

SUPERSTITION

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HE Church has frequently and in emphatic terms expressed her unconditioned condemnation of all forms of superstition. Founded in an age teeming with superstition, she has unceasingly waged a battle against nefarious occult practices. When the Church began to evangelize the Roman Empire she had to combat not only the paganism and immorality of the age, but also the superstitious customs intimately and vitally connected with them. And in this continued conflict with superstition the Church has always vigilantly guarded her doctrine and liturgy lest some life-sapping ritual, sprung from ancient times, germinate and flourish among the faithful.

The term superstition has been given various and diverse applications, depending upon the viewpoint of the speaker or writer. It contains the connotation of something degrading to man; all peoples have looked upon it as something to be avoided and abhorred. A man is loath to admit that he is a victim of superstition but is ever ready to label as superstitious all religions that differ from his own. What one praises as religion, another rejects and brands as superstition.

Saint Thomas defines superstition as a vice opposed to the moral virtue of religion. It is a vice of excess rather than of defect. Every moral virtue consists in acting according to the medium between two extremes. Any variation that transcends or is in default of this medium vitiates the virtue, gravely or lightly according to the degree of deflection. "The medium of the virtue of religion consists in that it renders to God the reverence and honor due Him as the supreme principle of creation."¹ "Every act of superstition transcends this medium, not because it offers more in the divine service than the true religion, but because it offers a divine homage to whom it is not due, or, in an unfitting manner."² This vice does not render a greater homage

¹ *Summa Theol.*, IIa-IIae, q. 81, a. 3, corp.

² *Ibid.*, q. 92, a. 1, corp.

and reverence to God than the true religion; but rather derogates from the divine cult by attributing divine homage to a creature or by ascribing to persons or objects a supernatural power which God has not bestowed on them.

Superstition is a general term and in its scope embraces all those vices that deprive God of the reverence and honor due Him as the supreme principle of creation. Supreme honor and worship (*cultus latriæ*) is due to the one true God and to Him only. The worship of a mere creature perverts the order of the divine Plan. It attributes to him powers that he does not or cannot possess. "It sets up another god and diminishes the divine sovereignty."³ This vice is termed idolatry if it renders to a creature the cult of *latria*. It is the most grievous form of superstition and is directly opposed to the worship of the true God.

Idolatry is not the only vice opposed to the virtue of religion. Any usurpation of the divine power or prerogatives militates against the worship of God. That man should desire to know the future is not unusual. He has a natural capacity for the acquisition of knowledge and a natural curiosity to know the future. Some future events are discernible to him but others are hidden from his knowledge. To know the contingent future pertains to the omniscience of God. This power is not granted to creatures except by divine commission, as was given to the Prophets of the Old Dispensation. To investigate the necessary future is within the province of men. It can be ascertained from a study of natural causes and of the laws of the physical universe. An investigation of this kind is in no way opposed to the worship of the true God. It is this form of investigation which is employed by the science which concerns itself with the relative position of the heavenly bodies and from this knowledge is able to determine an eclipse of the sun and moon and stormy and dry seasons. Events are the effects of their causes. From a consideration of the causes the effects can be known by a process of natural reasoning. The investigation, however, of the contingent and of the free future is not within the natural power of creatures. These events depend upon the free will of men which is not determined to one mode of action as are the laws of nature. "To determine contingent future events before they occur belongs to God alone Who in His Eternity sees them as present. If anyone presumes to foreknow or to predict in

³ *Ibid.*, q. 94, a. 3, corp.

any manner whatsoever the contingent future without a divine revelation, he usurps a power belonging to God alone."⁴

This usurpation of the divine power to know the contingent future is called Divination. Such an action is evil, not because it is prohibited, but rather it is prohibited because it is evil. "Every act of Divination comes from the demons, either because the demons are expressly invoked to manifest the future or because the demons lend themselves in all vain inquisitions of the future so that they may fill the minds of men with vanity."⁵

Divination or the art of attempting to acquire knowledge of the contingent future employs a great variety of methods. To enumerate and describe all of them would be the work of volumes and far beyond the scope of this article. "Scarcely an object or movement in the heavens, on the earth, or in the water, has escaped being metamorphosized into a message of the future."⁶ Multiple as these methods are, Saint Thomas reduces them to three general groups:⁷ necromancy, in which the demons are expressly invoked to make known the future; augury, in which the aid of the demons is implicitly invoked and an attempt is made to know the future by observing the signs in nature and interpreting them in relation to human affairs; and sortilege, in which the demon is implicitly invoked and an attempt is made to know the future, not from the signs in nature but from those invented by man, such, for example, as the drawing of lots or the throwing of dice to establish future contingent events.

Saint Thomas admits that some knowledge acquired from the invocation of the demon may be of temporal use to man, but he also adds that "no temporal utility can be compared to the loss of spiritual salvation which threatens by seeking hidden things through the invocation of the demons."⁸ "It is patent that the invocation of the demon to reveal the future is from its very nature detrimental to man, both on the part of the demon and of man. The demon, inasmuch as he is hostile, intends in all his operations the spiritual ruin of man. Man, precisely because he begs knowledge from the demon, exposes himself at least to belief in him and to act or refrain from action in accordance,

⁴ *Ibid.*, q. 95, a. 1, corp.

⁵ *Ibid.*, a. 2, corp.

⁶ Graham, E. P., "Divination" in *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

⁷ *Summa Theol.* II-II, q. 95, a. 3, corp.

⁸ *Ibid.*, a. 4, ad 3.

either with the demon's advice or with his own judgment, depending nevertheless upon the promptings of the demon. Since these effects of themselves follow from the nature of such an invocation and imply a willingness on the part of man to believe the demon, who is very cunning and knows how to lead man to perdition, even through the medium of truth, they render the act illicit. Nor is it in the power of man to safeguard himself from these fallacies."⁹

When a nation is engaged in warfare, it uses every precaution to conceal its military tactics from the knowledge of its enemies. Its battlements and strategic points are strongly fortified and diligently guarded. Its military plans are formulated in secret meetings and dispatched with great secrecy through trustworthy and confidential messengers. To betray these secrets is treason; to invite the enemy to take command of the forts and direct the military manoeuvres is tantamount to national suicide. We cannot find words sufficiently vehement to describe and denounce the stupidity and unreasonableness of such a mode of action. And yet a mode of action essentially similar to this is reënacted in the Christian's life when he resorts to demoniacal invocation. His life is a warfare, "not against flesh and blood but against principalities and the powers of darkness."¹⁰ By betraying himself into the powers of the demon he forswears his allegiance to God and submits himself to the avaricious domination of Satan.

⁹ Cajetan, *Commentary* on IIa-IIae, q. 95, a. 4.

¹⁰ Ephes., vi, 12.