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# Exorcism *and* Enlightenment

*Johann Joseph Gassner and the Demons of  
Eighteenth-Century Germany*

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**THE EXPERIENCE OF DEMONS**

L[ucius]: “So you’re a free thinker and a skeptic. So what? If real and incontrovertible experiences show that Herr Gassner has made many sick persons well, then you just have to believe these experiences.”

— [Christoph Heinrich Korn] *Gespräch im Reiche der Lebendigen*

Gassner was not the only one dabbling with the world of demons in the mid-1770s. In the South German, Upper Swabian town of Langenegg a poverty-stricken, guilt-ridden woman, Maria Anna Schwägelin, lay miserably confined in a spital for the poor. Orphaned early in life, she had abandoned her Catholic faith in order to marry a Protestant from Memmingen, but the marriage plans were broken off. She became increasingly convinced that in betraying her faith, she had left herself open to the assaults of the Evil One. Crippled, she began to wonder if her troubles were caused by the devil. A five-year-old child living in the poorhouse now began to seem demon possessed, but a local pastor decided that the child was actually bewitched. Schwägelin was beaten and soon confessed that she was indeed a witch. Transferred to the Imperial Abbey of Kempten for trial, she continued her confessions and was convicted in April of 1775. Historians have long believed that she was the last witch executed on German soil.<sup>1</sup> Recent research has shown that Maria Anna was not executed, however, and perhaps she should stand instead for how little we really understand the Germany of the 1770s.

During the months that Maria Anna Schwägelin was suffering in a poorhouse and confessing to her troubles with the devil, Father Gassner was touring Upper Swabia, demonstrating his abilities to detect and expel the devil with uncanny efficiency. In 1774 he published a pious little book on his methods right in Kempten, probably contributing to the renewed interest in demonic possession and witchcraft that got Maria Anna into such deep trouble. Born in 1727, Johann

Joseph Gassner came from Braz in the Vorarlberg (Austria), and had studied with the Jesuits in Prague and Innsbruck but did not become a member of their Society. Instead, he became a secular priest in 1750 and took up duties in Dalaas (1751–1758) and then in Klösterle, east of Feldkirch (1758–1774), at the foot of the immense Arlberg Mountains. Apparently from early in his pastoral career, Gassner had employed special blessings and cures; but as a result of a series of chronic ailments from 1752 to 1759 he developed a special technique for healing the headaches, fainting spells, and sudden weakness he experienced, especially whenever he was to preach or say Mass. He also sought out doctors and used their prescriptions, he wrote — but to no effect.<sup>2</sup> In the end, Gassner concluded that his illness came from the devil, and accordingly he invoked the Holy Name of Jesus and, in effect, exorcised himself. Using this method of cure, Gassner developed a regional reputation as a healer in the 1760s and learned to tell if the devil was at hand by practicing “test exorcisms,” in which he would order the devil, if he was present, to perform certain acts. Sometimes he addressed the devil in Latin, a language that he assumed his parishioners would not understand even though the devil, as a great linguist, would have no trouble. If he found that a demon was in fact present, Gassner took his time, forcing the demon to move around in the patient’s body and to manifest himself in various ways, until the patient too became persuaded of this startling truth: that he or she was possessed. This is a good example of how an idea could be mobilized, with practice, to become a full-fledged *experience*. One sometimes reads that Gassner believed all diseases to come from the devil, but this he specifically denied. In fact, his probative exorcisms make sense only if some illnesses and disabilities were of natural origin. By *practicing* on his patients, by helping them to experience their condition as demonic, Gassner was creating the first and crucial precondition for successful exorcism. It was a kind of negative spiritual exercise that paved the way for further experiences.<sup>3</sup> He allows us to see how our concepts and beliefs make certain experiences possible and others almost impossible.

This chapter explores the uses of the devil as a thinking tool, a way

of understanding and shaping one's experience and religion. In proceeding in this manner one runs the risk of sounding antiquarian and anachronistic. Few reputable history professors take the devil seriously anymore. What sensible person still thinks that demonic possession might be real or that exorcism might help? "In these Enlightened days," we are told, and we tell ourselves, such ideas are rotting on the compost heap of outmoded and dangerous ideas, displaced by science, psychoanalysis, improved means of understanding Holy Scripture, and by the feeling that if we let the devil back into public discourse, we'll open the door to witchcraft trials and demonically obsessed nursery schools, cloisters, asylums, and hospitals all over again. But here let me make an important clarification. I am not here mounting a defense of the devil, who, if he exists, certainly does not need my defense. Rather, I am suggesting that *how* we talk about such matters matters. How we talk shapes how we think and what we can fully experience. When Gassner and his supplicants spoke of the devil, they were speaking of and simultaneously shaping their own experiences.

### *Gassner's Healing Career*

Hundreds of patients came to Gassner for relief, but he did not treat them all. Only if he first got results with his "praecepta" or admonitions did he feel assured that a full-fledged "benedictio" (blessing) or exorcism would get rid of the devil for good. In a diary ("Diarium") that he kept for 1769 he recorded over two hundred cures and healing miracles, and in chapter 3 we will spend some time looking at these and other cases of healing. It is worth noticing, however, that Gassner did not think that he was dealing with classic instances of full-fledged demonic possession, for which the expected symptoms would have been amazing, supernatural, "wondrous." We find among those who sought him out virtually none of the classic signs of demoniac possession: no supernatural strength, no frothing at the mouth,<sup>4</sup> no unaccountable knowledge of distant events. They showed no mysterious knowledge of foreign languages they had never heard

or learned, although Gassner did deploy this last symptom in one of his favorite test exorcisms, addressing the supposed demon in Latin and (often) getting a response that he assumed could only mean that the devil was present. Basically, Gassner employed blessings and exorcisms to treat illnesses that looked natural. It seems that this was one way in which the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century actually affected his practice: the devil no longer looked as if he were separate from the world of normal appearance. Instead, even sickness and chronic crippling that looked ordinary might come from the devil.

In the summer of 1774 Gassner's growing reputation jumped beyond the region of Vorarlberg, Tirol, and eastern Switzerland, where he had gained a sensational but merely regional reputation as a wonder worker. With permission from his bishop in Chur, Gassner made a remarkable tour of Upper Swabia, the region just north of the Lake of Constance.<sup>5</sup> In Wolfegg he healed Countess Maria Bernardina Truchsess von Wolfegg and Friedberg along with many others, then moving on to other tiny counties and abbeys of the region. He spent a month or more with the abbot of Salem and began to cure desperate patients by the score, often treating fifty to eighty a day. Altogether that summer he reckoned that he had treated three hundred nuns and eight thousand persons of all sorts.<sup>6</sup> By the fall of 1774 he was back in his parish of Klösterle, having been gone far longer than his original leave of absence allowed. But now he received a summons to the Princely Provostry (Fürstpropstei) of Ellwangen, where the blind Anton Ignaz von Fugger, bishop of Regensburg (reg. 1769–1787), was also the prince provost of Ellwangen. Although Gassner determined that the bishop's blindness was merely natural and therefore beyond priestly help, his stay in Ellwangen brought him to new levels of success. Thousands of persons seeking help jammed the streets of the little town and overburdened local hostelries. Gassner stayed there from November of 1774 to June of 1775, displaying his techniques to the faithful and to skeptics alike. Members of the higher and lower nobility joined the throngs of commoners in traveling to Ellwangen, hoping for help, but also looking for proof that traditional, unenlightened (perhaps we should call it "Counter-Enlightened") Catholicism

still had some fight left in it during the years immediately following the papal dissolution of the Jesuit Order, a move that many German nobles had regarded as a craven concession to the worldly spirit of their age. Bishop Anton Ignaz rewarded Gassner by appointing him his court chaplain and making him a member of his “spiritual council” (*Geistlicher Rat*).

By now Gassner was famous throughout Germany and even in parts of France. But he was also attracting the attention of enlightened skeptics, including especially Don Ferdinand Sterzinger, a reforming Theatine from Munich, prominent member of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences, and one of the leaders of the Bavarian attack on witchcraft in the 1760s; and Johann Salomo Semler, professor of enlightened (“neologist,” or cautiously historicizing) theology at Halle in northern (Prussian) Germany. On the other hand, a handful of ex-Jesuits now sprang to his defense and mounted a noisy campaign trumpeting empirical claims based on careful observation and scrupulous reporting. And certain Protestants in Germany and Switzerland were so impressed with these claims that they began to take an intense interest in Gassner. The most famous of these was Johann Kaspar Lavater, the renowned pastor and physiognomist of Zurich, about whom I will have more to say.

In the summer of 1775, Gassner moved with Bishop Anton Ignaz from Ellwangen eastward over one hundred miles to Regensburg, where he worked his wondrous cures until September, when he moved his operations northward to the Upper Palatinate (at Sulzbach and Amberg), but under increasingly intense scrutiny and in apparently decreasing numbers. One reason for moving around like this may have been to bring his healing powers to ever larger groups of sufferers, but these peripatetic missions also firmed up support for Gassner’s movement among secular rulers, such as the Upper Palatinate, the court at Sulzbach, or the Bavarian administration in Amberg. As we will see in chapter 2, Gassner seemed for a time to be exploiting the weaknesses or peculiarities of the Holy Roman Empire with great success. Prudent men, however, urged greater caution. In November of 1775 the Emperor Joseph II ordered Gassner to leave

Regensburg; the archbishops of Prague and Salzburg issued pastoral letters warning of the misuse of exorcism; and in April of 1776 ecclesiastical enemies secured a condemnation from Pope Pius VI himself, which settled the matter, at least as far as his actual exorcisms went. Gassner was forced to take up simple parish duties in tiny Pondorf, several hours down the Danube from Regensburg, where he died in 1779. But in his heyday he had exorcised and blessed thousands and tens of thousands.<sup>7</sup>

### *The Problem of Evil*

How shall we understand what Gassner was doing? He was treating a familiar series of miseries with a novel diagnosis, and as we will see, he was using a form of exorcism that was not entirely orthodox either. One way to regard his work is to see it as a response to the question of evil. Susan Neiman has recently pointed out that in the eighteenth century, following the challenge of Pierre Bayle, many European intellectuals had increasing trouble understanding how a gracious God could inflict massive misery on thousands or even millions of innocent sufferers. The Lisbon earthquake of 1 November 1755 had cost perhaps twenty to thirty thousand lives, and it seemed hard or at least hard-hearted to argue the Leibnizian or Wolffian line that this was all part of the “best of all possible worlds.”<sup>8</sup> Some, like Voltaire, heaped ridicule upon the claim that the world always worked toward progress and human benefit. Others, like Rousseau, pointed to the human factors that contributed to natural disasters, such as poorly built houses and overcrowding. Following such lines of physical investigation, some began to think that nature was not itself a theater of evil, a place where natural evils existed to punish mankind for its moral evils. For such thinkers natural accidents and natural disasters were merely unfortunate; they concluded that true evil ought to be confined to those events or experiences that were the product of someone’s will. This amounted to redefining the distinction between natural evil and moral evil, and thus emphasizing the way evil entered the world as human beings became socially human.<sup>9</sup>

By the middle of the eighteenth century it was beginning to seem that efforts to explain evil might be doomed to blasphemy if they seemed to blame God for flaws He might have avoided. But as Neiman stresses, the refusal to deal with evil as a problem provided no solution. People still demanded (and reason still demands) an explanation, even if the wrongs we suffer and the wrongs others suffer do not come as divine punishments anymore. From this perspective, it makes historical sense that Johann Joseph Gassner was emphasizing the role of the devil in causing a large share of the miseries to which humankind is subject. It was Gassner's way of saying that misery was in fact intelligible; it was not accidental and not merely natural but rather the product of a cunning and depraved will. Banishing the devil was his therapeutic solution, but Gassner did not proceed in the manner that a naturalizing Enlightenment did. For most Enlightened intellectuals did more than banish the devil: they read him out of reality. The trouble was that declaring the death of the devil became a prelude to the death of God and signaled an early defeat on the field of meaning. Without the devil, it seemed, certain evils simply could not be understood.<sup>10</sup> It will appear, therefore, that demonology was actually a practical means of doing theology, a negative theology to be sure, but one connected closely to the human quest for meaning. So instead of flatly forgetting the devil, Gassner was trying on a massive scale to retain and yet banish (but not to annihilate) the devil. That was an unstable effort, one doomed to condemnation by both the church and the state in his day. But it was not so foolish as the Enlightened thought then and frankly have ever since.

#### *Franz Anton Mesmer as Rival*

At just the moment that Gassner's fame was at its peak and was attracting the skeptical attentions of churchmen and enlightened rulers such as Emperor Joseph II and Elector Maximilian III Joseph of Bavaria, another healer came out of Austria to fascinate his own throngs of enthusiastic followers. Inspired by the work of Viennese Jesuit court astronomer Maximilian Hell (1720–1792), Franz Anton

Mesmer (1734–1815) had discovered in 1774 that he could manipulate strange forces in some of his patients, forces that he called magnetic. Following Hell's example, he had begun working with "real magnets" made of metal, glass, and stone, but subsequently found that he could achieve the same amazing effects on patients by mere touch and concentration; and so he distinguished this new magnetism from the magnetism found in inanimate nature and called it "animal magnetism," a term he probably picked up from the seventeenth-century Jesuit savant Athanasius Kircher.<sup>11</sup> With this new therapeutic weapon and with the elaborate theory that went with it, he became a celebrity in Vienna, entertaining the young Mozart and healing the rich and famous. After a frustrating therapeutic setback at the Slovakian castle of a Hungarian nobleman, however, Mesmer decided to return to his homeland, just north of the Lake of Constance.

It was July 1775, exactly one year since Gassner had spent three successful months in the region. Like Gassner, Mesmer began to attract crowds of hopeful patients, and his fame built to such an extent that the electoral court of Maximilian III Joseph in Munich called Mesmer to consult in the matter of Father Johann Joseph Gassner, who was still conducting his own healing operations in Regensburg, an exempt imperial city surrounded by Bavarian territory. In November of 1775 Mesmer gave the Munich commissioners and the Bavarian Academy of Sciences extraordinary demonstrations of his "magnetic" powers, prompting patients to display and then to suppress symptoms with little more than the touch of a finger. His "cures" seemed to be just like those of Gassner, except that they did not involve the use of exorcisms, blessings, or the name of Jesus. He even claimed to have cured Peter von Osterwald, one of the chief members of the academy and a leading figure of the Bavarian Enlightenment. Dr. Mesmer, indeed, declared that Father Gassner was actually using "animal magnetism" without knowing it; after all, he too held the patient's head between his hands and sometimes stroked affected parts of the body, much as Mesmer stroked patients with his magnetic fingers. All of Gassner's talk about the devil as a cause of human ills seemed to Mesmer like nothing more than superstitious window

dressing. Henri Ellenberger has pointed to this collision of religious and scientific therapies as the dramatic hour when dynamic psychiatry was born. For Ellenberger this was when a psychiatric paradigm of healing through natural means was first substituted for the world of spirits and exorcism. The Bavarian Academy of Sciences voted Mesmer into membership, the first and only such official recognition of his new science and an indication that at that point he looked like a major figure of the Enlightenment.<sup>12</sup>

*Mesmer and Gassner*

Mesmer did not long confine himself to South German backwaters, but this is not the place to trace again his roller-coaster ride through Parisian society in the years 1778–1785 and his enthusiastic adoption by radical social reformers in France.<sup>13</sup> I wish to call attention instead to several formal parallels between the cures of the exorcist Gassner and the therapeutic methods of the naturalizing, self-proclaimedly scientific Mesmer.

First and most importantly, both men invoked invisible qualities or forces as the root cause of physical ailments. Father Gassner regularly admitted that the devil was not at the root of all human ills,<sup>14</sup> but when he was, it only made sense (to him) to employ blessings and probative exorcisms. Neither the magnetic fluid nor the devil, however, was strictly visible or palpable, even though popular images of Gassner's exorcisms often include a picture of a small, black creature flying up out of a patient's mouth or out a window. Reputable observers, and Gassner himself, gave no credence to such visible demons, and Mesmer, too, never claimed that one could see the forces of animal magnetism. One could only see the results of these entities, in either case, and some invisible force seemed a reasonable inference. Remember that researchers into electricity and magnetism had only recently, with the work of Aepinus (1759), established the connection between electricity and magnetism, and on into the 1790s (in the work of Galvani) scientists studied what they called "animal electricity." During the 1770s and early 1780s natural philosophers in

England and France were eagerly pursuing a program of research into the therapeutic benefits of magnets.<sup>15</sup>

Careful observers were well aware that swindlers and tricksters could appear to provoke preternatural or even supernatural effects. The new forms of electricity and magnetism had been exploited for their entertainment value for over fifty years, and careful scholars were skeptical of all that was claimed for these wondrous forces.<sup>16</sup> That is why commissions of inquiry looked so carefully at both Gassner's and Mesmer's methods. In 1784 it was a French royal commission including Antoine de Lavoisier, Benjamin Franklin, and Dr. J. I. Guillotin (inventor of the "guillotine") that condemned Mesmer's claims to have discovered an occult magnetic fluid.<sup>17</sup> Ironically, Gassner withstood scrutiny more often than the supposedly more scientific Mesmer. While Gassner, for example, passed the tests set for him by four professors from the University of Ingolstadt in 1775, Mesmer stood officially condemned by both royal commissions that examined his theories in 1784. It was not until 1826 that a committee of the medical section of the French Royal Academy of Sciences reopened the question of Mesmer and this time concluded far more favorably.<sup>18</sup> But my point is that demonologists were just as eager as naturalists to prove their claims in a public arena. Gassner's diaries recording his therapeutic victories mentioned often that the cures were permanent (rather than merely transitory) and listed distinguished (and therefore supposedly credible) witnesses. He was certainly not claiming that one must take such religious phenomena on faith. Unfortunately, as

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(*opposite page*) Johann Joseph Gassner (1727–1779) casting out a demon, 1775. It is worth noting that none of the eyewitness accounts of Gassner's healings ever claimed to have seen what this engraving depicts: a visible demon in the shape of a black, flying, lizardlike creature. But the scene also illustrates the mixed and crowded company that often gathered to witness Gassner's exorcisms. *Source: Gespräch über die heilsamen Beschwörungen und Wunderkuren des Herrn Gassners*, 1775, title engraving; reprinted by the kind permission of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich.

we shall see, the Enlightened did not respond well to Gassner's requests for empirical investigations into these healings.

Indeed, that is what fueled the truly extraordinary literary battle over Gassner. Partisan tracts flew about Germany with an intensity that we otherwise associate with revolutions. The most complete bibliography of the so-called Gassner-Streit lists twelve editions of Gassner's own little treatise, *Weise fromm und gesund zu leben, auch rubig und gottselig zu sterben, oder nützlicher Unterricht wider den Teufel zu streiten* (The Way to Live Piously and Healthily, And how to Die Peacefully and in God's Grace; Or, Useful Instruction on How to Fight against the Devil). That bibliography goes on to list 55 separate books and pamphlets in favor of Gassner, 31 works opposing him, and 25 works that were neutral or interested in special aspects of the controversy. In my researches, I have been able to add numerous titles and editions to this list as well. Counting second and third editions, translations, and all the newly discovered titles, it now appears that close to 150 works appeared, the overwhelming majority published in 1775 and 1776.<sup>19</sup> All of Germany, North and South, Protestant and Catholic, took part in this controversy, which depended not just on general principles (for and against the testimony of Scripture, or for and against the existence of the devil) but on what supposedly reliable witnesses claimed to have seen. This means that the Gassner controversy has a good claim to being one of the largest and noisiest arguments of the whole German Enlightenment. It certainly illustrates the fact that the German Enlightenment was much more concerned with religious matters than was the case in France.

### *Understanding the German Enlightenment*

How shall we understand this strange controversy? For one thing, this religious and scientific controversy erupted at a moment when publicity was becoming something like what it is today. Germany was experiencing its second media revolution, if we count the invention of printing and the pamphlets of the Reformation period as constituting the first. Newspapers and journals, books and pamphlets flew off the

presses at a rate that no one had previously experienced, and new rules had to be developed to cope with this novel situation.<sup>20</sup> But this vehement exchange of tirade and polemic was also extraordinary because it involved both Protestants and Catholics. To a degree that we may find hard to believe, Lutheran theologians and public commentators generally left South German and Catholic affairs out of account, as if such predictably superstitious and ignorant regions could present nothing of permanent importance to the cultivated Protestant reader. Similarly Catholics in the South often paid closer attention to events and books in Italy or France than to what their German brethren were doing and writing in the Protestant North. But in Gassner's case, this was not true. Careful observers and connoisseurs of experimental method revealed that Gassner's cures apparently withstood scrupulous investigation. Enlightened Catholics and Protestants took this as a serious provocation. Ordinary Protestants too took notice of Gassner, flocking in disturbing numbers to Ellwangen in order to be healed from ailments that their doctors and pastors could not alleviate. And Pastor Lavater in Reformed Zurich remained positively obsessed for several months with the possibility that in Gassner he might find a carefully attested case of God's direct intervention into earthly affairs, just the sort of miraculous wonder that he had been looking for and emphasizing since the late 1760s.<sup>21</sup> On this point, Gassner was perhaps not so different from Mesmer as has often been assumed. Mesmer too believed that animal magnetism was the "demonstrated presence of God" in the world.<sup>22</sup> But most importantly, Gassner's cures involved the devil, and the 1770s were not so far removed from the age of witch hunting that this circumstance could be ignored. Enlightened commentators were swift to charge that Gassner threatened to unleash a new wave of witchcraft trials, and with Maria Anna Schwägelin suffering in the poor house of Langenegg, accused of witchcraft in the jurisdiction of the prince abbey of Kempten, they seemed to have a serious point. Recall that Schwägelin was in fact convicted of witchcraft in the spring of 1775, and that she only barely escaped execution.

The official *Roman Ritual* of 1614 itself proclaimed that certain

cases of demonic possession were the result of bewitchment, so that belief in exorcism could reasonably lead some to look for the human agents who had facilitated or willed a fall into demonic possession.<sup>23</sup> That accounts for the fact that some of Gassner's fiercest critics concentrated on the supposed revival of witchcraft accusations and witchcraft trials that Gassner's exorcisms seemed sure to provoke, even though Gassner himself did not promote or underwrite such accusations. It was, of course, difficult for Gassner's supporters to deny that witchcraft was at least theoretically a possibility even if its prosecution had recently become hopelessly entangled in judicial uncertainties and moral dilemmas.<sup>24</sup> So one of the tacit and sometimes explicit issues in the Gassner controversy was witchcraft, whose conquest had seemed to be the very symbol of the Enlightened age.

*Thinking with Demons: The Grounds of Experience*

Recent work on the history of witchcraft has shown that this crime depended on a specific worldview, one in which most people (but not all) were accustomed to "thinking with demons," as a way to think and converse about reality.<sup>25</sup> Many early modern Europeans found witchcraft and demons a reasonable vehicle with which to wonder about the nature of political and social authority, the limits of natural causation, the origins of sin, the coming apocalypse, and the problems of mental disorder. For centuries demonology comprised a set of rational and coherent beliefs that helped many thinkers to integrate the scholarly fields of history, medicine, law, politics, and theology. At no time, however, did everyone agree about demons (or anything else). We sometimes simplify the past by imagining that in bygone days everyone thought alike, but that's a modern conceit that rests on pride combined with naiveté about the past. There were as many disputes about demons as about almost any other topic two or three or four hundred years ago, and many models of the world competed for attention. And that takes only the discourse of the learned into account. Among the poorly educated and illiterate, we sometimes catch glimpses of assumptions and beliefs that the better educated

and better disciplined, the more orthodox in short, were appalled (or sometimes titillated) to contemplate. Demons were often part of their world too, but not always in the well-ordered and systematically connected manner favored by intellectuals.<sup>26</sup>

In our own day it is still common enough among evangelical and charismatic groups to see the work of the devil in the troubles of this world, in sickness, “accidents,” and in the supposed infidelity, immorality, and godlessness of our times. But the urge for witch hunting has died out in the modern West, even though the cry is easily audible in many parts of Africa and Asia.<sup>27</sup>

Once witchcraft trials were dead, as they were in most corners of the West by 1750, we may wonder how certain contemporaries of Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, of Edward Gibbon and David Hume, could still bring themselves to see the devil in so many unsuspected places. One answer is that we have often vastly overestimated the supposed powers of the Hegelian *Zeitgeist* or the Foucaultian *epistème* to shape the thoughts or undergird the assumptions of all who happen to be living in the same time and place. Postmodernist reflections have sometimes run the risk of suggesting that anything is true if you think it is, that our concepts and beliefs are so powerful a constituent of experience that we are usually unable to see “around” them, to experience anything objectively. This has been part of the postmodern condition with its attack upon “the language of reference,” the notion that our words and ideas actually refer to realities outside ourselves. Taken literally, the thought can paralyze scholarship. But the interesting truth seems to be that most of us live simultaneously in various worlds of thought and words. Most of us are not trapped in one verbal game. So, to arrive at provisional conclusions amidst such confusions, it may help to recognize that groups of early modern people (what we may recognize as early modern subcultures) could entertain worldviews that diverged radically from one another, paradigmatic attitudes toward the world that structured radically different early modern experiences even in the late eighteenth century and made it difficult or even impossible for some people to speak to others of what they knew. I think that these worlds were more than

just conceptually distinct, for it is also true that many conceptual forms, many religious ideas, carry with them distinctive practices, specific habits that are cultivated either in order that specific experiences might come more easily and more predictably, or so that one might, on the contrary, be readier to cope with them, suppress them, or suffer them with greater equanimity.

It is, however, also true that our outlooks and our mental furniture literally prefigure what we are able to experience. Although we probably can have some form of an experience even if we do not have the verbal or mental categories with which to think and talk about it, usually if we do not have the concepts and the words that go with the concepts, we cannot well express or communicate what we experience. But without the words and the ideas, we essentially do not have the full experience. In this way the concepts we think with, the words we use, prefigure our possible experiences.

“Thinking with demons,” as Europeans had done for centuries, made so much sense in so many areas that the devil and his minions were very hard to give up, even for those who had, often for practical reasons, abolished witchcraft trials. And where the devil survived as a concept and hence as a lived reality, there one continued to find numbers of the demonically possessed. In eighteenth-century Germany, this insight itself became controversial in the form that Ludovico Antonio Muratori (1672–1750) posed it. The learned and Enlightened Italian scholar noted that “it is strange that there are only bewitched and possessed where there are exorcists.” The remedy, therefore, seemed clear to Muratori’s enlightened readers. Get rid of the exorcists, throw out their mental furniture, and the devil and his effects would find somewhere else to reside.<sup>28</sup> To religious conservatives, such a conclusion did not follow at all. If Muratori was right, it merely showed that where there were no detection devices, no exorcists, there no devils could be detected. And so Gassner’s cures seemed to raise fundamental issues about the existence of spirits, the continuation of miracles, the efficaciousness of the Roman Catholic sacramentals and especially of exorcism, and the hitherto untested powers of the human imagination.

Catholics and Protestants for whom the devil was still a biblical and (therefore) a living reality did not have to stretch far to experience the devil's effects both outside their own bodies and even within. Belief in the devil helped to activate him as a possible experience, and helped make it easier for him to leave behind the telltale traces of specifically demonic activity. Indeed, we may agree that where people have learned to get along without demons and the devil, the devil could indeed still be at work. How would we know? But under such modern conditions the devil rarely leaves behind the sulphurous odors and frantic convulsions found in explicit cases of demonic possession.

### *The Enchanted World*

Thus for some believers the world was “enchanted,” in the famous image of Max Weber. It contained spirits of various sorts, occult forces, and hidden dangers. Ordinary believers often held the view (and acted on the view) that miracles regularly occurred in this world. By this they meant that God or His saints intervened to rescue certain favorites and that unexpected but happy outcomes were common enough to be hoped for. To put oneself in this frame of mind and simultaneously to put God in a giving frame of mind, one might go on pilgrimage, say a specific round of prayers, or involve oneself in other devotional exercises. From this premodern point of view it made little sense to ask whether a miracle represented a breach in the otherwise immutable laws of nature. Who had time to care about that when the real point was that relief from mortal dangers might be only moments away? And if an Enlightened critic objected that the ideas involved here were unsubstantiated or unproved, many a person could retort that he or she had *experienced* the demon, and had seen the wondrous effects of exorcism with his or her own eyes. Then as now, that was a nearly irrefutable argument.

Such an enchanted worldview describes pretty well the humble Lutheran and Catholic supplicants who thronged to visit Gassner in Klösterle, Ellwangen, Regensburg, and Sulzbach, and who hoped that he might grant them just a gesture, a word of miraculous healing, a

compassionate glance. Sharing part of this worldview were many of the learned but disgruntled ex-Jesuits after 1773, who hoped that Gassner's amazing and numerous exorcisms would serve to reveal a world that was so full of evil spirits that only a traditional Catholic priest, armed with the sacramentals of his church, had any chance at all of effectively countering their attack. For the former Jesuits, relief of immediate suffering was not the main point, but restoration of the Jesuit Order was. This was certainly not the main concern of ordinary Christians, but it can be seen that both Jesuits and ordinary believers inhabited an "enchanted" world. In Gassner's day, the chief stronghold of the ex-Jesuits was Augsburg, an imperial city with strong, mutually distrustful populations of both Catholics and Lutherans. The magistrates of Augsburg and the bishop of Augsburg were so eager to suppress religious vituperation that long after 1773 the papal decree dissolving the Jesuit Order was not even recognized. Ex-Jesuits found a welcoming refuge there, and many of Gassner's strongest supporters lived, preached, or published in Augsburg.<sup>29</sup>

On the other side of the magical line, there were several sorts of disenchanters. Among Lutherans and Reformed, for example, theologians had agreed for two hundred years that the age of miracles was over. Yes, miracles had occurred in the years of the early church. Yes, of course Jesus had worked real miracles and had cast out demons. But those acts of Spirit and Power, those "signs," "wonders," and "mighty works," had served the purpose of establishing Christ's identity, and of building up the early church. They did not compete with God's Word, could not confirm new truths, and were, in the view of Protestant theologians, no longer necessary now that Christians had the benefit of Holy Scripture.<sup>30</sup> Of course, for most Protestants God might continue to govern and steer his creation through the exercise of his Providence, but the subtle point was usually that He did so by mobilizing the ordinary forces of nature, not by breaking the natural rules He had established for all time.<sup>31</sup>

For traditional Roman Catholics, this was nonsense. On every side they counted dramatic miracles of healing and rescue that had no imaginable natural explanation. For many Catholic polemicists the

survival of miracles within the Roman Communion was all the proof they needed that their church was true and that the various Protestant “sects” were bankrupt. By the end of the sixteenth century, however, even Roman Catholics, at least the careful and scholarly among them, had grown weary of Protestant charges that their priests were tricksters and that the Catholic laity were simply gullible. Too often what had seemed like a miracle had turned out on closer inspection to be fraud, deception, or simple mistake. And to prevent their position from being ridiculed by hostile Protestants, they tightened up their criteria for the truly miraculous. By the end of the sixteenth century they had come to accept Thomas Aquinas’s strict view, which held that “a miracle is defined as an event that happens outside the ordinary processes of the whole of created nature.” And increasingly that meant that miracles had to be tested carefully against all the possible powers of nature. If a possible natural explanation could be found for some amazing event, it was difficult to affirm with certainty that it was nonetheless a miracle.<sup>32</sup>

Along with these stricter notions of miracles, demonic possession now came under much more stringent regulation; the *Roman Ritual* of 1614 essentially defined it as a condition that could have no natural explanation. Demonic possession had become a sort of negative miracle. This is a point that will occupy us more fully in a later chapter, but here the point is simply that learned Protestants and Catholics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries came to regard miracles not as wonders (things that make us wonder) but as events that could have no natural explanation. Then the only question remained whether they still occurred at all, and on that score learned Catholics triumphantly insisted that God did still intervene to break the “laws of nature.” They were His to break, after all. But, logically enough, the proof of any supposed miracle now required a profound knowledge of nature and of experimental method.

During the eighteenth century still another position took shape among the self-proclaimed partisans of Enlightenment: that miracles, being breaches of the natural order, simply *could* not happen, or just as tellingly, that our human resources are so feeble or so easily deceived

that we cannot tell if an amazing event actually breaches the rules of nature.<sup>33</sup> Do we in fact know all the rules of the natural order? How could we ever be sure that an event was thoroughly miraculous? Notice what had happened. As miracles became more amazing, more wondrous, ever more impossible to explain, they also became less common until they were virtually impossible. These were the results of theological speculation and disagreement on a level that scarcely concerned those people who saw the whole world as “enchanted.” But the strongly empirical claims of Hume, Voltaire, and Diderot forced their Catholic opponents to become scrupulous scientists in order to defend essentially empirical claims for the survival of miracles. And all of that applies as well to what we have labeled “negative miracles,” instances of demoniac possession.

There was yet another Enlightened view that gained ground in the eighteenth century, one that did not pronounce upon miracles or demoniac possession directly (or theoretically) but which declared all events suspect if they promoted social disorder. As we will see in the next chapter, these were the grounds on which Emperor Joseph II ruled against Gassner’s healing campaigns. He needed no proof that Gassner’s cures were false or that the demon possessed were in fact naturally ill, for he had learned of the thousands of common people who flocked to see Gassner to be healed by him. Thousands of commoners converging anywhere represented a frightening spectacle for any absolute ruler. On grounds of good order alone, certain Enlightened political thinkers and rulers decided that Gassner and his exorcisms simply had to stop.

### *The Meanings of Experience*

These various views expressed in the late eighteenth century created the basis for strikingly various experiences. For some, Gassner’s test exorcisms served to prove to the suffering supplicant that he or she harbored one or more demons; and onlookers often drew the same conclusion. But for others this was a flatly impossible conclusion. For some petitioners, any relief from daily misery was miracu-

lous, although Gassner himself was careful not to claim the power of working proper miracles. For ordinary Germans this was not an obvious distinction since the word *Wunder* could mean either miracle or marvel. For some Catholics the promiscuous use of exorcism gave Protestants and the Enlightened a broad brush they could use to tar the Catholic faith with charges of superstition and ignorance, but for other Catholics the enthusiastic throngs of supplicants constituted a major social problem.

From the other side of the confessional divide, Pastor Johann Kaspar Lavater frankly hoped that demonic possession could be proved, for that would constitute for him proof of the unseen world, proof that the desiccated, materialistic world presented by the followers of Spinoza was hopelessly inadequate to the task of accounting for life as we live it. Lavater and some other Protestants hoped that Gassner would be the proof of God's continuing interventions that would put the Enlightenment to flight.

For still other Protestants, as we have seen, Gassner represented the very incarnation of dangerous folly, the revival of bewitchings and the spark in a powder keg that might lead to renewed witchcraft trials. For them, Gassner represented the risks that emerged when one did not truly understand Scripture and took literally what God had intended as beautiful parables.

These are matters that will occupy our attention in the coming chapters, but it should now be clear why certain believers in the 1770s could find themselves convinced that they were themselves possessed by the devil, and why that claim seemed ludicrous to others. The stage was set for a gigantic and perhaps irresolvable dispute, one that bears a striking similarity to many of the disputes of our own day, in which an initial problem often is the failure to attend with any care to what our interlocutors are actually saying. To grasp how and why Gassner's religious revival erupted where it did, however, we must also attend to the politics of the ecclesiastical states within the Holy Roman Empire, states that provided, at least for a time, a cultural niche for his ideas and practices.