic understanding of the world was not shaken. If their system of thought was in crisis, they did not perceive it. Finally we must step back from the sources and examine the context of broader intellectual and religious developments in the fifteenth century, in order to see whether, regardless of authorities' own perceptions, their criticisms of superstition emerged within, or are indicative of, some more generalized crisis in this era. Here I will show, by way of conclusion, how the issue of superstition might better fit, and perhaps slightly modify, the periodization of an "Old Europe" enduring, despite dynamic changes, down to the eighteenth century, rather than that of a "late" medieval period declining toward its end around 1500.

SUPERSTITIONS OLD AND NEW

Superstition was not a new concept in the fifteenth century. The idea, and the term, had originated in antiquity, generally pertaining to excessive or improper devotional or divinatory practices.²⁵ As Christianity gained ascendancy in the late Roman world, Christian writers declared that all pagan rites, insofar as they were directed toward Christian demons only masquerading as pagan deities, were improper, misinformed, and hence superstitious.²⁶ In the early fifth century, Augustine included "consultation and pacts with demons" in his influential list of superstitious practices.²⁷ Two centuries later, Isidore of Seville returned somewhat to Roman usages, citing Lucretius and Cicero while defining *superstitio* as excessive or "superfluous" religious observances. Yet he also emphasized the inevitable involvement of demons ("evil angels") in the magical arts.²⁸ Later Christian writers reproduced the definitions and the descriptions of superstition presented by those early authorities, creating to some degree a self-perpetuating rhetoric of

²⁵ See Dale B. Martin, *Inventing Superstition: From the Hippocratics to the Christians* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), though more focused on Greek *deisidaimonia* than Latin *superstitio*.

²⁶ Harmening, *Superstitio*, pp. 33–42. See also Jean-Claude Schmitt, "Les 'superstitutions,'" in *Histoire de la France religieuse*, 1: *Des dieux de la Gaule à la papauté d'Avignon*, ed. Jacques Le Goff (Paris, 1988), pp. 417–549, at pp. 425–28.

²⁷ *De doctrina Christiana* 2.20, CCSL 32:54: "Superstitiosum est, quicquid institutum est ab hominibus ad facienda et colenda idola pertinens uel ad colendam sicut deum creaturam partemue ullam creaturae uel ad consultationes et pacta quaedam significationum cum daemonibus placita atque foederata. . . ." See Linsenmann, *Die Magie*, pp. 50–52.

²⁸ Isidore, *Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*, ed. W. M. Lindsay, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1911; repr. Oxford, 1971), 8.3.6–7, 8.9.31, and 10.244.

superstition across the early Middle Ages.²⁹ So powerful was this literary tradition that considerable doubt hangs over the degree to which sources discussing superstition in the seventh, eighth, or ninth centuries describe contemporary practices.³⁰ Yet authorities' discourse on superstition, whatever enduring elements it contained, surely also reflected some aspects of real practice, as well as authorities' own often subtle reworkings of inherited tradition.³¹ These tendencies continued to be manifest in later periods.

As good Scholastics, the authors of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries who dealt with superstition were committed to the authority of the great names of the past. One of the few scholars to examine in depth even a portion of the sources focusing on superstition in this period, Karin Baumann, has concluded that fourteenth- and fifteenth-century church authorities regarded superstition as an essentially "a-historical phenomenon" that had been fully described already by patristic and early-medieval authors.³² Thus they followed those sources whenever possible, drawing on early Christian and even Old Testament accounts of pagan superstition for much of their rhetoric.³³ Of course, a relatively stable rhetoric of criticism can nevertheless mask important changes in the use of terms and nuances of meaning. These men wrote in and for their own era, and Baumann correctly concludes that, however heavily the weight of past authority may have lain on fourteenth- and fifteenth-century writers, they also reflected contemporary practices to a considerable degree in their works.³⁴ The issue, then, is how to understand their use of earlier authority and the new concerns with which they enlivened old debates.

There is no doubt that, especially at first glance, tracts and treatises on superstition produced in the fifteenth century seem homages to past opinion. Thomas Aquinas was a towering authority to whom all later authors adhered, especially for basic definitions.³⁵ They also drew heavily on another leading thirteenth-

²⁹ Harmening, *Superstitio*, pp. 49–75, notes with special reference the influence of the early-sixth-century author Caesarius of Arles.

³⁰ The strongest argument against widespread, persistent paganism in the early-medieval period is provided by Yitzhak Hen, *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul, A.D. 481–751*, Cultures, Beliefs, and Traditions 1 (Leiden, 1995), pp. 154–206. Ian N. Wood, "Pagan Religions and Superstitions East of the Rhine from the Fifth to the Ninth Century," in *After Empire: Towards an Ethnology of Europe's Barbarians*, ed. G. Ausenda, Studies in Historical Archaeoethnology 1 (Woodbridge, Eng., 1995), pp. 253–68, shows how difficult it is to access authentic northern European paganism (and hence superstition) from Christian sources.

³¹ Bernadette Filotas, *Pagan Survivals, Superstitions and Popular Cultures in Early Medieval Pastoral Literature*, Studies and Texts 151 (Toronto, 2005), esp. pp. 45–46.

³² Baumann, *Aberglaube* (above, n. 15), 1:274.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1:260 and 278.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:483–84.

³⁵ Every fifteenth-century author I have consulted relied heavily on Aquinas: Denis the Carthusian, Jean Gerson (specifically in his *Trilogium astrologiae theologizatae*, in Gerson, *Œuvres complètes*, 10:90–109, and his *Contra superstitionem sculpturae leonis*, in *Œuvres complètes*, 10:131–34), Heinrich of Gorcum, Felix Hemmerlin (his *De benedictionibus* and *De credulitate demonibus adhibenda*), Johannes of Frankfurt, Johannes of Wünschelburg, Martin of Arles, and Nikolaus of Jauer (his *De superstitionibus* and also in his official *Refutatio* of the errors of the Augustinian canon Werner of Friedberg in early 1405: Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 4721, fols. 199r–202r; checked against Clm 3041, fols. 183v–188r). The attribution of the *Refutatio* to Nikolaus of Jauer is suggested

century figure, William of Auvergne, particularly regarding questions of demonic power and the extent of demonic involvement in superstitious practices.³⁶ So strong was William's influence, in fact, that when Denis the Carthusian cited in his *Contra vitia superstitionum* "a certain master in his tract *De superstitionibus*, which for the most part he drew from Lord William of Paris's book *De fide et legibus*,"³⁷ he might have been referring to one of two different works by that title produced in the early fifteenth century, one by the Leipzig professor Johannes of Wünschelburg, the other an anonymous treatise *De superstitionibus* that exists in at least four copies in the Bavarian State Library in Munich, both of which are patterned heavily on William's work.³⁸

Beyond thirteenth-century Scholastics, and in many cases via those authors, authorities writing on superstition in the fifteenth century also drew on the older patristic and early-medieval literature that had established Christianity's basic understanding of the issue. Augustine appears as frequently as Aquinas in fifteenth-century texts. In fact, as concern over superstition mounted in this period, an intriguing manuscript shows how some clerics turned very directly to the literature of the past. The codex in question dates from the fifteenth century and originally belonged to the Augustinian Hermits in Munich. Toward the end of a manuscript that consists mainly of sermons of Franciscus Mayronis (1288–1328), a Franciscan theologian active in Paris, are a few folios dedicated to superstition. The library catalog labels this anonymous work simply as *Tractatus de superstitionibus, magia, sortilegiis, etc.*³⁹ In fact, it is a collection of excerpts from a number

in Franz, *Magister Nikolaus Magni de Jawor*, p. 154, and confirmed by Adolar Zumkeller, *Manuskripte von Werkender Autoren des Augustiner-Eremitenordens in mitteleuropäischen Bibliotheken*, Cassiciacum 20 (Würzburg, 1966), p. 396.

³⁶ Referenced in Denis the Carthusian, Gerson (his *De erroribus circa artem magicam* and *Trilogium astrologiae theologizatae*), Jakob of Paradise, Johannes of Frankfurt, Johannes of Wünschelburg, Martin of Arles, and Nikolaus of Jauer (*De superstitionibus* and *Refutatio*). On William see still Noël Valois, *Guillaume d'Auvergne, évêque de Paris (1228–1249): Sa vie et ses ouvrages* (Paris, 1880), esp. pp. 302–24 on astrology and superstition; Thorndike, *Magic and Experimental Science*, 2:338–71; now also Thomas B. de Mayo, *The Demonology of William of Auvergne: By Fire and Sword* (Lewiston, N.Y., 2007).

³⁷ "Magister quidam in Tractatu suo de superstitionibus, quem pro magna parte ex libro domini Guilielmi Parrhisiensis de fide et legibus collegit": Denis the Carthusian, *Contra vitia superstitionum*, p. 610.

³⁸ Anonymous, *Tractatus de superstitionibus*, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 4707, fols. 1r–70v; Clm 4727, fols. 1r–78r; Clm 18257, fols. 5r–52v; and Clm 26923, fols. 1r–67r. The treatise clearly comes from German-speaking lands, as the author includes a vernacular German charm to be recited under a new moon (Clm 4727, fol. 49r), and it must have been written in the first half of the fifteenth century. As a terminus post quem, the author cites Heinrich of Langenstein (d. 1397, Clm 4727, fol. 42r). As a terminus ante quem, probably the earliest of the Munich copies, Clm 26923, was likely copied in 1450. The copying of *De superstitionibus* is not dated in that codex, but the next work, following immediately after *De superstitionibus*, written in the same hand, and very likely copied in sequence, is a *Tractatus de latria et dulia* (Clm 26923, fols. 67v–96v), the explicit of which indicates that it was copied in that year. Much of the treatise is explicitly based on William's distinction of ten forms of superstitious idolatry. See Clm 4727, fol. 17r; and William of Auvergne, *De legibus* 23, in idem, *Opera omnia* (Venice, 1591), p. 65. On Johannes of Wünschelburg's reliance on William see Dietrich Kurze, "Johannes von Wünschelburg," in *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters: Verfasserlexikon*, 2nd ed., ed. Kurt Ruh, 4 (Berlin, 1982), p. 820.

³⁹ Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 8345, fols. 294v–297r.

of early sources. The (presumably) Augustinian scribe drew primarily on the namesake of his order, in particular quoting the essential passage from Augustine's *De doctrina Christiana* in which the bishop of Hippo defined superstition but also quoting from Augustine's *De divinatione daemonum*, the addendum to *De divinatione daemonum* that Augustine included in his *Retractationes*, and a letter from Augustine to Publicola.⁴⁰ Also included were Isidore of Seville's definitions of superstition from his *Etymologiae* and his long section devoted to *magia*.⁴¹ The most "modern" work quoted was the ninth-century canon *Episcopi* (which medieval authors attributed to the fourth-century Council of Ancyra), discussing the "superstition" of women who believed that they flew at night with the goddess Diana.⁴²

This little tract is hardly an intellectual tour de force. Not only does it consist almost entirely of quotations, but the scribe managed to bungle a number of them in minor ways (or he worked from faulty copies). To his eternal shame as an Augustinian, he mislabeled Augustine's fundamental definition of superstition in *De doctrina Christiana* 2.20 as found "libro primo" of the work.⁴³ He was also not especially well informed about his topic. He clearly knew no Greek and did not understand the Greek root of "necromancy," or divination by means of the dead.⁴⁴ Also, the collection of excerpts is incomplete. It has no prologue, introductory opening, or even title. It begins in medias res with a citation from Augustine (the incipit, such as it is, is simply: "Item libro primo de doctrina christiana . . .") and breaks off at the end of a page in the middle of a sentence.⁴⁵ Yet for all its imperfect and unfinished character, it shows that a cleric in the fifteenth century had grown interested enough in superstition to begin assembling a handbook of important early sources on the topic, probably as a reference work for others seeking basic definitions or writing on the topic themselves.

⁴⁰ For *De doctrina Christiana* see n. 27 above. Passages from *De divinatione daemonum* 3.7, 5.9, and 6.10 are found in *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 41, ed. Iosephus Zycha (Vienna, 1900), pp. 603, 607, and 610. The passage from the *Retractationes* is in CCSL 57, p. 114. The letter to Publicola is in CCSL 31, pp. 203–8.

⁴¹ Isidore, *Etymologiae* 8.3.6–7, 10.244, and 8.9.1–13. The scribe does not include the entire passages but excerpts several long selections. Not all are clearly attributed, and it is possible the scribe took some from intermediary works quoting Isidore.

⁴² See Hansen, *Quellen*, pp. 38–39.

⁴³ Clm 8345, fol. 294v.

⁴⁴ Clm 8345, fol. 297r, quoting from Isidore: "Ex nigromantici sunt quorum precantacionibus videntur resuscitari mortui diuinare et ad interrogate respondere, nigro in grece mortus, mancio diuinatio nuncupantur." In fact, Isidore has: "Necromantii sunt, quorum praecantacionibus videntur resuscitari mortui diuinare, et ad interrogata respondere. Νεκρὸς [necròs] enim Graece mortuus, μαντεία [mantia] divinatio nuncupatur" (*Etymologiae* 8.9.11). The scribe has conflated *necromantia* with its medieval near cognate *nigromantia*. See Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (University Park, Pa., 1998), pp. 4 and 19 n. 4. This error was fairly standard for writers in the fifteenth century.

⁴⁵ Clm 8345, fol. 297r: "Hiis ergo portentis per demonum fallaciam illuditur curiositas humana quid imprudanter appetunt scientie quod . . ." Fol. 297v is blank, as are fols. 300r–302v, as if the work was meant to be continued. There are no fols. 298 or 299, which, presumably blank, may have been torn out of the codex at some point, though there is no obvious sign of this, or the folios could simply have been misnumbered. This is clearly an incomplete rather than fragmentary copy, as the spaces for a large capital at the beginning of each major quotation have been left blank.

Reliant on past authority, the fifteenth century did not develop any new definition or dramatically new understanding of superstition. As Baumann notes, authors in this period considered the essential nature of superstition to be the same as that confronted by the early church fathers. Significantly different, however, were the level and the nature of interest the topic now attracted. In antiquity, while superstition had been a major issue, in many ways essential to Christianity's own definition of itself, it had never been an overriding focus of Christian writing.⁴⁶ Discussions of superstition were typically found as elements within other, more expansive works: Augustine's *De doctrina Christiana*, Caesarius of Arles's wide-ranging sermons, or Isidore of Seville's universal *Etymologiae*.⁴⁷ The same is true of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. During this period the church became increasingly involved in the quotidian religious practices of the laity through mechanisms as diverse as parish clergy, sacramental confession, and inquisition. Yet when learned authorities addressed superstition, they tended to deal with the issue as a theological abstraction or in relation to the suspected errors of other learned elites, such as the magical rites of clerical necromancers.⁴⁸ Concern over superstition had not yet peaked or reached its broadest extent. A score of tracts and treatises spread out over the first half of the fifteenth century do not necessarily mark concern over superstition as a defining characteristic of that period either, but they do show that for the first time a number of authors chose to write exclusively about this topic. Moreover, the issue figured prominently in one very characteristic genre of this age, being discussed as a form of idolatry in treatises on the Decalogue.⁴⁹ Decalogue commentaries were a primarily pastoral genre, and they reflect the growing concern of ecclesiastical authorities regarding superstition in lay belief and instruction.

Along these catechetical lines, and also very much in the spirit of the times, fifteenth-century authors addressed the issue of superstition less as an abstract theological point and more as a practical problem to be confronted and corrected.⁵⁰ Even broad, theoretical works were frequently motivated by particular concerns. Possibly the most widely circulated fifteenth-century treatise on super-

⁴⁶ Filotas, *Pagan Survivals*, p. 359, notes in five centuries of pastoral literature only about two thousand short passages dealing directly with superstition.

⁴⁷ For Augustine and Isidore see above, nn. 27, 40, and 41. Caesarius of Arles's *sermones* are found in CCSL 103 and 104. For a study see Guillaume Konda, *Le discernement et la malice des pratiques superstitieuses d'après les sermons de S. Césaire d'Arles* (Rome, 1970). Filotas, *Pagan Survivals*, p. 1, argues that Caesarius "set the tone" for all subsequent early-medieval treatment of paganism and superstition.

⁴⁸ Schmitt, "Superstitions" (above, n. 26), esp. pp. 497–510.

⁴⁹ German-language examples of these works form the basis of Baumann's study in *Aberglaube*. In terms of the breadth of this material in the fifteenth century, she notes that Munich alone has over 250 German vernacular manuscripts that deal with the Decalogue, mostly from the period 1420–90 (Baumann, *Aberglaube*, 1:127 and 128–97, describes many of these manuscripts). On the significance of the Ten Commandments for this period see John Bossy, "Moral Arithmetic: Seven Sins into Ten Commandments," in *Conscience and Casuistry in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Edmund Leites (Cambridge, Eng., 1988), pp. 214–34.

⁵⁰ Daniel Hobbins, "The Schoolman as Public Intellectual: Jean Gerson and the Late Medieval Tract," *American Historical Review* 108 (2003), 1308–37.

stition was that of Nikolaus of Jauer.⁵¹ This large work dealt with numerous aspects of superstition, yet it seems to have been motivated by a specific case of error, not by some uninformed layperson but by a theologically trained cleric. Implications for lay instruction, however, are evident throughout the case. In early 1405, the year Nikolaus wrote his treatise, the Heidelberg theological faculty had questioned the Augustinian friar Werner of Friedberg about various superstitious positions he supposedly held, some of which clearly derived from or reflected common practices.⁵² Werner was censured not only for using a vernacular healing charm himself but also for failing to reprimand any laity who confessed using similar rites. As always, at issue were both the nature of the practice and the need to police proper understanding.

Nikolaus wrote the official refutation of Werner's errors, and this exercise may have inspired his much larger treatise, in which he addressed issues of practice and understanding in more general ways.⁵³ Of course, such a connection is not necessary. Superstition was also being discussed in other contexts at Heidelberg at this time. Even as Werner's questioning was under way, another member of the theological faculty, Johannes of Frankfurt, conducted an academic dispute on whether certain words, figures, or characters could command and control demons, a central issue in authorities' categorizations of acts as superstition.⁵⁴ One could just as easily assume that Nikolaus of Jauer was already working on the topic of superstition and for that reason was chosen to refute Werner of Friedberg's positions. Either way, however, the relationship between Nikolaus of Jauer's treatise and the case of Werner of Friedberg shows the close connection between fifteenth-century writing on superstition and particular events.

⁵¹ Franz, *Magister Nikolaus Magni de Jawor*, p. 152. Franz's list of 58 known manuscript copies of *De superstitionibus* (pp. 255–64) is expanded to 119 in Bracha, *Teolog, diabel i zabobony*, pp. 216–21; in conversation, Dr. Bracha has informed me that his tally of *De superstitionibus* manuscripts is now close to 150. If one accepts the general “factor of 15” that Uwe Neddermeyer argues should be used to estimate original fifteenth-century manuscript production totals from known survivals, then *De superstitionibus* might have originally circulated in over 2,000 manuscript copies (*Von der Handschrift zum gedruckten Buch: Schriftlichkeit und Leseinteresse im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit. Quantitative und qualitative Aspekte*, Buchwissenschaftliche Beiträge aus dem Deutschen Bucharchiv München 61, 2 vols. [Wiesbaden, 1998], 1:81).

⁵² On Werner's case see Franz, *Magister Nikolaus Magni de Jawor*, pp. 150–54, and, more recently, Robert E. Lerner, “Werner di Friedberg intrappolato dalla legge,” in *La parola all'accusato*, ed. Jean-Claude Maire Vigueur and Agostino Paravicini Bagliani (Palermo, 1991), pp. 268–81. Nikolaus does not mention Werner's case directly in his *De superstitionibus*, but nor does he mention the case much in his official *Refutatio* of Werner's positions (above, n. 35). The *Refutatio* is mostly a collection of authorities disproving the positions Werner had been made to renounce in his *Revocatio* of February 11, 1405 (Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 4721, fol. 198r–v).

⁵³ Franz, *Nikolaus Magni de Jawor*, pp. 154–55.

⁵⁴ Johannes of Frankfurt, *Questio*. The work survives in manuscripts variously dated to 1405–6 and 1425–26. Franz, *Magister Nikolaus Magni de Jawor*, p. 85 n. 7, misread the explicit of the copy in Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 15320, fol. 155r (“Hec questio fuit in disputatione de quolibet heydelberge determinata Anno domini 1406 nona die januarii per magistrum Iohannem de Frankfordia sacre theologie bacl.”) as “1412.” He was then followed by Hansen, *Quellen*, p. 71, in his edition of this work. Dorothea Walz (above, n. 12) has examined this misreading and further argues that 1406 must be a scribal error for 1405, thereby placing the disputation in the same month (January 1405) as Werner's trial.

Other authors also reflect this sense of immediate concern. Heinrich of Gorcum, writing around 1425, announced at the outset of his treatise that he intended to respond to “cases [of superstition] presented to me” and proceeded to address nine examples.⁵⁵ Martin of Arles, writing much later in the century, composed his general work on superstition in response to a single questionable event. In times of drought the local clergy of a village near Pamplona would perform a ceremony that involved saying masses over an image of St. Peter, baptizing it, and holding a procession. All this was intended to bring rain. Martin wrote in response to “a certain archdeacon” who asked whether this was a legitimate rite or a condemned superstition.⁵⁶ Denis the Carthusian wrote probably around the middle of the century and, while he mentioned no specific example, was likely inspired by similar cases. He stated that his short work should serve as a guide for local pastors so that they could prevent their flocks (and doubtless themselves as well) from falling into superstitious error.⁵⁷ Rather different in social context, but still a clear example of a treatise written for a specific purpose, was the German courtier Johannes Hartlieb’s 1456 tract, *Buch aller verbotenen Künste, des Aberglaubens und der Zauberei*. Written at the request of Duke Albrecht II of Bavaria, Hartlieb’s work deals more with learned courtly magic than common spells and charms, though it makes some mention of common magic and witchcraft.⁵⁸

However timeless superstition could seem in its essential nature, many authors clearly felt it was becoming more pressing and problematic in their time. Jean Gerson explicitly lamented at the beginning of *De erroribus circa artem magicam* that superstitious observances were growing ever more prevalent.⁵⁹ Denis the Carthusian exhibits a similar attitude. His *Contra vitia superstitionum* drew extensively on William of Auvergne’s *De legibus*.⁶⁰ Yet Denis recognized that the particular needs of his age called for a more readily usable summary of that sprawling thirteenth-century work, one that could be used to combat growing superstition among the laity. His stated intent was to expound on his topic “briefly, plainly, and simply” as a guide to low-ranking parish clergy who would be in regular contact with common people and would need to police their practices.⁶¹ In perhaps the most evocative description of the perceived degradation of present days, Nikolaus of Jauer compared the strong predilection of contemporary Christians for superstition to that of the ancient Jews for succumbing to idolatry and worshiping false gods.⁶²

⁵⁵ Heinrich of Gorcum, *De superstitiosis quibusdam casibus*, fol. 1r.

⁵⁶ Martin of Arles, *De superstitionibus*, fols. 1r–2r.

⁵⁷ Denis the Carthusian, *Contra vitia superstitionum*, p. 599: “. . . praesertim quam laici quidam ex ignorantia multipliciter hic offendunt; qui quamuis idola non adorant, tamen in modo colendi deum grauius errant. Pertinetque ad pastores vt illos corripiant, corrigant et informant.”

⁵⁸ Johannes Hartlieb, *Das Buch aller verbotenen Künste, des Aberglaubens und der Zauberei*, ed. and trans. Falk Eisermann and Eckhard Graf, *Esoterik des Abendlandes 4* (Ahlerstedt, Ger., 1989).

⁵⁹ Gerson, *De erroribus*, p. 77: “observationes nostra, pro nefas, tempestate nimis et nimis inualescentes.”

⁶⁰ Probably directly, but also explicitly through another fifteenth-century treatise modeled on William’s work, as above, n. 37.

⁶¹ Denis the Carthusian, *Contra vitia superstitionum*, p. 599: “breue, plane atque simpliciter.”

⁶² Nikolaus of Jauer, *De superstitionibus*, fol. 44r.

Despite the clear sense that superstition had grown particularly threatening, only one of these authors made any specific argument for why this should be so: Martin of Arles noted the presence of many “new Christians” in Iberia, that is, converted Jews and Muslims, and attributed the spread of superstition to them.⁶³ Moreover, while all authors cited ancient authorities and clearly perceived superstition as in some sense perennial, only one writer, Heinrich of Gorcum, asserted specifically that some superstitions, such as belief in the so-called Egyptian days as a time of particular misfortune, were the unchanged manifestations of ancient paganism.⁶⁴ These men had a sense of history and certainly recognized that superstitions changed over time, even as they held that essential errors remained constant. A new vitality infused this old issue in the fifteenth century, but not in ways that astonished authorities or called for extended explanation. The church had confronted superstition in the past, and now was simply another moment when it needed to do so again. What remains to be asked is whether in this particular confrontation, in the concerns it generated and the responses it invoked, the authorities who wrote on superstition perceived any kind of crisis.

AUTHORITIES' ANXIETIES

The concerns clustering around the issue of superstition were, for authorities, as much about ensuring proper understanding of the various forces that infused the created world as about policing proper use of powerful rites. In many cases improper understanding is what rendered a practice inappropriate. Any involvement with demonic power was of course reprehensible—or rather, almost any, for the faithful could sometimes compel the devil by the power of Christ. Prayer, blessings, and items consecrated by the church all exerted power, yet that power had to be correctly understood lest a legitimate rite become corrupt and superstitious. In addition, various natural, though often occult, forces suffused the world, presenting a legitimate resource on which the faithful might draw but also a means by which demons could lead the unwary astray.⁶⁵ As authorities articulated their anxieties about all potential areas of superstitious error, they were, in fact, mapping a topography of both spiritual and natural power. The general contours of that map were widely agreed upon, but many of the more exact details were troubling, and often authors disagreed among themselves on precisely where important boundary lines should be drawn.

Authorities were in full agreement about the main danger entailed in superstition: the likely involvement of demons. Heinrich of Gorcum warned at the outset of his short tract of the terrible sin into which people would fall if they sought the “aid or counsel” of demons.⁶⁶ This was hardly a startling position, as it was

⁶³ Martin of Arles, *De superstitionibus*, fol. 33r.

⁶⁴ Heinrich of Gorcum, *De superstitionis quibusdam casibus*, fol. 5r.

⁶⁵ I also address considerations of natural and demonic power in relation to superstition, with different points of emphasis, in “The Disenchantment of Magic: Spells, Charms, and Superstition in Early European Witchcraft Literature,” *American Historical Review* 111 (2006), 383–404; and in “Witchcraft, Superstition, and Astrology in the Late Middle Ages” (forthcoming).

⁶⁶ Heinrich of Gorcum, *De superstitionis quibusdam casibus*, fol. 1r.

grounded firmly in authorities stretching from Augustine to Aquinas.⁶⁷ Other fifteenth-century authors followed suit, declaring the threat of idolatry to be the greatest danger inherent in superstition.⁶⁸ That the idolatrous worship of demons was sinful could hardly be doubted, although in good Scholastic fashion many authors set about proving it at some length.⁶⁹ Most common spells and charms, however, did not contain explicit elements of demonic invocation or worship. In these cases, authors (again following established authority) assumed a tacit pact binding the human spell caster to a demon.⁷⁰ Yet since tacit pacts, by definition, left no overt evidence of demonic involvement, authorities felt compelled to prove that demons were, or at least could be, involved in the operations that spells or other superstitious rites were supposed to bring about.

Fifteenth-century authors writing on superstition devoted a great deal of their energy to demonstrating the possibility and range of demonic power. Nikolaus of Jauer dedicated more than the first third of his long work to this topic.⁷¹ Jean Gerson's *De erroribus circa artem magicam* was much shorter but with an even greater proportion—close to half the original material in the tract—devoted to questions of demonic existence and power.⁷² Jakob of Paradise framed his entire discussion of spells and superstitions in terms of demonic abilities.⁷³ Even with rites that supposedly involved the explicit invocation of demons, authorities felt the need to argue at some length that these were improper and superstitious.⁷⁴ In fact, the sources on which these men drew did create grounds for debate. The

⁶⁷ Heinrich announced (*ibid.*) that he intended to draw mainly on Augustine, *City of God* 21, and Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2.2.95–97.

⁶⁸ Anonymous, *De superstitionibus*, fols. 7v–8v; Nikolaus of Jauer, *De superstitionibus*, fol. 49v; Denis the Carthusian, *Contra vitia superstitionum*, p. 600; Jakob of Paradise, *De potestate demonum*, fol. 267v.

⁶⁹ The longest treatment is Anonymous, *De superstitionibus*, fols. 7r–v and 8v–16v, in general outline following Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2.2.94.2–3, 3:666–69, though obviously far exceeding it in detail.

⁷⁰ Augustine had defined all superstition as entailing “pacta . . . cum demonibus” in *De doctrina Christiana* 2.20, p. 54, while Isidore had referred to magical arts functioning “ex quadam pestifera societate hominum et angelorum malorum” in *Etymologiae* 8.9.31. Aquinas stated that all magicians operated “per pactum initum cum daemone” in *Summa theologiae* 1.110.4, 1:825; he repeated Augustine’s association of superstition and demonic pacts and noted that these pacts might be “vel tacita, vel expressa” in *Summa theologiae* 2.2.92.2, 3:661. See Harmening, *Superstitio*, pp. 309–17. Also in the thirteenth century Albertus Magnus and William of Auvergne discussed tacit and implicit pacts: see Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1972), p. 144; and Tschacher, *Der Formicarius* (above, n. 16), pp. 250–52.

⁷¹ Nikolaus of Jauer, *De superstitionibus*, fols. 35r–46r (out of a total of twenty-nine folios in this copy).

⁷² Gerson, *De erroribus*, pp. 78–81 (out of fourteen total pages in this edition, of which the final five pages consist largely of the 1398 condemnation of magic and superstition by the Paris theological faculty).

⁷³ At the outset of *De potestate demonum* (fol. 245r) he noted that all “sortilegia, incantaciones, veneficia, sompnia, diuinaciones, beneficiones, prestigia, aursupicia, ars notoria, futurorum prenosticaciones, coniuraciones, dierum obseruaciones, puntuaciones per artem nigromancie, piromancie, geomancie, et plura talia,” when not mere figments of human imagination, derive from “illusiones demonum.”

⁷⁴ Anonymous, *De superstitionibus*, fols. 55v–59r, discussing explicitly demonic divination; Denis the Carthusian, *Contra vitia superstitionum*, pp. 613–14, discussing the same.

Bible, for example, repeatedly sanctioned the practice of exorcism, declaring that all followers of Christ had the power to cast out demons in his name.⁷⁵ This could easily be construed as entailing power to control and manipulate demons more generally. Thomas Aquinas had also stressed that there were two modes by which humans could interact with demons, either imploring and supplicating them for aid or commanding and compelling them by the power of Christ. He had judged, and fifteenth-century authors were forced to acknowledge, that the second method was entirely legitimate.⁷⁶

Such an admission was deeply troublesome because it opened a window for human interaction with demons that might not be conclusively shut again. Most authorities were quick to stress that, aside from casting out demons and driving them away, no one could ever hope to control these powerful and deceitful creatures by any kind of rite or ritual.⁷⁷ Even in cases of simple exorcism, authorities argued vigorously that demons were compelled only by divine power, not by any virtue inherent in the words or rites employed. Yet incorrect words or any improvisations could lead inadvertently to demonic supplication. Thus Nikolaus of Jauer advised people to use only psalms and official prayers, above all the Lord's Prayer, to shield themselves from demons.⁷⁸ Certainly, they should not risk any more complicated interaction with demonic forces.

Of course, not just divine and demonic power operated in the world. Earthly materials possessed natural properties, and astral bodies radiated natural energies. Some of these natural powers were obvious, but others were occult and could only be exploited by those with special knowledge. At least since the thirteenth century a category of natural magic had existed in Christian thought, which authorities deemed more or less permissible. William of Auvergne had written on this topic, as had Thomas Aquinas and his teacher Albertus Magnus.⁷⁹ Exploiting natural properties was in no way illicit or superstitious, and so in their consideration of superstition, authorities needed to take into account this added complication: what rites and seeming spells might in fact draw only on natural forces? Nikolaus of Jauer wrote that people were perfectly free to use herbs and other natural items to cure illness, heal injuries, and for other beneficial purposes.⁸⁰ Martin of Arles agreed, though because it was critical that illicit forces not creep in and corrupt

⁷⁵ Matthew 10.1, Matthew 10.8, Mark 3.15, Mark 16.17, Luke 9.1.

⁷⁶ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2.2.90.2, 3:654; Johannes Nider, *Preceptorium divine legis* 1.11.kk; Anonymous, *De superstitionibus*, fol. 60r; Jakob of Paradise, *De potestate demonum*, fols. 259v–260r.

⁷⁷ Anonymous, *De superstitionibus*, fol. 39v; Nikolaus of Jauer, *De superstitionibus*, fols. 42v–43r; Nikolaus's *Refutatio* of the errors of Werner of Friedberg, fol. 201v; Johannes of Frankfurt, *Quaestio*, passim.

⁷⁸ Nikolaus of Jauer, *De superstitionibus*, fol. 55v.

⁷⁹ Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Eng., 1989), pp. 12–14; Francesco Santi, "Guglielmo d'Auvergne e l'ordine dei Domenicani tra filosofia naturale e tradizione magica," in *Autour de Guillaume d'Auvergne († 1249)*, ed. Franco Morenzoni and Jean-Yves Tilliette, Bibliothèque d'Histoire Culturelle du Moyen Âge 2 (Turnhout, 2005), pp. 137–53; Jean-Patrice Boudet, *Entre science et "nigromance": Astrologie, divination et magie dans l'Occident médiéval (XIIe–XVe siècle)*, Histoire Ancienne et Médiévale 83 (Paris, 2006), pp. 128 and 133.

⁸⁰ Nikolaus of Jauer, *De superstitionibus*, fol. 56r–v: "De veritate autem herbarum non est dubium et ita eiam licitum sit eis uti ordine nature ad sanitates et ad alia immutanda."

an otherwise natural remedy, he cautioned that people should not recite any incantations as they gathered herbs or other natural ingredients.⁸¹

Authorities entered into particularly complex discussions concerning whether natural divination might be possible. In principle, all authorities agreed that careful observation of natural signs could be used to predict some future occurrences, but again opportunities for falling into error were plentiful. Heinrich of Gorcum, for example, noted that birds were especially sensitive to natural conditions in the air, and so their behavior could often be used to predict coming storms and other meteorological events without recourse to any kind of illicit, superstitious augury.⁸² Denis the Carthusian agreed but warned that even if people observing a flight of birds avoided any illicit behavior themselves, still demons might affect the behavior of the birds in order to lead these people into error.⁸³

The most powerful natural forces permeating the world, and the most worrisome, were those emanating from the sun, moon, and stars. Authorities heaped attention on superstitious uses of astral forces to perform divination and other magical operations. A number of Jean Gerson's tracts dealt specifically with such astral superstition.⁸⁴ Authorities' main concern was that astral magicians might, in their rituals and ceremonies, address and propitiate stars as sentient intelligences. Thomas Aquinas had condemned this sort of astral rite, for, as he argued, the stars had no life themselves and the only intelligent entities that magicians might address through such rites were demons.⁸⁵ Similarly William of Auvergne had strongly opposed the "idolatry" of anthropomorphizing astral bodies and honoring or invoking them as if they were sentient beings.⁸⁶

Another serious concern was that astrologers might claim to predict events over which the stars exerted no natural influence, above all events that derived from human actions, for astral force could not be allowed to impinge on human free will. Yet authorities admitted that astrologers could legitimately prognosticate anything that might be caused, directly or indirectly, by astral influence.⁸⁷ This opened up a fairly wide field of action. Most directly, the power of the stars affected the atmosphere and so could influence the weather. But the stars also affected other natural processes, including some within the human body itself. Many authorities were quick to note that physicians legitimately took into account the effects of the stars on the human body when diagnosing and treating disease.⁸⁸ Because of their natural effect on the body, the stars could even create urges and

⁸¹ Martin of Arles, *De superstitionibus*, fols. 7v–8r.

⁸² Heinrich of Gorcum, *De superstitionibus quibusdam casibus*, fol. 1r.

⁸³ Denis the Carthusian, *Contra vitia superstitionum*, pp. 618–19.

⁸⁴ Jean Gerson, *Trilogium astrologiae theologizatae, Contra superstitionem sculpturae leonis*, and *De respectu coelestium siderum* (the last in *Œuvres complètes*, 10:109–16).

⁸⁵ Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* 3.104; *Thomas von Aquin, Summe gegen die Heiden*, 3/2, ed. and trans. Karl Allgaier, *Texte zur Forschung* 18 (Darmstadt, 1996), pp. 116–22.

⁸⁶ William of Auvergne, *De legibus* 25, in *Opera omnia*, pp. 75–79. Anonymous, *De superstitionibus*, fols. 22r–23v, rehearsed his arguments in the fifteenth century.

⁸⁷ Nikolaus of Jauer, *De superstitionibus*, fols. 40r and 50r; Denis the Carthusian, *Contra vitia superstitionum*, pp. 614–15; Jakob of Paradise, *De potestate demonum*, fol. 264v.

⁸⁸ Hartlieb, *Buch* (above, n. 58), p. 88. Nikolaus of Jauer, *De superstitionibus*, fol. 50r, explicitly compares physicians and (nonsuperstitious) astrologers in their use of natural signs to predict future conditions.

“inclinations,” by which many weak-willed people were fully governed, and so, in fact, the stars could be used at least to guess at some aspects of human behavior.⁸⁹ This very inexact sort of foreknowledge could never rise to the level of certain prediction because, of course, free will might always overrule the carnal impulses generated by astral forces, yet such considerations added layers of complication to authorities’ judgments about astrological divination.⁹⁰ Precisely because of these complexities, many authorities cautioned against any reliance on astral rites because demons could so easily involve themselves in these murky matters.⁹¹

The potential threat of demons operating in the natural world could be countered by the invocation of divine power. Martin of Arles had noted that people should not mutter any incantations while gathering medicinal herbs, for fear that this would invite demons into an otherwise permissible activity, but he encouraged the use of the Creed or the Lord’s Prayer.⁹² Yet even the invocation of divine power could be a cause for concern and confusion. Authorities stressed that official prayers and blessings, just like unofficial spells and charms, carried no power in and of themselves. If prayer and blessing were effective, this was only the result of divine power acting in response, not to a specific verbal formula, but rather to the faith that those words (ideally) conveyed.⁹³ To believe or to behave otherwise would be to fall into superstitious error. Only the sacraments functioned automatically, and again not because of any power that rested inherently in their formulas, but because of a “pact” consecrated between God and the church that divine power would always respond to sacramental invocation.⁹⁴

A similar threat of superstition clung to relics of saints, to images of the Virgin Mary, Christ, the cross, and even the Eucharist. Such items were worthy of reverence for what they represented (or in the case of the consecrated host, church

⁸⁹ Nikolaus of Jauer, *De superstitionibus*, fol. 53v; Denis the Carthusian, *Contra vitia superstitionum*, p. 615; Jakob of Paradise, *De potestate demonum*, fol. 264v.

⁹⁰ Nikolaus of Jauer, *De superstitionibus*, fol. 53r; Martin of Arles, *De superstitionibus*, fol. 12r. Best on the complexities of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century astrology is Laura Ackerman Smoller, *History, Prophecy, and the Stars: The Christian Astrology of Pierre d’Ailly, 1350–1420* (Princeton, N.J., 1994). Boudet, *Entre science et “nigromance,”* covers astrology in detail and places it in the context of many other forms of magic.

⁹¹ Anonymous, *De superstitionibus*, fol. 65r; Nikolaus of Jauer, *De superstitionibus*, fols. 50v, 53v, and 54v; Denis the Carthusian, *Contra vitia superstitionum*, p. 615; Martin of Arles, *De superstitionibus*, fols. 16r–v and 57r–v. At fol. 57r–v Martin is citing from Gerson, *Trilogium astrologiae theologizatae*, p. 105.

⁹² Martin of Arles, *De superstitionibus*, fol. 8r; likewise Johannes Nider, *Preceptorium divine legis* 1.9.e. Both authorities drew from Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2.2.96.4, 3:689.

⁹³ Anonymous, *De superstitionibus*, fols. 35v–36r; Nikolaus of Jauer, *De superstitionibus*, fols. 57v and 58v; also his *Refutatio*, fol. 200v; Johannes of Frankfurt, *Quaestio*, pp. 79–80; Heinrich of Gorcum, *De superstitiosis quibusdam casibus*, fol. 2r; Denis the Carthusian, *Contra vitia superstitionum*, pp. 605–6.

⁹⁴ Heinrich of Gorcum, *De superstitiosis quibusdam casibus*, fol. 2v; Denis the Carthusian, *Contra vitia superstitionum*, p. 605; and with the notion of pact Nikolaus of Jauer, *De superstitionibus*, fol. 58r; Johannes of Frankfurt, *Quaestio*, p. 79; Anonymous, *De superstitionibus*, fols. 32v and 42r, drawing on the notion of divine pacts in William of Auvergne, *De legibus* 27, p. 87.

authorities asserted, for what they in fact were).⁹⁵ Yet they, too, had no inherent “virtue”; rather they served as foci through which divine power often (or always) chose to operate.⁹⁶ These were subtle distinctions, and authorities were deeply concerned that they would be lost on common people, or even some clerics, who would come to revere these items in themselves and not for what they represented.⁹⁷ Among the errors of which the Augustinian friar Werner of Friedberg stood accused in 1405, for example, was that he believed a cross in the possession of the Augustinians in Landau carried unique virtues beyond those that any cross might possess, a charge he strongly denied.⁹⁸ Had he believed this, however, he would have fallen into the same error as both clergy and laity in the village near Pamplona condemned by Martin of Arles, who believed that they could augment some power inherent in a statue of St. Peter by baptizing it and then employing it in a ceremony to bring rain.⁹⁹ Similarly, other authorities criticized people who believed that a particular image of the Virgin Mary might be “holier and more efficacious” than any other.¹⁰⁰

None of this was to say that faithful Christians should not use prayers or blessings or call upon the saints in times of need. The very first “case” that Heinrich of Gorcum discussed in his *De superstitionis quibusdam casibus* concerned the performance of rites dedicated to St. Agatha in order to protect against fire. Heinrich concluded that these rites were entirely licit and commendable so long as people understood that it was divine power, and not any virtue inherent in the rite itself, that would provide the sought-for protection.¹⁰¹ Werner of Friedberg, who was a lector in theology, though still accused of falling into error by advocating and employing superstitious rites, noted that if all blessings were illicit, the church could not advocate the blessing of ashes on Ash Wednesday, palm fronds on Palm Sunday, or eggs or meat at Easter.¹⁰² He declared that whenever people asked his advice about particular blessings or charms, he only forbade the practices if they seemed manifestly to call on the power of the devil.¹⁰³

⁹⁵ Martin of Arles, *De superstitionibus*, fols. 48r–50r, beginning with the question of a superstitious misuse of an image of St. Peter, has the fullest treatment of this issue. Anonymous, *De latría et dulia*, which follows Anonymous, *De superstitionibus*, in Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 26923, fols. 67v–96v, and was copied in the same hand and likely at the same time, includes extensive discussions of the manner in which images of Christ, Mary, the saints, and the cross are to be venerated and worshiped (fols. 82v–92r).

⁹⁶ Martin of Arles, *De superstitionibus*, fol. 15r–v. The Eucharist was again an exception in that it always conveyed divine power but only in the sense of bestowing grace for which it had been consecrated. Other operations—healing, warding off demons, etc.—were no more inherent to it than to any other blessed or sacral item.

⁹⁷ Anonymous, *De superstitionibus*, fol. 28r.

⁹⁸ Werner, *Revocatio*, fol. 198r.

⁹⁹ Martin of Arles, *De superstitionibus*, opens his treatise with this case (as above, n. 56), and discusses its error fully at fols. 47v–54r.

¹⁰⁰ Anonymous, *De superstitionibus*, fol. 28r: “una ymagine beate virginis certis aliis esse sanctiorem yel efficaciorum ad effectus miraculosos.”

¹⁰¹ Heinrich of Gorcum, *De superstitionis quibusdam casibus*, fols. 1v–2r.

¹⁰² Werner, *Revocatio*, fol. 198r. See also his slightly earlier *Responsio*, in Lerner, “Werner di Friedberg” (above, n. 52), p. 280.

¹⁰³ Werner, *Revocatio*, fol. 198r: “in welhem segen der tuifel nit angeruft ward die han ich nit gestrafft noch verboten”; *Responsio*, p. 280: “et in quibus invocationibus sub vocabulo maligni spiritus non

lost, Christ was found again; may he bless these wounds, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”¹⁰⁶ Several decades later, however, the Zurich canon Felix Hemmerlin judged the spell to be entirely legitimate and Heidelberg’s condemnation faulty.¹⁰⁷ Nor was this the only case in which Hemmerlin went against other authorities. He also approved of a spell to heal ailing cows that he knew other authorities had opposed.¹⁰⁸ The theologians of Heidelberg had similarly condemned the belief that writing the names of the Three Kings and carrying them as a charm would ward off attacks of epilepsy.¹⁰⁹ A few decades later in Cologne, however, Heinrich of Gorcum explicitly supported this practice, so long as people did it in reverence to God and not in the belief that the written words themselves carried power.¹¹⁰ Some authorities were inclined to allow the clearly widespread practice of carrying apotropaic charms worn around the neck.¹¹¹ Others were more suspicious, however, and Nikolaus of Jauer argued in the strongest terms that while the custom was perhaps not inherently illicit, nevertheless it was highly questionable, or at least presented the possibility of serious error, and so should be avoided.¹¹²

The limits of legitimate exorcism were especially difficult to determine. Both Martin of Arles and Felix Hemmerlin maintained that it was licit to use holy names to “exorcise” pests from fields, and in this case Hemmerlin was in agreement with

¹⁰⁶ “Christus wart geboren Christus wart verloren Christus wart widerfunden deer gesegen dise wunden In namen des vatters und des sunes und des hailigen geistes”: Werner, *Revocatio*, fol. 198r. See also Werner, *Responsio*, p. 280, in which the last clause is rendered in Latin.

¹⁰⁷ Hemmerlin, *Alius tractatus exorcismorum seu adiurationum*, fol. 106v: “Et ecce audi rem proprie gestam quod de anno domini MCCCCV, die Sexta, mensis Februarii, quidam peritus frater Wernherus, lector ordinis Augustinensis, in aula episcopi Spirensis, in opido Heydelbergensis, reuocauit octo articulos tanquam erroneos, per ipsum predicatos, inter quos quartus de certis exorcismis erat talis, in forma vulgari patenter alemanico conceptus. . . . Et consequenter dixit formam unius exorcismi qui talis fuit de vulneribus curandis: Christus ward geboren, Christus ward verloren, Christus ward gefunden, der gesegnet dise wunden, in namen des vatters, etc.” Analysis of this spell occupies most of this tract. Hemmerlin states (fol. 107v) that Werner was engaged in a good work, with good intention, and employed correct words. His final conclusion concerning Werner’s charm, “quod tales et sui similes adiurationes seu exorcismi aut imprecationis pronuntiatio licite et conuenienter admittitur, et per prelatos ecclesiarum non prohibentur,” is on fol. 110v.

¹⁰⁸ Hemmerlin, *Tractatus de exorcismis*, focuses on the vernacular spell “Ob das sy das Maria magt oder iungfrow eyn kindt Jesum gebar, so kumme disem thier das blatt ab, in namen des vatters, etc.” (fol. 103v). He mentions other authorities who condemn the spell, although he does not indicate who they are (fol. 105r).

¹⁰⁹ Werner, *Revocatio*, fol. 198r: “Item der funfte wer die namen der trei kinigen by im trett das dem sant Valentinus plage nit angane.”

¹¹⁰ Heinrich of Gorcum, *De superstitiosis quibusdam casibus*, fol. 4r: “In aliquibus cedulis scribere nomina trium regum et collo suspendere ob reuerenciam dei et ipsorum regum et eorum fiducia sperare auxilium non est illicitum. Credere autem ipsis verbis scriptis inesse aliquam virtutem sanandi quasi libere infirmitates est vanum et superstitiosum.”

¹¹¹ Heinrich of Gorcum, *De superstitiosis quibusdam casibus*, fol. 2r; Denis the Carthusian, *Contra vitia superstitionum*, pp. 602–3. On the neck as the “default position” for amulets see Don C. Skemer, *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages* (University Park, Pa., 2006), p. 135.

¹¹² Nikolaus of Jauer, *De superstitiosis quibusdam casibus*, fol. 59r–v. Nikolaus of Dinkelsbühl, *De preceptis Decalogi*, was also strongly critical (fols. 28v–29r and 30v), before grudgingly admitting that such practices are sometime licit (fol. 30v).

the Heidelberg theological faculty, or at least so he asserted.¹¹³ Nikolaus of Jauer deemed that the use of crosses to ward off storms from fields was superstitious because this was not a purpose for which the church specifically intended blessed crosses to be used.¹¹⁴ Heinrich of Gorcum condemned the practice as well, but mainly on the grounds that people typically believed the cross itself possessed inherent power, thereby implicitly leaving the door open for the licit use of such rites so long as proper understanding was maintained.¹¹⁵ Previously in his tract Heinrich had argued that people could legitimately take consecrated or blessed items from churches and employ them for nonsacral purposes, so long as they did so with reverence and right belief.¹¹⁶ Denis the Carthusian argued against this, maintaining that it was inherently irreverent to use consecrated items for purposes other than those for which they were officially intended.¹¹⁷ He then raised an exception to his own point, however. Noting that holy water was officially blessed to drive away demons, he surmised that insofar as demons might be the cause of foul weather, it was licit to use holy water to protect fields at least from demonically generated storms.¹¹⁸ The ever-permissive Felix Hemmerlin, discussing no less a sacral item than the Eucharist, felt it was entirely legitimate to use consecrated hosts to protect fields on all occasions.¹¹⁹

With the possible exception of Hemmerlin, all early-fifteenth-century critics of superstition were deeply concerned about the potential for error that these practices held, which, if unchecked, could become a terrible corruption within Christian society. Heinrich of Gorcum, for example, noted that many people fell into superstition only out of ignorance and so might be gently corrected; but if they persisted in their error, then authorities should apply “harsher medicine.”¹²⁰ Likewise Johannes of Frankfurt noted that officials should either expel or “more harshly correct” superstitious diviners or sorcerers.¹²¹ Yet how were authorities to correct error reliably when there was so much confusion, in practice, about which rites might be permissible and which not? Typically, authors argued that officials should err on the side of caution. Denis the Carthusian asserted that even if rites were not inherently superstitious, authorities could legitimately condemn them

¹¹³ Martin of Arles, *De superstitionibus*, fol. 28r; Hemmerlin, *De exorcismis*, fol. 104r, and again with a statement about Heidelberg approving such practices in *Alius tractatus exorcismorum*, fols. 108v–109v. This portion of the tract has been edited and translated into French in Chêne, *Juger les vers* (above, n. 20), pp. 126–33.

¹¹⁴ Nikolaus of Jauer, *De superstitionibus*, fol. 57r.

¹¹⁵ Heinrich of Gorcum, *De superstitionibus quibusdam casibus*, fol. 4v.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, fols. 2v–3r.

¹¹⁷ Denis the Carthusian, *Contra vitia superstitionum*, pp. 610–11.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 611.

¹¹⁹ Hemmerlin, *De benedictionibus*, fols. 100r–103r.

¹²⁰ Heinrich of Gorcum, *De superstitionibus quibusdam casibus*, fol. 6r: “Necesse erit vti acriori medicina vt morbus curetur et non inualescat.”

¹²¹ Johannes of Frankfurt, *Quaestio*, pp. 75–76: “Sequitur tercio, quod huiusmodi vani divinatores vel sortilege, carminatrices aut carminatores debent puniri et quandoque expelli aut alias acriter corrigi.”

because of the danger that they might lead people into illicit practices.¹²² Johannes Nider commented that many rites that were entirely appropriate when employed by educated clerics should be forbidden to the common laity because of their lack of understanding.¹²³ Noting the danger of unknown names transforming prayers or blessings into demonic invocations, Martin of Arles remarked wryly that those who knew no Latin should certainly not attempt spells or blessings involving fragments of Greek.¹²⁴

Yet there was no clear consensus. In 1419 Pierre d'Ailly wrote to his former pupil Jean Gerson, not about common spells and charms, but about the equally complicated matter of learned astrology. Gerson had just written a work critical of astrology, while d'Ailly was a proponent of the art.¹²⁵ As was so typically the case when authorities confronted issues of superstition in the fifteenth century, the cardinal and the chancellor of the University of Paris actually agreed on most of the basic, theoretical distinctions between permissible astrology and its superstitious variants. Gerson had deemed astrology a "noble and admirable science" and had even cited d'Ailly several times in his tract.¹²⁶ The question was how to differentiate appropriate from erroneous astrology in practice. D'Ailly noted sardonically that just as there were certainly superstitious astrologers who went too far in their predictions, venturing into areas where the stars had no natural effect, so, too, there were "superstitious theologians" who went too far in their condemnations of these practices.¹²⁷

Superstition was a complex issue that generated considerable confusion and a multiplicity of responses among the authorities whom it concerned. Yet as d'Ailly and Gerson illustrate, differing conclusions did not necessarily lead to fundamental conflict or any obvious crisis. As one survey has noted, the fifteenth-century church generally exhibited "striking . . . forbearance" toward differing thought and expression, not so much in theory, where lines could be drawn quite sharply between the acceptable and the condemned, but rather in actual practice.¹²⁸ Authorities' anxieties about superstition and their responses to them fit this model perfectly. Despite the confusion that could surround the issue, no fifteenth-century authority ever called for a new or dramatically different approach to superstition. Rather, they all seem to have felt that traditional applications of church power,

¹²² Denis the Carthusian, *Contra vitia superstitionum*, p. 607: "Iam dictum est, quod quamvis benedictiones et adorationes praefata in seipsis non sint superstitiosae neque illicitae, si fiant sicut prohibitum est, nihilominus sunt vitandae ac prohibendae propter annexa pericula, quia in eis frequenter aliqua superstitiosa miscentur."

¹²³ Nider, *Preceptorium divine legis* 1.11.hh.

¹²⁴ Martin of Arles, *De superstitionibus*, fol. 34r.

¹²⁵ Gerson's *Trilogium astrologiae theologizatae*. The fundamental study of d'Ailly's astrology is Smoller, *History, Prophecy, and the Stars* (above, n. 90).

¹²⁶ Gerson, *Trilogium astrologiae theologizatae*, pp. 90, 92, 95, and 102.

¹²⁷ D'Ailly in a letter to Gerson ca. November 1419, in Gerson, *Œuvres complètes*, 2:219: "Nam sicut illos dico superstitiosos astronomos qui contra theologicam veritatem astrologiam ultra id quod potest nimis extollunt, sic et illos superstitiosos theologos qui contra philosophicam rationem astronomiae potestatem nimis deprimunt vel penitus tollunt."

¹²⁸ John Van Engen, "The Church in the Fifteenth Century," in *Handbook of European History, 1400–1600: Late Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Reformation*, ed. Thomas A. Brady, Jr., Heiko A. Oberman, and James D. Tracy, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1994), 1:305–30, at p. 309.

both gently to correct and more harshly to chastise, could control the problem sufficiently. Moreover, that power should be guided, they all maintained, by traditional Christian understandings of superstition stretching back for centuries. Perhaps the most “extreme” of these authors was Felix Hemmerlin, in his open assertions that most other authorities had come to faulty conclusions on this issue.¹²⁹ But his own conclusion was that those other authors were too severe and that most common spells, blessings, charms, and other rites were harmless or even positive and could easily be tolerated.¹³⁰ If there was a crisis brewing in his day, he does not seem to have been its harbinger.

THE CONTEXT OF CONCERN

Fifteenth-century authorities viewed the perceived prevalence of superstition in their day as a serious concern, but that concern does not appear to have risen to the level of a crisis, either in the sense of clearly demonstrating the exhaustion and imminent collapse of old forms of thought and practice or in the sense of demanding the development of new and innovative responses. Yet might we see this flowering of concern over superstition as an element of crisis, even if they did not? There are good reasons to argue that a true crisis is impossible without at least some contemporary recognition of the event, that some level of “crisis mentality” must grip the contemporary imagination.¹³¹ But perhaps with historical hindsight we may recognize, where contemporaries did not, that the growing anxiety about superstition in the early fifteenth century was an aspect of other developments that they, or we, might regard as crises.¹³²

As I have argued elsewhere, one context in which concern over superstition clearly developed in this period was among new universities being founded across Europe and especially in the lands of the German empire.¹³³ Influenced by Gerson, working in the old intellectual center of Paris, members of the new theological faculties that dotted the central European landscape increasingly wrote shorter, more focused works that addressed practical problems rather than sweeping abstractions.¹³⁴ They also tended to address matters of everyday piety and pastoral

¹²⁹ Hemmerlin, *De exorcismis*, fol. 105r.

¹³⁰ Hemmerlin, *Alius tractatus exorcismorum*, esp. fols. 109v–110r.

¹³¹ Ferdinand Seibt, “Zu einem neuen Begriff von der ‘Krise des Spätmittelalters,’” in *Europa 1400: Die Krise des Spätmittelalters*, ed. Ferdinand Seibt and Winfried Eberhard (Stuttgart, 1984), pp. 7–23, at pp. 12–13; František Graus, “Epochenbewußtsein im Spätmittelalter und Probleme der Periodisierung,” in *Epochenschwelle und Epochenbewusstsein*, ed. Reinhart Herzog and Reinhart Koselleck, *Poetik und Hermeneutik 10* (Munich, 1987), pp. 153–66, at p. 154; František Graus, *Pest–Geissler–Judenmorde: Das 14. Jahrhundert als Krisenzeit*, Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 86 (Göttingen, 1987), p. 530; Klaus Schreiner, “‘Diversitas temporum’—Zeiterfahrung und Epochengliederung im späten Mittelalter,” in *Epochenschwelle*, pp. 381–428, at p. 384.

¹³² František Graus, “Epochenbewußtsein–Epochenillusion,” in *Epochenschwelle*, pp. 531–33, notes how later historical perceptions of a period may differ from contemporary ones; see also Graus, *Pest–Geissler–Judenmorde*, p. 530.

¹³³ Bailey, “Concern over Superstition” (above, n. 7).

¹³⁴ Hobbins, “Schoolman” (above, n. 50). Of the works dealt with here, Heinrich of Gorcum, *De superstitiosis quibusdam casibus*; Denis the Carthusian, *Contra vitia superstitionum*; and the several works of Felix Hemmerlin, as well as all the works by Gerson himself on this topic, clearly qualify as “tracts.” Longer works such as Nikolaus of Jauer, *De superstitionibus*, and Martin of Arles, *De superstitionibus*, still conform to Hobbins’s idea of practical intent.

care, exemplifying the new trend toward *Frömmigkeitstheologie* in this period, again influenced by Gerson but dominant in German lands.¹³⁵ Each of these trends favored renewed attention to the old issue of potential superstition in common beliefs and practices. Particularly from the leading central European universities at Prague and Vienna, networks of theologians interested in superstition radiated out to other, even newer institutions across the empire.¹³⁶

The newer universities founded in the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries were often the creations of regional princes and were expected to serve the needs of secular government.¹³⁷ Theological faculties were therefore supposed to play a role in promoting right belief and sound piety. Policing potential superstition was one aspect of this duty. The case of Werner of Friedberg is exemplary. His advocacy of common spells and charms for healing and other simple needs not only threatened to undermine proper religion in the region of Landau but also challenged the authority of local clergy who were forbidding certain spells that Werner approved.¹³⁸ As Werner had theological training, he was able to justify himself under initial questioning at the local bishop's court with some skill.¹³⁹ Now, however, theologians from the region's new university at Heidelberg, founded only twenty years earlier, could be brought in to refute his positions.

Some scholars have seen this multiplication of intellectual centers in the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as itself constituting a crisis, contributing to intellectual discord in western Europe. Certainly it was a negative development from the perspective of the traditional intellectual center in Paris, which (insofar

¹³⁵ Berndt Hamm, "Frömmigkeit als Gegenstand theologiegeschichtlicher Forschung: Methodisch-historische Überlegungen am Beispiel von Spätmittelalter und Reformation," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 74 (1977), 464–97. On connecting this new theological approach to superstition see Baumann, *Aberglaube* (above, n. 15), 1:201–2; also Krzysztof Bracha, "Kritik an den Glaubens- und Verhaltensformen und an der Aberglaubenpraxis im kirchlichen reformatorischen Schrifttum des Spätmittelalters," in *Christianity in East Central Europe: Late Middle Ages*, ed. Paweł Kras and Wojciech Polak (Lublin, 1999), pp. 271–82, at pp. 272–73; Krzysztof Bracha, "Der Einfluß der neuen Frömmigkeit auf die spätmittelalterliche Kritik am Aberglauben im Reformschrifttum Mitteleuropas," in *Die "Neue Frömmigkeit" in Europa in Spätmittelalter*, ed. Marek Derwich and Martial Staub, Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 205 (Göttingen, 2004), pp. 225–48, at pp. 227–29.

¹³⁶ For Prague see František Šmahel, "Stärker als der Glaube: Magie, Aberglaube und Zauber in der Epoche des Hussitismus," *Bohemia: Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kultur des böhmischen Länder/A Journal of History and Civilization in East Central Europe* 32 (1991), 316–37, at pp. 328–29. Baumann, *Aberglaube*, 1:101–2, notes the importance of the "Vienna school" in catechetical writing, which frequently dwelled on superstition.

¹³⁷ A. B. Cobban, *The Medieval Universities: Their Development and Organization* (London, 1975), pp. 118–19; Jacques Verger, *Les universités au moyen âge*, Collection SUP, L'Historien, 14 (Paris, 1973), pp. 140–43. Particularly for the case of Vienna see Paul Uiblein, "Die österreichischen Landesfürsten und die Wiener Universität im Mittelalter," *Mitteilungen des Instituts für österreichische Geschichtsforschung* 72 (1964), 382–408, esp. pp. 382–83. On the service of the university to the court, particularly in matters of potential superstition, see Michael H. Shank, "Academic Consulting in Fifteenth-Century Vienna: The Case of Astrology," in *Texts and Contexts in Ancient and Medieval Science: Studies on the Occasion of John E. Murdoch's Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Edith Sylla and Michael McVaugh, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 78 (Leiden, 1997), pp. 245–70.

¹³⁸ Werner, *Revocatio*, fol. 198r; Werner, *Responsio*, p. 280.

¹³⁹ Mainly in his *Responsio*; see Lerner, "Werner di Friedberg," passim.

as it noticed at all) now saw its authority challenged.¹⁴⁰ But such gloomy perceptions hardly applied to the new foundations themselves, brimming with energy and possibilities. The mood in Vienna in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, for example, has been described by one scholar as “buoyant.”¹⁴¹ These new centers of intellectual activity promoted a diversity of opinion, perhaps reflected, to some extent, in the confusion and disagreements that surrounded the issue of superstition.¹⁴² But this diversity did not lead to any evident crisis. Again it must be stressed that despite the difficulties superstition presented, authorities appear to have remained confident in the church’s ability to address the problem in traditional ways.

The persistence of superstition into the fifteenth century might be taken as a sign of failure on the part of the church in its ancient efforts to Christianize the peoples of Europe.¹⁴³ In their appropriations of late-antique Christian criticism of superstition, fifteenth-century authors sometimes did refer to superstitious practices as remnants of paganism.¹⁴⁴ Yet they also recognized the vast distance between their own and ancient days,¹⁴⁵ and they realized that the practices they condemned were essentially Christian. Indeed, this was the main reason for their concern. As one author stated explicitly, the superstitious spells and charms they criticized were far worse than the erroneous rites of the Jews precisely because such spells were corruptions of Christian practice.¹⁴⁶ Certainly superstition entailed “popular” practices and “folkloric” beliefs that could be quite different from the religious culture of clerical elites.¹⁴⁷ But more often people of all social statuses based the spells, blessings, and charms they employed on elements of the liturgy or other official rites.¹⁴⁸

Thus in their efforts to correct and improve Christian practice, critics of superstition were among the many voices calling for religious reform in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.¹⁴⁹ Calls for reform are often taken to imply a crisis,

¹⁴⁰ Michael H. Shank, *“Unless You Believe, You Shall Not Understand”: Logic, University, and Society in Late Medieval Vienna* (Princeton, N.J., 1988), p. 5; Verger, *Les universités*, p. 112.

¹⁴¹ Shank, *Unless You Believe*, p. 6. For intellectual optimism more generally in this period see William J. Courtenay, “Huizinga’s Heirs: Interpreting the Late Middle Ages,” in *Herbst des Mittelalters? Fragen zur Bewertung des 14. und 15. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Jan A. Aertsen and Martin Pöckavé, *Miscellanea Mediaevalia: Veröffentlichungen des Thomas-Instituts der Universität zu Köln* 31 (Berlin, 2004), pp. 25–36, esp. pp. 25–26.

¹⁴² “Pluralism” is the term applied by Shank, *Unless You Believe*, p. 56.

¹⁴³ On notions of Christianization and its discontents, the best introduction is still John Van Engen, “The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem,” *American Historical Review* 91 (1986), 519–52.

¹⁴⁴ E.g., Nikolaus of Jauer, *De superstitionibus*, fols. 43v–44r, 45v, 48v, 60v, and 62v; Nikolaus of Dinkelsbühl, *De preceptis Decalogi*, fol. 30r.

¹⁴⁵ Nikolaus of Dinkelsbühl, *De preceptis Decalogi*, fol. 29v.

¹⁴⁶ Anonymous, *De superstitionibus*, fol. 33r: “Multo amplius nepharium et huiusmodi stigmatibus incidi et caracteribus insigniri quanto videlicet detestabilis est execratio ydolatrie quam ritus iudaicus.”

¹⁴⁷ Schmitt, “Superstitions” (above, n. 26), pp. 421–23.

¹⁴⁸ Most powerfully shown in Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven, Conn., 1992), pp. 266–98. On a “common” magical tradition not limited to popular or elite groups see Kieckhefer, *Magic* (above, n. 79), pp. 56–57.

¹⁴⁹ See Bracha, “Kritik an den Glaubens- und Verhaltensformen,” esp. p. 271; Bracha, “Einfluß,” esp. p. 244; Bracha, “Kritik des Aberglaubens” (above, n. 18), esp. pp. 151–52.

or at least a decline.¹⁵⁰ Yet we must be cautious about using some generalized idea of reformist concerns to deduce a generalized crisis in this period. In fact, many varieties of reform developed during these years, and distinct trends should not be casually lumped together.¹⁵¹ Critics of superstition belong to the trend that I have elsewhere called “spiritual reform,” and reformers of this variety sought to improve personal piety and to correct individual belief and practice.¹⁵² As Jean Gerson argued, the faithful should turn to God, not superstition, in times of need and should “amend their lives.”¹⁵³ Notably, reformers of this sort did not seek a technical *reformatio* in the sense of a return to some supposed earlier, more perfect state of humanity or the church (unless that state should have been before the Fall). As such, while they certainly stressed the deformations of present days, they did not, at least in their tracts and treatises on superstition, valorize the past as other varieties of reformist writing sometimes did, thereby generating an artificial sense of crisis.¹⁵⁴ This is not to imply that these men were unimpressed by the achievements of earlier times. Gerson, for example, exhibited great admiration for the accomplishments of thirteenth- and early-fourteenth-century thinkers in his program for intellectual reform.¹⁵⁵ Yet their critiques of superstition do not fixate on any lost age of superior virtue and so do not present an image of a contemporary society fallen into deep crisis.

The whole “crisis model” of understanding the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries has come under considerable criticism itself, as have evocative notions of the

¹⁵⁰ Discussion of church and imperial reform comprises the heart of Dieter Geuenich, “Das 15. Jahrhundert—‘Herbst des Mittelalters’ oder Beginn der Neuzeit?” in *Wegmarken europäischer Zivilisation*, ed. Dirk Ansoerge, Dieter Geuenich, and Wilfried Loth (Göttingen, 2001), pp. 162–77, at pp. 168–75.

¹⁵¹ As warns Van Engen, “The Church in the Fifteenth Century,” p. 307. For some varieties see Ivan Hlaváček and Alexander Patschovsky, eds., *Reform von Kirche und Reich zur Zeit der Konzilien von Konstanz (1414–1418) und Basel (1431–1449)* (Constance, 1996).

¹⁵² Bailey, *Battling Demons* (above, n. 16), p. 3; for reference to superstitions see *ibid.*, pp. 130–36. Similarly Christopher M. Bellitto, *Nicolas de Clamanges: Spirituality, Personal Reform, and Pastoral Renewal on the Eve of the Reformations* (Washington, D.C., 2001), esp. pp. 2–3 and 59–60; also Bellitto, “The Spirituality of Reform in the Late Medieval Church: The Case of Nicolas de Clamanges,” *Church History* 68 (1999), 1–13.

¹⁵³ “. . . non superstitiosis observationibus sed piis obsecrationibus, non daemonum invocationibus sed vitae emendatione”: Gerson, *De erroribus*, p. 85. Martin of Arles, *De superstitionibus*, fol. 69r, repeats the line almost exactly.

¹⁵⁴ Peter Schuster, “Die Krise des Spätmittelalters: Zur Evidenz eines sozial- und wirtschaftsgeschichtlichen Paradigmas in der Geschichtsschreibung des 20. Jahrhunderts,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 269 (1999), 19–55, at p. 44, suggests that reformers’ “starke Idealisierung der Vergangenheit und Rückwärtsgewandtheit” may have contributed to an artificial crisis mentality. Likewise Van Engen, “The Church in the Fifteenth Century,” p. 312, notes that reformers’ “partisan accounts” often cause modern historians to perceive deep conflict where in fact the contemporary reality was one of (often complicated) coexistence. For a good account of reformist zeal see James Mixson, “The Setting and Resonance of John Nider’s *De reformatione religiosorum*,” in *Kirchenbild und Spiritualität: Dominikanische Beiträge zur Ekklesiologie und zum kirchlichen Leben im Mittelalter*, ed. Thomas Prügl and Marianne Schlosser (Paderborn, 2007), pp. 319–38.

¹⁵⁵ Zénon Kaluza, *Les querelles doctrinales à Paris: Nominalistes et réalistes aux confins du XIVe et du XVe siècles*, Quodlibet 2 (Bergamo, 1988), p. 13.

era's waning, decline, or even its very "lateness."¹⁵⁶ Such descriptions of this period stem at least as much from late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century ideas of historical progression, and that era's own fin-de-siècle concerns, as from any fourteenth- or fifteenth-century reality.¹⁵⁷ This is particularly true when our focus falls only on the fifteenth century, as even partisans of the crisis model are increasingly restricting it to the troubled 1300s.¹⁵⁸ They also frequently argue that the concept of crisis must be understood in terms not only of exhaustion, waning, or collapse but also of energetic breakthroughs and progressive new developments.¹⁵⁹ In this, they seem to approach the arguments of those opponents of the crisis model who characterize the supposed late Middle Ages, and particularly the fifteenth century, in terms of multiplicity of forms, forces, and tendencies, incapable of reduction to any simple synthesis.¹⁶⁰ Confusion over how to identify and respond to superstition would fit the general paradigm of fifteenth-century diversity and complicated coexistence of various practices and beliefs, at least until the mid-to-late-1400s, when a harsh new synthesis began to emerge in the form of demonic witchcraft. Yet even here one must be careful to note that early theories of witchcraft were far from uniform or monolithic.¹⁶¹ Moreover, throughout the fifteenth century even the harshest opponents of witchcraft remained ambivalent on the matter of simple superstitious spells and charms.¹⁶²

Even the next century, with its profound religious upheavals, brought little fundamental change to thought about superstition. The Reformation certainly added new dimensions to the concern, with different confessions now accusing one another of enshrining foul superstition in their theology, in addition to ever-intensifying efforts to correct and control common practices. Yet authoritative

¹⁵⁶ Schuster, "Krise des Spätmittelalters"; Erich Meuthen, "Gab es ein spätes Mittelalter?" in *Spätzeit: Studien zu den Problemen eines historischen Epochenbegriffs*, ed. Johannes Kunisch, *Historische Forschungen* 42 (Berlin, 1990), pp. 91–135; Howard Kaminsky, "From Lateness to Waning to Crisis: The Burden of the Later Middle Ages," *Journal of Early Modern History* 4 (2000), 85–125. Timothy Reuter, "Medieval: Another Tyrannous Construct," *Medieval History Journal* 1 (1998), 24–45, holds that the Middle Ages as a whole are more a historical convention than a unified period, although he does not regard the term as an unworkable convention (esp. pp. 37–38).

¹⁵⁷ Rehearsed by Schuster, "Krise des Spätmittelalters," and Meuthen, "Gab es ein spätes Mittelalter?" but most fully traced in František Graus, "Das Spätmittelalter als Krisenzeit: Ein Literaturbericht als Zwischenbilanz," *Mediaevalia Bohemica* 1 (1969), supplement pp. 1–75. For Huizinga see Wessel Krul, "In the Mirror of Van Eyck: Johan Huizinga's *Autumn of the Middle Ages*," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27 (1997), 353–84, esp. pp. 369–74. Historians' usage of the term "crisis" has also been influenced by contemporary conditions: see Randolph Starn, "Historians and 'Crisis,'" *Past and Present* 52 (1971), 3–22, esp. pp. 7–10.

¹⁵⁸ Walter Buckl, ed., *Das 14. Jahrhundert: Krisenzeit* (Regensburg, 1995), although Buckl himself, in his introductory essay, warns that fourteenth-century trends did not begin sharply in 1300 or end in 1400 ("Das 14. Jahrhundert: Eine Einführung," pp. 9–17, at p. 10).

¹⁵⁹ Buckl, "Das 14. Jahrhundert," p. 10; Seibt, "Zu einem neuen Begriff," p. 10; Geuenich, "Das 15. Jahrhundert," *passim*.

¹⁶⁰ Erich Meuthen, *Das 15. Jahrhundert*, 4th ed., rev. Claudia Märtil, Oldenbourg Grundriss der Geschichte 9 (Munich, 2006), stated at p. 2 but argued virtually *passim*. Likewise Van Engen, "The Church in the Fifteenth Century," p. 309; more broadly in John Van Engen, "Multiple Options: The World of the Fifteenth-Century Church," *Church History* 77 (2008), 257–84.

¹⁶¹ Richard Kieckhefer, "Mythologies of Witchcraft in the Fifteenth Century," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 1 (2006), 79–108.

¹⁶² Bailey, "Disenchantment of Magic" (above, n. 65).

thought on superstition did not take on any particularly new character or tone, remaining essentially grounded in medieval and early Christian conceptions even as it reflected the changing context of its own time.¹⁶³ Moreover, within the now-various confessions of Western Christianity, authoritative policing of the complicated “twilight zone” of common spells and charms continued much as in the fifteenth century.¹⁶⁴ It was not in the fifteenth or sixteenth century but rather in the eighteenth that authorities’ approaches to superstition underwent fundamental change, as Enlightenment thinkers dramatically recast superstition as an error against new models of scientific rationality rather than against traditional religious doctrine.¹⁶⁵ Instead of supporting the notion of a crisis-ridden or waning late-medieval period that came to a calamitous end around 1500, the issue of superstition instead fits more easily into the model of an Old Europe of beliefs and mentalities that endured until the 1700s.¹⁶⁶

“Old Europe” is typically defined as stretching from the twelfth or even eleventh century through the eighteenth and is usually discussed in terms of political and economic structures.¹⁶⁷ Yet as one scholar has noted, “human mentalities have their persistencies just as much as demographic patterns, field systems, and trade routes do.”¹⁶⁸ Indeed, mentalities may be the most persistent of those structures. The conceptions of superstition that underwent dramatic change in the eighteenth century did not first emerge in the eleventh or twelfth. Authors in the fifteenth century knew the practices they confronted were not identical to those of ancient

¹⁶³ Ernst Saxer, *Aberglaube, Heuchelei und Frömmigkeit: Eine Untersuchung zu Calvins reformatorischer Eigenart*, Studien zur Dogmengeschichte und systematischen Theologie 28 (Zurich, 1970), esp. pp. 15–17, notes Calvin’s reliance on patristic and even Thomistic notions of superstition.

¹⁶⁴ The phrase is from R. W. Scribner, “Ritual and Popular Religion in Catholic Germany at the Time of the Reformation,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 35 (1984), 47–77, at p. 71. His articles also form the best introduction to this aspect of Reformation-era history: see esp. “Sorcery, Superstition, and the Witch of Urach, 1529,” in Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany* (London, 1987), pp. 257–75; “The Reformation, Popular Magic, and the ‘Disenchantment of the World,’” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23 (1992–93), 475–94, reprinted in Scribner, *Religion and Culture in Germany (1400–1800)*, ed. Lyndal Roper, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought 81 (Leiden, 2001), pp. 346–65; and “Magic and the Formation of Protestant Popular Culture in Germany,” in *Religion and Culture*, pp. 323–45.

¹⁶⁵ Recognized by Harmening, *Superstitio*, p. 5; Pott, *Aufklärung* (above, n. 6), esp. p. 1.

¹⁶⁶ Replacement of the late-medieval crisis model by the model of Old Europe is argued strongly by Kaminsky, “From Lateness to Waning to Crisis,” pp. 120–25; with specific reference to religious history see Howard Kaminsky, “The Problematics of ‘Heresy’ and ‘The Reformation,’” in *Häresie und vorzeitige Reformation im Spätmittelalter*, ed. František Šmahel, Schriften des Historischen Kollegs, Kolloquien 39 (Munich, 1998), pp. 15–21. See also Meuthen, “Gab es ein spätes Mittelalter?” pp. 132–33, and *Das 15. Jahrhundert*, pp. 1–2. The idea of “Old Europe” (*Alteuropa*) is often linked to Jakob Burckhardt, but it was traced even earlier by Richard Blänkner at the 1987 Otto Brunner Conference in Trent. See *Annali dell’Istituto Storico Italo-Germanico in Trento* 13 (1987), 136; cited in the “Translators’ Introduction,” in Otto Brunner, *Land and Lordship: Structures of Governance in Medieval Austria*, trans. Howard Kaminsky and James Van Horn Melton (Philadelphia, 1984), p. lix n. 99.

¹⁶⁷ Overview in Dietrich Gerhard, *Old Europe: A Study of Continuity, 1000–1800* (New York, 1981).

¹⁶⁸ Robert E. Lerner, *The Powers of Prophecy: The Cedar of Lebanon Vision from the Mongol Onslaught to the Dawn of the Enlightenment* (Berkeley, Calif., 1983), p. 8. This book’s largest argument is that a “medieval supernatural framework” did not end until the eighteenth century (p. 197).

days, but they understood those practices in terms that had been developed in the tenth century, the seventh, the fifth, or even earlier.¹⁶⁹ Rather than just an Old Europe of six or seven hundred years, here we can see a world of traditional Christianity enduring some fifteen centuries.¹⁷⁰

Yet there are also more recent breaks in the history of superstition. As much as they drew on patristic and early-medieval authorities, the authors of the fifteenth century were also grounded in, and reacted to, theological developments in the twelfth and above all the thirteenth centuries. The need to make traditional Christian understandings of demonic power cohere with Aristotelian philosophy, and the problems of definition and discernment that ensued as aspects of that coherence were worked out, lies at the core of many of the practical problems of identifying and regulating superstition that authorities encountered in the fifteenth century.¹⁷¹ Their engagement with and criticism of this topic came at the midpoint (perhaps a climactic midpoint) in Old European mentalities, or in a later phase of traditional Christian mentalities, that endured for several more centuries.¹⁷² Their concerns provide a vital window into the dynamic religious and intellectual world of the fifteenth century; they do not, however, represent an autumnal end phase or crisis of a late or waning Middle Ages.

¹⁶⁹ Most clearly indicated in the anonymous compilation of fifth- through tenth-century sources in Clm 8345 (above, n. 39).

¹⁷⁰ The issue of superstition may thus help to answer the question posed in Meuthen, "Gab es ein spätes Mittelalter?" p. 133: if one accepts a period of Old Europe stretching from the twelfth through eighteenth centuries, what does one do with the earlier medieval period?

¹⁷¹ Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago, 2002), traces concern over witchcraft back to thirteenth-century theological developments.

¹⁷² Cf. Graus, *Pest-Geissler-Judenmorde*, p. 554.