

ENCHANTED EUROPE

SUPERSTITION,
REASON, AND
RELIGION, 1250–1750

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Introduction

In March 1495 Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere, the future Pope Julius II, organized an unsuccessful assault on Genoa and Savona in support of the French campaign in Italy, during the first phase of the long and disastrous saga of the Italian wars.¹ While these manoeuvres were taking place, the Dominican preacher and regent master Silvestro Mazzolini of Prierio (c.1456–1527), the future Master of the Sacred Palace and theological controversialist, was travelling across the Piedmontese and Ligurian hills towards Savona, to deliver a Lenten sermon. On the road he met an infantry captain called Marzocchio, and the two of them agreed to head for Genoa together. The soldier's mule injured itself and started to bleed from one leg. The soldier, concerned because this was a fine animal (and a borrowed one into the bargain), asked Mazzolini if he knew how to pronounce a blessing on it. Mazzolini blessed the animal in the name of the Trinity, and the bleeding stopped. However, the soldier was evidently not satisfied, since when they met another soldier on the road he asked this second soldier to pronounce a healing blessing on the mule as well. The other soldier grumbled when he heard that a priest had blessed the animal, and pronounced a second charm or spell over the mule. Mazzolini related with ill-suppressed glee that after this second, less orthodox blessing the bleeding restarted and continued until the party reached Genoa.²

In 1553 the Lutheran theologian Kaspar Peucer (1525–1602), son-in-law of the great Protestant educator, philosopher, and theologian Philipp Melanchthon, issued the first edition of his *Commentary on the Various Types of Divinations*.³ The study of meaningful prodigies, which he called 'teratoscopia', Peucer regarded as one of the legitimate and necessary forms of divination. Peucer listed a series of marvels, including various misbirths.

Besides the relatively common conjoined births, he described how in 1531 at Augsburg a woman had given birth to three offspring, one a head wrapped in membranes, the second a serpent with two legs, the body and the feet of a toad, and the tail of a lizard, the third a perfectly normal pig. Again, on 25 January 1543, an infant was reportedly born in Belgium with blazing eyes and a terrifying aspect, with nostrils in the shape of a cow's horns, and dog-hair on his back. The faces of monkeys were visible on his chest, where there were cats' eyes instead of nipples. He also had webbed feet like a swan, and a tail. He lived for four hours and after saying 'be watchful, your lord God is coming', he died.⁴

Both these stories testify to a world of thought in which matter and meaning were closely entwined. In one story a friar applies spiritual power to a physical (in this case veterinary) problem; in the other a physician-theologian discerns meaning in bizarre occurrences outside the normal course of nature. Both these stories came from the pens of extremely accomplished theologians, fully grounded in the intellectual culture of their time. Neither, however, conforms to the standard of post-Enlightenment rationalism. In each case observers in more recent centuries would probably have called their beliefs 'superstitious'. More recently, historians have become more cautious and more relativist in our outlook; we are more likely to stress how observers like these held beliefs that were 'rational' by the standards and beliefs of their time; or to deconstruct the whole idea of the 'rational' as hopelessly contaminated by social inequality or linguistic aberration.

Here is the irony. Both Mazzolini and Peucer used the concept of 'superstition' in their own writings. Both believed that it was very important to distinguish 'superstition' from the legitimate use of spiritual and religious rituals and symbols. They differed and indeed disagreed vigorously over where to draw the line between superstition and religion; but they both believed fervently that such a line existed. In no way were these theologians postmodern relativists. Both these authors, and dozens if not hundreds of others, engaged in detailed analysis and often fierce debate over what superstition was, how to identify it, how to distinguish it from acceptable religious custom, and how to dissuade less thoughtful or less educated people from engaging in superstitious practices.

Until the middle of the eighteenth century and possibly for longer, most thinking people in Europe believed that the physical matter of the cosmos was full of meaning. Gestures and rituals might somehow or other lead to

physical effects or material transformation. The disposition of matter was rarely if ever purely accidental; the appearance of living beings, both their normal and their abnormal manifestations, could contain messages from the divine. Yet—and this part is least often recognized—these interpretations of meaning did not derive from random or undisciplined thinking or loose nature-mysticism. On the contrary, some of the most rigorous studies of causation in pre-modern Europe derived from the attempt to discern why things happened and what they meant, in the context of the theological analysis and critique of ‘superstition’. This analysis provoked some crucial reflection upon what ritual could or could not achieve in the physical world. At one level, then, this book offers an essay in intellectual history. It narrates a debate, or rather a long series of debates, over the nature of religion and its place in the universe. It proves, if anything, that careful theoretical reflection over the proper uses and potentialities of religious practice is as old as Christianity itself (or older). Thirteenth- and fourteenth-century scholastic theologians were just as concerned to delimit the relationship between ritual causes and physical effects as their sixteenth- or eighteenth-century successors, though the answers varied at different periods.

At another level, the critique of superstition addresses the setting *par excellence* where academic theology confronted the realities of life and the irreducible, instinctive patterns of mass culture. In this genre of writing churchmen were not writing about themselves, nor meditating on arcane mysteries celebrated on altars concealed behind beautiful screens from the profane laity. They confronted the brutal facts that children fell sick and died; that cows mysteriously failed to give milk; that horses either bolted or suffered from unexplained exhaustion; that summer storms came from nowhere to devastate the crops; and that less educated people persisted in believing in the existence of a huge, amorphous variety of semi-visible or invisible spirit-creatures who might influence their lives. Ecclesiastical authors struggled to make sense of these mysteries and, even more, to analyse the exotic variety of remedies and prophylaxes that people traditionally used against them. The superstition-critique presents pastoral theology at its most practical, specific, and applied. Moreover, since pastoral theologians participated in the broad culture of their birth as much as in the formal intellectual habits of their professional training, the analysis of ‘superstition’ challenged them repeatedly to navigate their own way between custom and instinct on one hand and intellectual formation

on the other. Occasionally—as perhaps in the story just told above by Silvestro Mazzolini of Prierio—the mask slipped. Sometimes it fell away altogether.

‘Superstition’: an elusive and slippery term

Probably for as long as human beings have engaged in religious activities, there have been disputes about the right and wrong ways to practise one’s beliefs. Early in Christian history, various opprobrious terms were coined to classify the ‘wrong’ ways to conduct divine worship. Idolatry was the worship of the wrong god, or whatever was not God. Heresy was the worship of the true God, but according to beliefs that contradicted received authority, according to personal choice rather than community consensus. Superstition came to mean the worship of the true God by inappropriate and unacceptable means. All of these were labelling expressions: none had a secure frame of reference apart from the values, presuppositions, and preferences of those who used them. However, the way that they were used tells us a great deal about the dynamics of power and authority in the history of religion. The changing shape of the controversies which they evoked forms a powerful document in the history of European culture.

The term ‘superstition’ derived from classical antiquity, and nearly always contained a pejorative sense—it implied ‘bad’ as opposed to ‘good’ or ‘correct’ belief or practice in the realm of religion. Though its etymology was never clear, it always presupposed an opposite, or even a cluster of opposites.⁵ In the late Roman Empire pagans described Christianity as superstition in one sense; Christians described paganism as superstition in another.⁶ In general ‘superstition’ could be opposed to other forms of putatively ‘wrong’ religion, such as idolatry, heresy, or fanaticism. It could also be opposed to putatively ‘right’ or valid religion, to terms such as ‘piety’, ‘true religion’, ‘orthodoxy’, or ‘reasoned faith’. Finally, it can be used as it is typically used in modern secular society: as a pejorative term to describe *any* belief system that falls short of the speaker’s chosen standard of ‘rationality’. At the high water-mark of modern confidence in scientific rationalism, ‘superstition’ has become the preferred term of abuse used by any secular atheist to describe religion of any kind. The resurgence of religion as a factor in world politics, and postmodern aversion to the condescending attitudes of Western rationality towards the rest of

humanity, have made such aggressive uses of the term rarer; but the connotations persist. However it is used, the term has the effect of driving sharp distinctions, where the need may be more for subtle shades than hard lines.

Superstition is a flexible designation, and can be aimed at a range of targets at different times and by different people. In the most general sense, it has commonly been used to refer to a fairly disorganized bundle of beliefs and practices rooted in tradition: attempts to *discern* the unknown through *divination*, and to *control* it, or at least protect against it, through simple use of *charms*. Such traditions made claims about the access to and use of an invisible reality, whose existence was assumed rather than theorized in a structured way. These beliefs privileged experience over analysis. They located spiritual power, causality, and meaning arbitrarily and conventionally in particular things, places, peoples, times, and circumstances. Often they served to address particular physical and existential needs and concerns, rather than giving an overall transcendent interpretation to the meaning of existence. In general, ‘superstition’ has tended to be ethically ambiguous or neutral. The criterion of a valuable practice or piece of knowledge was whether it achieved the effect desired by the person using it, rather than whether or not it was ‘right’ in any ultimate sense. Incoherence and inconsistency are to be expected in so-called superstitious belief systems, although they can also show surprising dimensions of similarity and parallel evolutions within different cultures. In these very general terms—which will be unpacked and analysed much more fully in Part I—‘superstition’ was described and subjected to theological critique from very early in Christian history, and more or less continuously since then.⁷

Between the thirteenth and the eighteenth centuries, the debate over ‘superstition’ grew more intense than at almost any time before or since. Nearly all the major movements in ideas in this period somehow or other impacted on this issue. The fragmentation of medieval academic theology in the so-called strife of the ways entailed a diversity of views over how to distinguish religion and superstition. The Christian humanism of the European Renaissance built itself on an explicit critique of the allegedly ‘superstitious’ quality of everyday Christianity as practised by the uneducated. The sixteenth-century Reformation adapted, distorted, and transformed the late medieval rhetoric over ‘superstitions’ with its charge that Catholicism was itself *inherently*—and not just accidentally, or when misunderstood—a particularly pernicious form of superstition. Roman

Catholicism, as it defined its 'reformed' identity in the latter part of the sixteenth century, resolved to disown those parts of its own heritage that seemed unsuitable in the eyes of its own leadership. At the same time, it vigorously resisted the charge that its 'core' rituals and customs were superstitious, and even rehabilitated some practices that had been cast into doubt in previous centuries. In the era of confessional orthodoxy from the late sixteenth century to the end of the seventeenth, the rhetoric that had traditionally condemned superstition and magic in the eyes of the devout became a crucial part of the intellectual armour used to prosecute sorcerers, magicians, and witches. Then, in the early Enlightenment, 'superstition' took centre stage in religious discussions to an even greater extent than before. 'Superstition' and 'reason' became the poles around which the religious and ethical theorists of the early Enlightenment debated the proper claims of religion on the human mind.

In this area above all else, it is vital to remember the distinction between theory and practice. Much writing on the area of superstitions has been bedevilled by a failure to distinguish adequately between what people were instructed to think and do on one hand, and what evidence suggests they thought and did on the other, between norms and reported realities. Most of the literature that forms the heart of the evidence for this book is essentially theoretical. It derives from the pens of trained theological intellectuals. Theologians and their kind wrote long and often about superstition, either in order to critique and challenge the beliefs and practices of those who were not theologians, or to continue a debate with others of their own kind who held differing opinions. They wrote in Latin and in a variety of vernaculars. They employed a range of genres from the theological *summa* to the popular sermon and pamphlet. Nevertheless, while the authors of the learned critique of superstitions wrote for a varied range of audiences and readerships, they spoke for themselves, and for much of the time for themselves only. Each source, each text used in the following pages represents an interpretation of a complex and confusing state of affairs from one, usually highly trained mind. It does not speak for the culture as a whole.

Some theoretical questions

Various consequences follow, and it is important to set these out at the start. First and perhaps most obviously, the historian must not pretend to

determine what ‘actually’ constituted ‘superstition’ versus ‘true religion’ at any period. Since the whole point is to show how these loaded terms evolved and acquired new and often contested meanings, a degree of relativism is essential. The terms superstition and superstitious must hereafter be read as though in perpetual, though usually invisible, inverted commas, always as used by this or that author in the past. Quoting or paraphrasing such a source implies no verdict on whether the views held by that source should be adopted or rejected by author or reader.

Secondly, one needs to shed any casual assumptions about culture and class as applied to the literature on superstition. Again, much confusion has entered this subject because historians have imported into the Middle Ages or early modern period unexamined assumptions about where to draw the line, culturally and economically, between the more and the less educated. Even—perhaps one should say especially—in the Church of the late Middle Ages, one cannot assume that ‘the clergy’ held shared and representative views about what was ‘superstition’, or that those views differed from the views of ‘the laity’ in any clear-cut way. Still less can one assume that clear lines were drawn between literate versus illiterate, urban versus rural, bourgeois versus proletarian. Nor can one assume that most people on the more privileged side of those divides shared the views of the theologians, normally our primary sources, about what ‘superstition’ was or how to respond to it. As a starting point, this study assumes only that most of the theological authors participated in a culture which allowed them to exchange texts and debate points with each other on the basis of certain shared assumptions. Such people constituted what I refer to below as the ‘theological academy’. By this term is meant a culturally defined group of literate, Latin-reading scholars who knew the basic concepts and tools of scholastic theology and embraced the application of formal logic as a tool to make sense of their religious experience. These people were, evidently, an extremely small subset even amongst that pre-modern elite, the professional clergy. More career clergy were educated as lawyers than theologians, and few of either had profound or regular contact with the majority of the population, unless, like some of the authors reviewed in this book, they served as popular preachers. Some people outside this theological academy, clerics and laity, may indeed have shared the culture of the authors of the critique of superstition. The number and social location of those who shared those views will have changed over time, as successive waves of religious reform and philosophical development washed

over Europe. However, we shall probably never know *exactly* how widely the views of the writers analysed in this book were shared. At all costs the narrative in what follows should not be read as an intellectual history of European attitudes as a whole.

This raises a third question in its turn. How far does the literature on superstition describe something that might have been observed as a lived reality? How widespread or pervasive were the beliefs and practices that it denotes? To what extent might the learned literature be used as evidence for anything beyond the minds of its authors? Some scholars would prefer to avoid the question entirely. It would certainly be possible to take a rigidly postmodern stance, and to describe the superstition literatures as a series of discourses that had no necessary connection to any 'reality' whatever. However, most historians, let alone general readers, will find that enclosed, elliptical approach very unsatisfactory. They will wish to know how far the material reviewed in this book described anything that would have been observable in everyday pre-modern society, and how accurate or misleading that description may have been. There is no obvious or self-evident answer to these questions. At the most extreme, one historian has argued, with considerable evidence on his side, that the 'superstition-literature' of the early and high Middle Ages reflected little if anything more than the self-affirming continuation of a literary tradition. Theologians, in this account, quoted each other irrespective of whether the texts that they quoted described or denoted anything in the world outside their studies and libraries.⁸ Most historians would not be so extreme: and indeed, there are strong reasons for rejecting an approach that dismisses entirely any relationship between the literature and the real-world phenomena of 'superstitions'.⁹ However, the epistemology of medieval and early modern theologians differed from that of modern ethnographers. In general, medieval authors showed a strong preference for 'authority', first and foremost in the form of sacred texts, but also secondarily in the form of texts of antique and canonical wisdom. Historians of heresy are familiar with a literature on heretical movements that interpreted, or distorted, the empirical evidence of trial testimony to make it conform to texts of canonical authority. Experience would be shoe-horned into an ill-fitting tradition, before a supposedly 'authoritative' tradition would be adapted and revised in the light of experience.¹⁰

The literature on superstitions, though in some respects similar, is different in one critical respect from the literature on heresy. Heresy-writers

were usually, with rare exceptions, describing a movement of people who formed a self-conscious group, even if such people would not necessarily have recognized themselves in the ecclesiastical labels of Waldenses, Lollards, or Hussites.¹¹ In the case of those portrayed as holding ‘superstitious’ beliefs, there was no such collective identity. Ecclesiastical writers depicted an amorphous and constantly shifting mass of people, including men and women, the learned and the unlearned, physicians, soldiers, and ecclesiastics as well as the more readily stereotyped folk-healers using charms and spells. Consequently, the literary image runs an even greater risk than do the heresy-treatises of homogenizing and so distorting the material that it depicts. Moreover, there is even less likelihood than with heresy that one will discover literature that explicitly argues for or justifies allegedly ‘superstitious’ practices (although, as will be seen, some such literature does in fact exist).

There is a second layer of conceptual difficulty with the superstition-literature. Since theologians and other ecclesiastical writers on the whole wrote normatively and pastorally, rather than ethnographically, their descriptions constantly ‘read’ the phenomena that they witnessed in the light of certain core presuppositions. Their descriptions are the very opposite of neutral, disengaged description. To anticipate a little, this disjunction between the assumptions of the learned and the material appears most glaring in the area of demonology. Most theological writers in the pre-modern era were post-Thomist Aristotelians: they believed that there were spirits in the world, and that those spirits were rigidly, cosmically divided into the good angels and the evil demons, the loyal and fallen spirits respectively.¹² On the other hand, we can infer that in pre-modern Europe there persisted a resilient folk-belief, according to which the invisible world was densely populated with both personal beings and impersonal forces that were morally ambiguous. These beings and forces were capable of friendship, enmity, and mischief—in fact they partook of the same moral ambiguity as people, something which academic theology stubbornly denied to the spiritual realm.¹³ Theological writers could not help themselves, and had no wish to restrain themselves, from describing the spirit-world of folk-beliefs in the language of the ethically polarized cosmos of scholastic Christian philosophy. The impersonal occult force of a folk-belief became, in the theologian’s eyes, the ‘demon’ seeking to seduce the weak-minded by offering spurious help. The historian who wishes to use this material is constantly challenged to unravel a tangled skein made up

of different cultural elements. Only by establishing some rough-and-ready methodological filters, and then treating the results with great caution and scepticism, can the historian claim to infer any provisional data about the phenomena behind the distorting and perpetually coloured glass of the sources.

One final question is absolutely critical for the context of this inquiry. It relates to the evolution of so-called popular belief over the long centuries of the pre-modern era in Europe. The history of 'superstition' and the responses to it becomes inextricably tangled with questions of the rise of the 'rational' and the supposedly 'modern' in European cultural history. How, and why, if ever, did European people cease to be 'superstitious' in the sense that this book describes them? Even though this work does not presume to take a view on the broad questions of the rise of 'modernity' or 'rational religion' in Europe as a whole, it is vital to sketch out these debates, since the arguments around superstition inevitably touch on these questions at multiple points.

In German idealistic philosophy, the Reformation was assumed almost without question to have played a critical role in inaugurating the modern world of rationally restrained faith and rationally unrestrained inquiry. Wilhelm Dilthey argued that the Reformation was quite simply the German equivalent of the Renaissance elsewhere in Europe. It reacted against medieval obscurantism and freed the national spirit to discover its place in the universe.¹⁴ The liberal theologian Adolf von Harnack claimed around 1900 that the primary and decisive importance of the Reformation consisted in the fact that it stripped away from Christianity so many of its encrustations of superfluous ritual and priestcraft.¹⁵ His pupil Ernst Troeltsch set rather higher standards for 'modernity' than his teacher. Troeltsch recognized that the essentially medieval pursuit of dogmatic certainty lingered in the Reformation, even though its essence contained the seeds of modernization.¹⁶ Troeltsch's colleague and associate Max Weber contributed the most influential, and to some the most notorious arguments for reformed modernity. In his classic *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* of 1904 Weber reasoned that the psychic ideal-type created by Protestantism, especially in its Puritan forms, tended to espouse a pragmatic and functional, rather than a sacral, approach to the business of life. In his *Sociology of Religion* Weber developed a typology of religious development according to which religions gradually ascended from magical cults towards a rational concept of a transcendent divinity.¹⁷ Weber developed the thesis

that the process of ‘disenchantment of the world’ (*Entzauberung der Welt*), in which magical and supernatural beliefs lost credibility with the rise of modernity, science and commerce, reached its climax in the form of Puritan Protestantism.¹⁸

As idealism and liberalism waned, other historical philosophies emerged that sublimated the supposedly modernizing effects of the Reformation into other intellectual modes and keys. The Reformation, or some part of it, became the moment when a new urban bourgeoisie took control of its economic and political destiny, even when it thought it was only taking control of its civic religious and welfare institutions.¹⁹ Even as the drivers of change shifted from a Hegelian to a Marxist mode, the ‘modernizing’ theme in the history of the Reformation era persisted as an axiom. In the final decades of the twentieth century, social historians sought to discern in the Reformation and confessional eras the rise of the bureaucratic state, administered by systematic record-keeping and characterized by social discipline.²⁰ Religious historians in this mode postulated that in the early modern centuries Europe was ‘Christianized’, as the highly organized and disciplinarian political and ecclesiastical machinery of confessional orthodoxy investigated, controlled, reformed, and ultimately abolished the popular culture of magic and superstition.²¹ The alleged rise of ‘modern man’ depended either upon a campaign by the early modern professional and typically bourgeois clergy to suppress the customs of rural society, or on a progressive self-imposed isolation by the intellectual bourgeoisie from the customs of traditional folklore.²² If the result of this campaign was a success, it was ‘acculturation’; if it failed, it signalled the separation of the bourgeois from the masses, a ‘civilizing process’ with clear economic and class implications.²³

The late twentieth century in Europe and America witnessed a wave of intellectual disenchantment (as one might call it) with the whole notion of ‘progress’ towards ‘modernity’. The Enlightenment was not enlightened, especially if one were mentally disturbed. The thesis of ever greater secularization and rationalization was mocked by the recrudescence of fierce religiously motivated movements across the world, whose fervour overturned any assumption that the products of Western ‘modernization’ were either universally desired, privileged by history, or technologically invulnerable. It has appeared that Edward Gibbon was wrong to assume that for the barbarians to conquer Rome again, they would need to cease to be barbarous.²⁴ The social history of late medieval and early modern

Europe has quite naturally and inevitably shared in this abandonment of old assumptions about the linear rise of rationality and a 'disenchanted' world. Numerous scholars have tested the evidence for the rise of 'rational' early modern humanity and found it seriously wanting.

First, historians have reminded us that after the Reformation intelligent Protestants emphatically continued to believe in demons and spirits and in special interventions of the divine in their universe. The Reformation did not abolish the world of fallen angels nor remove the threat of witchcraft and hostile sorcery. Demonic magic suffered no incompatibility whatever with the Protestant world-view. Secondly, intelligent Protestant writers saw nothing improper in documenting extraordinary manifestations of the sacred in everyday life. Strange apparitions or manifestations within the natural order, like that just quoted from Peucer (see n. 4), were quite appropriate objects of study and meditation. While God might no longer work 'miracles' in the narrow technical sense, the hand of the divine was repeatedly to be discerned in the 'special providences' that might occur from time to time to warn people of their predicament and their religious and ethical duties.²⁵ There are absolutely no grounds for challenging either of these arguments. The evidence of continuing Protestant belief in a meaningful cosmos is copious and indisputable; and indeed this book will add further to the documentation of several of these points.

Slightly more debatable are the claims made in his later works by the brilliant social historian of early modern German religion, the late R. W. Scribner. In a key article issued in 1993, Bob Scribner argued that the Protestant Reformation *inherently* had no plan to demystify or desacralize the cosmos.²⁶ He identified parallels to the supernaturalism of traditional Catholicism in many aspects of Protestant culture. Protestant Bibles and even images of leading reformers were allegedly imbued with ritual and apotropaic potencies similar to those attributed to Catholic relics or sacred images.²⁷ Protestants might no longer expect to see visions of saints, but they could see visions of angels whose moralizing messages differed hardly at all from the apparitions of earlier centuries.²⁸ The rites of worship in the reformed world might be viewed by their believers in terms hardly different from those of Catholics of earlier centuries. Scribner's argument has found many followers among the many highly gifted historians of succeeding generations, including several of his pupils. It is not uncommon now to read of a 'distinctively Protestant popular

religion and magical culture', or to find the traditional arguments about Protestant metaphysics turned on their head by ingenious deployment of unusual sources.²⁹

The challenge posed by Scribner's and his pupils' arguments lies not in any shortcomings in the scholarship (which is invariably excellent) but in questions over method and approach. Bob Scribner developed to an exceptional level of refinement the strategy of writing the social history of the Reformation from the perspective of the local archival records of village communities in early modern Germany. He discovered many fascinating and hitherto unknown documents in the course of numerous visits to archives.³⁰ The inevitable price paid for this tactic lay in the consideration given to the traditional theological sources. In this style of historiography the theological writings of the reformers are minimized, when they are not entirely absent. One could quite reasonably argue that far too much attention was paid in the past to the theoretical ruminations of theologians, and relatively too little to the everyday experiences of the ordinary people.³¹ However, when the role of the theological sources is so far minimized, it becomes much more difficult to distinguish between the intentions of the reformers and their failures: the latter may easily be confused with the former. Transitional phenomena such as the temporary survival of monasteries in Lutheran cities may be emphasized at the expense of the long-term reality of their abolition.³² Scots Protestants might have continued to visit holy wells after the Reformation, but there is clear evidence that their kirk sessions disapproved of their doing so.³³ It would be bizarre to suggest that holy wells formed an inherent part of the Scots Calvinist belief-system: yet very much that kind of argument has been applied to parts of Reformation Europe.

Ultimately, the debate becomes a question of who speaks for the Reformation as a whole. The prudent answer might be that no one does so absolutely or exclusively. The leading reformers represented one voice, the secular politicians another, the ordinary believers in towns and country yet another. When one is speaking of the *intentions* behind the movement, however, it makes more sense to dwell on the dynamic forces of change rather than the reluctant voices of tradition; provided always that one maintains a degree of reserve over how far the intentions were realized in practice. There are also reasons to suspect that, even apart from his distinctive research methodology, Professor Scribner had reasons of his own, not always acknowledged in the historiography, to resist the inference

that Protestantism was inherently more 'modern' than the Catholicism that it rebelled against.³⁴

Historical revisionism has also come to the world of the late seventeenth century and the early Enlightenment. It has become increasingly clear that in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries there arose in the culture of the intellectual elites a taste for rediscovering the spiritual and the supernatural. This phenomenon emerged particularly clearly in England, but was also manifested in other countries of Europe. Fellows of the Royal Society took a keen interest in portents and omens, apparitions of ghosts, and the dwindling number of trials for witchcraft. Despite the fact that modern historians tend to minimize the amount of actual 'atheism' or 'mechanism' in the thought of the early Enlightenment, there was clearly sufficient *fear* of the rise of mechanical philosophy to provoke an energetic quest for evidences of the 'invisible world' in order to rebut the supposed atheists. In a brilliant and important historiographical review article, Professor Alexandra Walsham has argued that this wave of 'resacralization' in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries demonstrates a tendency for the 'desacralization' of religion and culture to ebb and flow in a series of cycles rather than a single linear progression.³⁵ This book will suggest a somewhat different explanation, rooted in the disintegration of early modern metaphysics. However, Professor Walsham and the works that she describes demonstrate the presence of this wave of intellectual supernaturalism beyond any possible cavil.

Finally, some histories of the post-urbanization, post-industrialization world argue that a culture of 'superstitious' reading of the universe persisted there also, well into the nineteenth century and beyond.³⁶ This work will also suggest an explanation for that phenomenon. The 'critique of superstition' occupied a particular niche in the social history of European thought. Between the rise of the superstition-treatises and the onset of Romanticism, religious intellectuals believed it was both possible and necessary to try to rein in and to guide the attitudes and beliefs of ordinary people. By the nineteenth century such an aspiration appears to have largely dissipated. The urgency felt by earlier pastoral theologians to moderate the beliefs of ordinary people had been replaced by other concerns. Therefore, it is not in the least surprising if evidence survives of popular 'superstitions' long after the supposed 'decline of magic'. What had declined was the *fear* of magic.

The case for reading the theological texts on superstition

A consistent problem with modern ‘revisionist’ histories of Protestant metaphysics lies in the simple fact that for most historians, and nearly all students, the theological literature on superstitions has remained profoundly inaccessible and unknown. The debate over superstition and ‘disenchantment’ was played out, with great vigour, intellectual toughness, and some subtlety, within the theological establishment of early modern Europe itself. As a prelude to making any claims as to what happened to ‘popular belief’, it is vital to clear the mind about what Europe’s thinkers and teachers were saying about it at the time. This work is intended to bring a body of theological literature into focus on the subject. Most of the texts analysed and deployed in this book consist of ‘superstition-treatises’, that is, pieces written either as occasional discussions or as part of a more systematic theological investigation into belief or a text of pastoral catechesis. This literature had existed in some form or another since the early days of the Church. Important antecedents were certain key works of Augustine, and also the sermons of Caesarius, sixth-century bishop of Arles, which offer a particularly rich set of insights into the pastoral work of a bishop in late antique Gaul.³⁷ Important contributions to the genre were made in the early medieval penitentials and the collections of early-to-high medieval canonists, such as Regino of Prüm and Burchard of Worms.³⁸ However, neither in these early writings nor in the works of the high-point of medieval scholasticism do we regularly find anything to compare with the late medieval superstition-treatises. In general the thirteenth-century scholastics discussed popular belief only when it encountered a key text in their canon of systematic theology. Peter Lombard’s *Book of Sentences* almost inevitably provoked some such discussion around book 4, distinction 34, where Lombard discussed the issue of a couple made impotent in respect of each other by sorcery. Inevitably all his many commentators followed suit to some degree or other.³⁹ Most scholastic demonologies were preoccupied with first principles, only occasionally descending to practical applications.⁴⁰

From c.1350 onwards, across Europe from England and France to eastern Germany and into Spain, a series of theological writers penned

treatises that quite specifically addressed issues of pastoral teaching in the area of superstitions. In many cases these were expositions of the Ten Commandments: the first commandment against 'strange gods' and idolatry generated a fertile literature on mistaken religious practices.⁴¹ Others were occasional pieces that responded to particular cases of conscience, like the detailed pastoral challenges discussed by Jean Gerson in his short works of pastoral advice, or by Heinrich von Gorkum's *On Certain Cases of Conscience Relating to Superstition*, both from the early fifteenth century, or somewhat later in Isidoro Isolani's *Book against Magicians and Diviners* of 1506 or Martín of Arles y Andosilla's *Treatise on Superstitions* of 1517.⁴² By the sixteenth century one finds printed vernacular treatises that addressed superstition in and for itself, such as Martín de Castañega's *Treatise on Superstitions and Sorceries* (1529), and Pedro Ciruelo's *Reproof of Superstitions and Sorceries* (1539). Both appeared in Spanish, and in the latter case in multiple editions.⁴³ It is not entirely clear why this genre of writing should have come into existence in such relative abundance when it did. To some extent, there were simply more books being written on more subjects anyway. However, some historians have detected a tendency for the theology of the later Middle Ages to adopt a more pastorally oriented strategy in a conscious way. Certainly the literature of this period acquired a degree of contact with the earthy realities of everyday life that had been much rarer hitherto.⁴⁴

The superstition-literature also overlapped at many points with the literature on magic and, in due course, on witchcraft also, but was not quite identical with either of those sub-genres. As has already been demonstrated by Michael D. Bailey, two fifteenth-century works traditionally linked with the genesis of the witch-hunt, Johannes Nider's *Formicarius* and Heinrich Krämer's *Malleus Maleficarum*, were largely devoted to broader questions of superstitious practice.⁴⁵ Some works contained several different genres within them: Johann Weyer's *On the Illusions of Demons*, a work that has previously been studied almost entirely for what it contains on the subject of witchcraft, contains in fact a great deal more superstition-lore that the traditional witchcraft literature tended to neglect.⁴⁶ Martín Delrio's *Six Books of Magical Disquisitions* is a particularly clear instance of this sort of hybrid work.⁴⁷ A few examples of these treatises are already available in English, in either complete or partial translation; these will be cited and referenced here in the most readily accessible editions where appropriate.⁴⁸

The sources for this work include medieval Catholic, reformed and post-Reformation Protestant, and early modern Catholic writings, as well as selected texts from the Enlightenment. It is conventional in studies of witchcraft to argue that dogmatic religious difference was of little or no consequence where the theory of witchcraft was concerned.⁴⁹ That simple bracketing of theological concerns will not, of course, work for the superstition materials at all. Writers either side of the Reformation divide did share many important presuppositions, both philosophical and cosmological. However, the differences between medieval Catholics, Protestants, and Roman Catholics made systematic and absolutely crucial differences to the way in which they processed their material. Often the Protestant 'superstition treatises' amounted to polemical pamphlets with a strong confessional agenda, such as Andreas Althamer's published sermon on the devil from 1532, or Johann Spreter's treatise on blessings and enchantments of 1543.⁵⁰ Sometimes Protestant and Catholic writers took part in complex rebuttals of each other, as in James Calphill's and John Martiall's competing treatises on the religious significance of the cross from 1560s England, or Johannes Heerbrand's and Albrecht Hunger's rival sets of theological theses on magic from 1570s Germany.⁵¹ At various points important borrowings and derivations of material will be indicated, since writers copied from each other both within and across the confessional and chronological divisions. The Jesuit Martín Delrio borrowed from the Lutheran Johann Georg Godelmann: both used material freely from Johann Weyer with or without acknowledgement.⁵² But even as they copied from each other, even as they shared many cosmological assumptions, these writers read the divine dispensation for the created order differently.

The inquiry will demonstrate that the pastoral struggle to transform 'popular belief' started much earlier than the first exponents of 'Christianization' and 'disenchantment' imagined. Against the background of that medieval pastoral tradition, the decades of the Reformation functioned more as an interruption and a distraction than as the key moment in the assault on folk-beliefs. In a way, the most revealing point in the story is the one at which Europe's intellectual intelligentsia lost its *fear* of popular beliefs. The key stage in the process of 'disenchantment' may prove to have occurred when transforming the beliefs of ordinary people ceased to generate such desperate evangelical urgency in the minds of the clergy. Religious intellectuals who had undergone the 'disenchanting' process in their own worlds of faith and theology felt themselves free to abandon the

long-standing and largely failed attempt to disenchant the rest of society. In the process they ceased to worry when poets, dramatists, and folklorists 're-enchanted' the European world in the service of art, culture, or indeed popular entertainment.

This is an appropriate point to confess that I am not entirely sure whether 'superstition' itself, in the sense of the great amorphous body of arbitrary and disjointed beliefs that people hold about their world, has a history in the strict sense of that term.⁵³ That is to say, I am uncertain whether one can construct any meaningful or useful explanatory narrative that demonstrates how one form of 'superstitious' mindset transformed itself into another across time. The difficulty may be evidential. It may simply not be possible to reconstruct beliefs that lack an analytical framework or literary record with sufficient detail. It may also be that traditional belief-systems partake too much of the bedrock of the human psyche to be truly susceptible of historical analysis. Beyond all doubt, on the other hand, the intellectual *response* to superstition has a history. The critique of superstition played itself out against the major trends and themes in Europe's intellectual life over a period of several centuries. Arguments were discovered, refined, adapted, and transformed in response to the religious, philosophical, and scientific changes in the broader culture of Europe from the late Middle Ages to the Enlightenment. Superstition may, or may not, have a history in this strict sense; the response to superstition certainly does have one. The latter history, the story of the response to superstition rather than the story of superstition itself, forms the theme of the chapters that follow.

Structure and limits of the book

The first two major sections of the book attempt to separate things that cannot be absolutely differentiated one from another, and yet must be distinguished if the subject is to be comprehensible. Part I (Chapters 1–4) discusses the phenomena of popular superstition as reported in the literature, predominantly the literature from the last two centuries or so of the European Middle Ages. Writers and preachers expended a great deal of time ostensibly describing the things that people did, or tried to do, to improve their lot in a fickle and dangerous world. Although those descriptions were never fully free from either constructive interpretation or normative judgements, they did present an image of the mind of the

‘superstitious’ that contained a range of common factors. In the first place this image must be analysed and studied as just that—an image, whose relationship to anything we might call ‘reality’ is at best suspect. At the end of the fourth chapter, an attempt will be made to review the written material in conjunction with the surviving codicological, physical, and archaeological data. This will offer suggestions—if nothing more than that—as to how far the image of ‘superstitions’ reflected the life of people in the past.

Since the subject of this chapter is the late Middle Ages, the intersection between the practices called ‘superstitious’ and those of traditional Catholic Christianity demands particularly careful attention. Here one needs to keep two principles in constant tension. On the one hand, medieval Christianity was startlingly inclusive: it formed a vast, diverse, and seamless texture where the exalted speculations of the mystics and the refined subtleties of metaphysicians touched on devotional and pastoral theology and practice, the strands reaching right across the spectrum to the most materialistic and apparently ‘mechanical’ procedures of protective prayer and ritual. It is entirely understandable that some historians steadfastly refuse to try to draw lines of demarcation between different parts of medieval religious culture, including it all under one umbrella of ‘traditional religion’.⁵⁴ However, in the minds of preachers and moralists *at the time*, this all-inclusive coexistence of disparate elements seemed neither attractive nor even acceptable. In fact, medieval writers did include among ‘superstitions’ a significant proportion of what were sometimes called ‘vain observances’. Such things were practised largely or wholly within the Catholic religious culture, but were also unacceptable to some theological opinion within it. It is not that no distinction existed between acceptable and ‘superstitious’ religious practices: rather, it was that clergy constantly debated over where the distinction was to be drawn. Therefore, this chapter will include a number of things that might, then and since, have been regarded as perfectly acceptable ‘folklorized’ religious practice.

In the second part one remains with the Middle Ages, but moves into the area of theological critique and censure of popular belief as the theological writers portrayed it. A strong tradition of anti-superstitious writing originated with Augustine and earlier writers, which the Middle Ages inherited and modified. Chapters 5–9 explore the demonological tradition in medieval ecclesiastical writing. The presence and activities of evil spirits in the natural order served as the primary theological explanation

for nearly every effect allegedly claimed for ‘superstitious’ activities. On one hand, since demons occupied a distinct and agreed space within the natural order of created beings, there were limits to their power. A whole range of things lay beyond the power of demons, though God could and might chose to do such things and demons might aspire to mimic the divine. On the other hand, demons were conventionally credited with the power to generate illusions: so any reports that appeared to endow them with greater powers than scholastic demonology allowed could be ‘explained away’ as the result of artificially generated illusions playing on fallible human senses and minds.

In Chapter 8 some of the fault-lines and differences between the theological writers on superstitions will be excavated and explored. Although there was much shared culture among the theological critics of superstition, significant differences of approach also emerged, over major issues as well as details. This book suggests that, at heart, many of these differences resolved themselves into questions of theodicy, the great intractable dilemma of the origin of evil. Very broadly, theologians divided themselves into two groups. First, some writers portrayed God as the arbiter of a cosmic gymnasium or military training camp, where individual souls were pitted against demonic adversaries, equipped with a variety of resources, spiritual and physical, for their own protection, and more or less left to get on with the struggle. On the other hand, another group of theologians consisted of providentialists. They envisaged God controlling the malice of evil spirits with constant vigilance, only permitting human beings to suffer misfortune for specific reasons at specific times. This highly abstract question impacted on the practical advice that pastoral theologians gave clergy and laity. Broadly speaking, the more freedom demons had to do harm, the more leeway theologians would give ordinary people to use (approved, ecclesiastical) ‘counter-magic’ to protect themselves. The more providentialist writers tended to be more restrictive: if bad things happened to people for good reasons, then protecting oneself against misfortune was almost beside the point. This debate (often identified as an issue in the Protestant versus Catholic controversies of the early modern era) was closely anticipated in the diverse writings of the later scholastics.

Demonology provided the intellectual mechanism by which ecclesiastical writers converted folkloric beliefs and customs into something that was putatively, and in theological eyes actually, evil. The pastoral challenge for preachers and parish clergy was to ‘convince’ their audiences that something

that they called a 'superstitious' activity, and which many ordinary people practised in the firm belief that it was harmless or beneficial—and even religious—was really part of a demonic conspiracy to destroy souls. In the encounter between pastoral theology and folklore, two rival interpretations of the invisible universe clashed. The paradoxes of studying this literature are many. The demonological treatises are copious and abundant, and present by far the fullest insight that we are likely to gain into the 'enchanted' mindset of medieval Europe. Yet it seems almost certain that their particular reading of the phenomena, their anxious, fervent conviction that superstitions were really the 'novitiate of the devil', convinced very few people beside themselves and their closest supporters. Even many clerics seem not to have been persuaded. Chapter 9 enters into the challenging question of how far the 'critique of superstition' actually impacted the pastoral work of Europe's clergy. To take either of the extreme positions, to claim that the pastoral campaign was either extremely effective or failed utterly to have any impact, would be equally mistaken. There is enough evidence to infer that the pastoral campaign to manage and control 'popular culture' began well before the Reformation; but there is also evidence of sufficient fragmentation, disagreement, and divided voices to explain many of its limitations.

With Part III the survey moves into the eras of the Renaissance and Reformations. The Christian humanists form an important prelude to the Reformation controversies, not least because so many of those who shaped the religious destiny of the sixteenth century were schooled in Christian humanism of some kind or another. The humanists radically shifted the emphasis in pastoral piety away from the correct performance of ritual towards ethics and personal spirituality. They did so principally for their own adepts: but they also had an impact on the pastoral language of the broader Church. 'Superstition' suddenly broadened its ambit to include not just wrong beliefs or wrong ceremonies, but wrong *attitudes* to rites and ceremonies: it was 'superstitious' to expect benefits even from an impeccably orthodox ritual if the appropriate ethical commitment were lacking. In the critique of 'superstition' the Renaissance constituted a paradoxical but vital prologue to the Reformation debates. In the area of theological responses to folk-beliefs (as elsewhere) Martin Luther stands as the Janus-figure, the transitional thinker who embraced an older world-view thoroughly, only to break it apart and build something new. Luther struck out on his own in many different and often contradictory respects.

He took evil, and the power of demonic evil, very seriously indeed. He enlarged the consequences of the fall to include not just human sinfulness, but the disordered nature of the entire creation. Yet no-one did more than Luther to discredit the notion that one could clamber up to heaven by a sequence of diligently performed religious rituals. The paradoxes of Luther's insights in this area demand a chapter to themselves (Chapter 11).

When speaking of the contributions of the wider Protestant Reformation on this subject, it is important to do full justice to a phenomenon that many other historians have already noted. The Protestant reformers cultivated a keen sense of the active role of God in the created order, and a vigorous and articulated demonology. They collected evidence of prodigies, portents, and 'special providences'. Their 'critique of superstition' certainly did not extend as far as nineteenth-century liberal theologians might have wished. Their cosmos was as spirit-filled and as ethically driven as that of their medieval predecessors. Chapter 12 explores these aspects of the picture in some detail. It also points out some important shifts in attitude that lay embedded within the sixteenth-century context. Special providences and portents were definitely to be expected: apparitions of the dead or miraculous exorcisms of spirits were not. One hypothesis about the inner logic of the Protestant critique may help to explain the disagreement between recent and older historians. It is perfectly possible for a religious movement to contain within it the seeds of a later development: but for those seeds not to germinate in the first, second, or third generation, because other factors in the cultural environment prevent them from doing so. To put it bluntly, those historians of 'ideal-types' who postulated something inherently modernizing in the ideas of the Reformation may have been conceptually correct: but the modernizing potential that they discerned may not have been realized in fact, because too many other cultural assumptions stood in the way. Although Protestantism was clearly not 'modern' in any absolute sense, it may in some way prove to have been modern *manqué*.

Pursuing this possibility, Chapter 13 argues that the differences that separated the reformers from medieval Catholicism on the 'superstition' issue were profound and critical. The reformers argued that Catholic ceremonies, which claimed to protect the faithful from demonic malice and misfortune, essentially suffered from the same error as the popular superstitions that they criticized. In particular, a chorus of Protestant thinkers denounced the notion that rituals of consecration could modify

or transform physical objects—water, salt, oil, candles, parchment, and so forth—by giving these things spiritual potency to resist evil. This was, for Protestant thought, magical thinking pure and simple. So, by a bizarre switch of rhetoric, Protestant writers denounced the things that medieval Catholicism had called into being as *preservatives* against evil, deploying against these consecrated objects exactly the same arguments that medieval Catholics had in their turn used against the rituals and objects of popular magic. The same demonological argument that medieval pastoral theologians used against magical charms now applied to Catholic rites. If a Catholic ritual ‘worked’, it was only because the devil made it appear to work, in order to seduce people further into error. To expect to manipulate the universe supernaturally through ritual amounted therefore to diabolical magic or, at best, the false expectation of a miracle. Miracles, which had been a resource in the earliest ages of the Church, were now ceased and no longer to be expected. It was simple blasphemy to claim that the Church could deploy supernatural power ritually and at will to protect people.

Beyond these arguments, the now conventional postulate that Protestantism was as ‘enchanted’ and devil-ridden as its medieval predecessors proves to require some important qualifications. Chapter 14 considers how reformed thought addressed the perennial question of theodicy. The reformers inclined, for the most part, to the extreme providentialist view that evil occurred through an ultimately wise, though deeply hidden and mysterious, decision of God. Consequently, all the resources to resist misfortune that had been zealously cultivated in the old Church were beside the point. More deeply still, the reformers’ providentialism cast the role of the devil and evil spirits in general into a very different role. The devil was, at best, an entirely captive instrument of the divine purposes. The most dangerous thing that the devil could do to people was, in truth, to persuade them of wrong opinions.

Chapter 15 explores the diversity of responses to the debate over superstition found among the theologians of the Catholic reform. The debate over superstition illustrated almost more poignantly than anything else the variety of possible directions that Catholic polemic needed to take in order to sustain and defend the Roman Catholic Church in the era of confessional diversity. On one hand, Catholic theologians argued that nothing had changed since the Middle Ages: superstitions were wrong for exactly the same reasons as they had been before. On another, the reformers of Catholic Christendom aspired to purge, to purify, and to some

extent to homogenize the liturgical resources of Christianity, although their desire for homogeneity has sometimes been exaggerated.⁵⁵ Thirdly, Catholic theologians responded with outrage to the Protestant arguments that equated Catholic liturgical practice with superstitious magic. They defended the authenticity and value of the officially approved rites by which the Church defended people against hostile forces and powers. These last two objectives tended to counteract each other. The potential existed for real conflict at the heart of the Counter-Reformation; that such conflict was not generally realized owed much to the fact that different arguments could be deployed in different contexts according to the pastoral need in a given area.

In Part IV the book begins to consider the breakdown of the consensus over Aristotelian cosmology and demonology in the seventeenth century, and the theological implications of that breakdown. Within various traditions derived from the Reformation, first nearer the radical margins and subsequently more in the mainstream, views arose which challenged the traditional view of the cosmos and the presence of spirit-beings within it. This trend derived as much from growing religious diversity as from new scientific theories about matter and the universe. In either case the effect was the same. The consensus over demons, and therefore over the possibilities, causes, and limitations of magical and 'superstitious' activities, broke down. It now became possible to argue, with greater clarity and conviction than before, that certain reported phenomena simply could not and therefore did not happen. It became possible to dispute the traditional explanations for the supposedly occult causes and connections between things.

A second critical change occurred towards the end of the seventeenth century in most, though not all, of the countries of Europe. The restraints of confessional discipline over religious thought and practice slackened very perceptibly. As a consequence, forms of deviant belief that might previously have been feared as the result of demonic threats were now treated with indifference or even with mockery.⁵⁶ The strict religious restraints that had been characteristic of the confessional age broke down, as new generations saw and were appalled by the catastrophic effects of dogmatically driven community strife. In this age also, though not at once and certainly not everywhere, belief in witchcraft began to lose the support of criminal justice systems in Western Europe. However, there was also an important contrary drift. As confessional dogma and Aristotelian physics alike lost their

grip, many thinkers feared their world was slipping into pure materialism and atheism. Consequently, as Chapter 17 demonstrates, a sudden, anxious quest began to validate the 'supernatural'. Things that would in the past have been feared as the delusions of devils were now anxiously sought out in order to prove the existence of the 'invisible world'. The sceptical and the credulous movements of thought responded to each other, and in a sense needed each other. There would not have been the same urgency about the attack on 'Saducism' and the rediscovery of the spiritual world, if that world had not been believed to be under real attack.

In Chapter 18 the frame moves on to the early eighteenth century and the first decades of the Enlightenment. Ultimately the scope of reference for the term 'superstition' was enlarged to include all 'irrational' aspects of religious practice, discipline, or custom. The antithesis between superstition and 'reason' did not first appear in the Enlightenment, as many might suppose. Late scholasticism, especially of a nominalist variety, had repeatedly referred to the 'unreasonableness' of a superstitious practice as grounds to reject it. However, in the eighteenth century the criterion of reason took centre stage. 'Reason' is of course a flexible and variable concept, determined by perspective and assumptions. Some historians have argued that an early Enlightenment figure like Pierre Bayle derived much of his critique of contemporary religion from his own Calvinist religious roots, rather than from any abstract 'reason' divorced from religious thinking.⁵⁷ The revisionist view that highlights the religious background of such early Enlightenment figures as Bayle is helpful to this project. It shows how the eighteenth-century critique of 'superstitious' religion did not spring from nothing, nor did it break absolutely with what had been said and written before it. It is also important to register the contribution of baroque Catholic authors in this area such as Jean-Baptiste Thiers and François LeBrun, whose works appeared in a large composite edition in the 1730s.⁵⁸ Here again, one finds considerable elements of continuity as well as evidence of gradual modernization in the presentation of the traditional superstition-critique.

Nevertheless, there were important disjunctions as well as continuities between the confessional era and the Enlightenment. A significant shift took place in the vocabulary of intellectual discussion of religion. 'Superstition' ceased to be something putatively external, anathematized from *within* the theological establishment. The term now meant something *about* the way Christianity itself was practised that appalled the *philosophes*, whether they were actively religious or not. The moral outrage of Enlightenment

thought focused consistently on certain targets: religious intolerance and violence from the elites, ignorance and primitivism on the part of the majority. Such a reordering of priorities could not fail to alter the way in which the discourse around 'superstition' was conducted. An important consequence of Enlightenment critiques of religion 'gone wrong' was the rise of historical interpretations of the evolution of Christianity itself. Such historicist readings of the religious past were not new. Some of the historical critiques previously assumed to be typical of the eighteenth century were in fact adumbrated by the Protestant reformers two centuries earlier. Nevertheless, the *philosophes* adopted some of the rhetoric and logic of the Protestant reformers only to direct it towards a very different goal.

Most historians now revise the traditional reading of the Enlightenment by taking its overall commitment to 'reason' with a significant pinch of salt. Even amongst those who participated fully in the cosmopolitan literary and philosophical culture of the mid-eighteenth century, many had a taste for the exotic, the bizarre, and the outré. Such tastes sat very ill with some of the propaganda about rationality and ethical sense set forth by Voltaire and his kind. One should take full account of the ways in which the Enlightenment may have been gently subverted by some of its own exponents. As with the potentially modernizing effects of the Reformation, there may have been a credibility gap between intention and achievement. The religious philosophers of the eighteenth century inhabited a world where most people still lived in a profoundly pre-modern mindset. Witch-trials continued in some parts of Europe, Protestant and Catholic, into the eighteenth century. Demonology and exorcism remained serious subjects for discussion among religious leaders of all kinds. The response to miraculous occurrences was not always one of unrestrained intellectual scepticism.⁵⁹

The final chapter will conclude with a brief look forward to the era of Romanticism, in which the intelligentsia of Europe finally lost not only its fear but also its disdain for popular legend, folklore, and ritual. After decades of rather brittle propaganda for rationalism, Europe's intellectual and spiritual life rediscovered tradition in the name of national and ethnic particularity. The folklorists of post-Enlightenment France and Germany treated the popular legends of supernatural power neither as evidence of demonic seduction nor as embarrassing primitive relics to be discarded. Rather, they collected them as the fragile pressed flowers of a pre-modern cultural identity under threat of modernization and urbanization. It may

be that, in order to treat the lore of spirits and occult causes with the curiosity of the collector, one must first be utterly removed from the world where these things are sources of fear or alarm. The interest of Romantic-era folklorists in the subject matter of European superstitions and their accompanying beliefs may represent the moment when the magical and the demonic finally lost the power to frighten those who studied it.

It is important, finally, to identify certain things that this book deliberately and intentionally either does not attempt to address at all, or at least declines to try to cover comprehensively.

1. This book presents an analysis of a body of literature. No systematic attempt is made to evaluate the institutional or legal impact of the ideas discussed here. In various parts of Europe, the critique of superstition was sometimes translated into concrete judicial procedures, by consistories and kirk sessions in Reformed countries or offices of the Inquisition in Italy or Spain. Pastoral visitations conducted under the inspiration of the Council of Trent and its programmes often included in their questionnaires inquiries about 'superstitious' practices. However, the institutional implementation of the critique forms a whole vast subject on its own, and is excluded from this study for reasons of space and coherence. Consequently, large-scale socio-historical questions about the 'acculturation' or 'social control' of the mass of Europe's people are not posed except insofar as they emerge from the theological and philosophical written sources.

2. The book focuses primarily on superstitions and the learned response to them. Even though 'superstition' had a distinct and relatively consistent 'core' in the shape of healing and protective charms, folk-beliefs about spiritual beings, and the arts of divination, it still proved an extremely elastic term, especially when used collusively as a term of abuse or opprobrium. While the dividing line between superstition and obviously related subjects such as magic, witchcraft, possession, and astrology is hazy at best, some limits have to be set to the study. So intellectual magic, as practised by learned adepts with the use of grimoires or occult manuals like the *Key of Solomon*, is largely excluded. The present book does not seek to add in any substantial way to the already vast and prodigious literature on the witch-hunting manuals, except in so far as these may also have contributed to the superstition-critique. Neither does it discuss actual records of trials for witchcraft, nor the reasons for the decline and end of witch-hunting in Europe. Possession and exorcism figure only in so far as they came to

be included in the discourse of the power of demons, and later in the debate over the putatively ‘superstitious’ character of Roman Catholicism. Learned astrology figures only as reflected in the critiques of theological writers: it is not evaluated or described in detail for itself. To have treated all such tangential subjects adequately would have made for a vast book.

3. This book presents arguments rooted in history, not in anthropology, philosophy, or religious studies. Consequently it uses terms as they are found in historical sources, without seeking to relate these to any more absolute or abstract nomenclature or set of concepts. The terminology used in this book is not intended to bear transfer to or automatic comparison with that used on evidence found in other parts of the Christian world beyond Western Europe, or indeed in other faiths. The outcomes of this study may well be suggestive for, and receive illumination from, comparison with entirely different fields of inquiry into the religious mind. However, once again a limit has to be set to the present study: that limit is set by the fairly broad parameters of the sources discussed in the following pages.

This work claims that only by understanding the complex rational structures that the thinkers of pre-modern Europe erected to try to understand their world, can we begin to write a satisfying account of pre-industrial European culture. Medieval and early modern Europeans read their world theologically, and we must take their theological readings of it seriously. At the same time, the relationship between theological culture and the cultures of the less educated remains constantly problematical. We cannot assume either that these cultures integrated seamlessly with each other, any more than we can postulate rigid unbridgeable divides between them. Finally, this book does imply—to say the least—that the origins of ‘modernity’ are inextricably tied up with the complex business of faith seeking (rational) understanding. Europe’s people found that the landmarks by which they marked out the approved and received understanding of their universe were subtly but decisively shifted in the course of the later Middle Ages and the early modern period. The story is a complex one and demands all the ingenuity of historians to chart it. There is, however, a very important story to be told.