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*Disruptive Power: Catholic Women, Miracles, and Politics in
Modern Germany, 1918–1965* by Michael E. O'Sullivan
(review)

Lauren Faulkner Rossi

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Disruptive Power: Catholic Women, Miracles, and Politics in Modern Germany, 1918–1965. By Michael E. O’Sullivan. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018. Pp. 344. Cloth \$60.00. ISBN 978-1487503437.

In histories of Germany after 1918, popular piety and religious miracles have not been significant topics, but in his new book, Michael E. O’Sullivan seeks to change this. He makes his intervention into historiography clear: “German Catholicism experienced a massive revival in miraculous faith from the aftermath of the First World War until the onset of the Cold War that most of the academic world has disregarded” (4). Specifically, he focuses on how German Catholics understood miracles, involving cures, stigmata and other kinds of bleeding, and apparitions of the Virgin Mary, and what they tell us about secularization and modernity. The miracles, he argues, reveal “a revolt by traditionalists against mainstream religious and political leaders” (4). This revolt was doubly disruptive: it contributed to the Catholic Church’s fragmentation after 1945 and it transformed Christianity’s role in German politics.

O’Sullivan’s main subject is the best-known German stigmatic of the twentieth century, Therese Neumann. Hailing from Konnersreuth in Bavaria, close to the Czech border, Neumann came to regional prominence during the Weimar Republic, when she first started experiencing visions and the stigmata (wounds on the head, hands, and feet that imitated the suffering of Christ). She persisted through the Third Reich, largely by laying low, and emerged in the postwar era as a bridge of sorts between Bavarian rural tradition and American modernity. In 2005, largely in response to popular petitions, the bishop of Regensburg formally opened the proceedings for her canonization. O’Sullivan’s conclusions about Neumann and her supporters, the Konnersreuth Circle, are compelling: they had more influence over those believers (or would-be believers) who flocked to see her than many Catholic authorities were comfortable with.

But O’Sullivan faces challenges in his analysis. Neumann exhibited contradictory behavior, and her current candidacy for sainthood means her writings, under investigation by the Church, are not available to researchers. But he has marshaled enough evidence to locate her agency in an “extreme version of Catholic patriarchy,” whereby she was able “to fully capitalize on her spiritual gifts” (118). For instance, she controversially prioritized obedience to her father over obedience to her bishop (and thereby avoided having to submit to additional medical tests), and she was not restrained by clerical supervision in interactions with either supporters or critics. On other points, he cannot easily account for her decisions. She engaged with and defended herself against men who were critical of her stigmata and vision-induced ecstasies, whether priests, doctors, or journalists. (The German bishops were divided over the veracity of her claims, though she enjoyed amicable relations with some of them.) She was less willing to challenge male patriarchy when it came to identifying

sexual predators. Though she was a rigid force for chastity in rural Konnersreuth (for which she earned a reputation as a bully among some critics), where the dangers of rape and sexual harassment were persistent, her efforts focused entirely on the women who came to her, and not at all on the men causing the problems. O'Sullivan's description of an "affair" that caused spiritual turmoil for one woman is unfortunate (135)—the woman in question was a victim of sexual assault as a child (perhaps he took his description from the source he is paraphrasing). His reading of the experience emphasizes Neumann's role in reforming the woman and elevating her own authority over that of the woman's priest. In another instance involving a Konnersreuth teacher accused of sexually assaulting some of his students, Neumann announced that she believed him innocent based on a vision she had before his trial started, and her supporters paid his legal fees, though the teacher was ultimately sentenced to jail. Any more explicit condemnation, O'Sullivan insists, carried the risk of grave personal consequences. While this may be true, some readers may be less generous in their interpretation of the situation, especially as Neumann had no trouble taking on the patriarchy in other situations.

On occasion, O'Sullivan advances interpretations without sufficient evidence. His argument that Neumann and her supporters "unintentionally hastened the larger church's decline in West Germany" is not borne out by the sources he cites. He does not really engage with the larger story of the church's decline, nor enumerate the "subset" of Catholics who were loyal to her above all else beyond a reference to "a vast but narrow segment of Catholics in Germany and the United States" (238) and her popularity (for spiritual and cultural reasons) with some Americans during the occupation. Citing surveys conducted over the past several decades, O'Sullivan argues that some Germans "retained elements of their Catholic background even while breaking with church dogma" and that seventy percent of contemporary Germans consider themselves "religious" (250), but the extent to which this persistent religiosity is shaped by or owes its contours to Therese Neumann and her mystical piety is unclear. Proving that a single woman and her relatively small network was even partially responsible for a larger, more widespread decline in religiosity or the diminution of political power wielded by German Christians is no easy feat, especially as secularizing currents were present across Europe at the time. Clearly, she had an impact, but there is no discussion of currents beyond Neumann herself.

If Neumann falls short of proving some of O'Sullivan's grander claims, her case offers powerful evidence that narratives about religious mysticism and popular piety in Germany (and elsewhere in Europe) should be better integrated into conventional histories. He aptly demonstrates the ways in which power from below—grassroots movements as well as localized individual efforts—can influence and shape figures and events at regional and national levels. While his book will be of most interest

to German studies scholars, his subject also has broad appeal to social and cultural historians of modern Europe.

Lauren Faulkner Rossi, *Simon Fraser University*

Dorothy Thompson and German Writers in Defense of Democracy. By Karina von Tippelskirch. Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018. Pp. 299. Paper \$50.95. ISBN 978-3631707036.

This book, including its brief but instructive introduction by Sigrid Bauschinger, deals with Dorothy Thompson's (1893–1961) journalistic publications, as well as her correspondence and fragmentary autobiographical writing. She was the most famous and most influential US female journalist of the 1930s and 1940s, and her impressive knowledge of the German language and German and Austrian literature and culture foregrounded the success of her work in Europe. While most newspaper and radio reports are quickly forgotten, Dorothy Thompson's contributions are still studied by historians, literary scholars, and media specialists. Karina von Tippelskirch's book is not simply another biography on Thompson, but a study demonstrating Thompson's impact on US policies regarding refugees from Nazi Germany. In particular, von Tippelskirch elucidates how Thompson found ways to initiate or support nongovernmental agencies to help persecuted writers and intellectuals reach the United States as a safe haven, how she personally contributed to the survival of friends like Lion Feuchtwanger, Carl Zuckmayer, and Fritz Kortner, and how she was able to give Thomas Mann a voice in the American media, both as the spokesperson of the "other Germany" as well as through his "Joseph"-tetralogy that was translated into English in 1934. Her circle of like-minded friends in Austria and Germany was large. In Vienna, she attended Genia Schwarzwald's "Salon" on a regular basis, and it was there that she met Helmuth James Graf von Moltke, who later fell victim to Hitler's vengeance against all resistance groups. As a foreign correspondent she started to write for leading US journals in the 1920s in Paris and Vienna and in the 1930s in Berlin. Early on she became a representative of the "New Woman" during that time period: In her youth, she had successfully worked in a campaign for women's voting rights, and she saw herself (and was seen) as a person redefining in theory and practice female ambitions and goals regarding professional work and their friendships and liaisons with both men and women. Between 1928 and 1942 she was married to Sinclair Lewis, one of the most famous writers at the time who received (as the first American author) the Nobel Prize in literature in 1930. The couple did everything they could to help exiled writers and invited many of them to stay on their legendary "Twin Farms" in Vermont. Thompson's intelligence as well as her enlightened ethics