

QUESTION 92

Superstition in Itself

Next we have to consider the vices that are opposed to [the virtue of] religion (questions 92-100): first, vices that agree with religion in giving divine worship; and, second, vices that have a clear opposition to [the virtue of] religion through a contempt for those things that belong to religion. Now the former are vices that pertain to *superstition*, whereas the latter are vices that pertain to *irreligiosity*.

Hence, we must first consider superstition itself (question 92) and its parts (questions 93-96), and then irreligiosity and its parts (questions 97-100).

On the first topic there are two questions: (1) Is superstition a vice contrary to [the virtue of] religion? (2) Does superstition have more than one part, i.e., species?

Article 1

Is superstition a vice contrary to [the virtue of] religion?

It seems that superstition is not a vice contrary to [the virtue of] religion:

Objection 1: It is not the case that one of two contraries is posited in the definition of the other. But *religion* is posited in the definition of *superstition*, since superstition is said to be “religion observed in an immoderate way (*religio supra modum servata*),” as is clear from a Gloss on the following passage from Colossians 2:23: “... which have the appearance of religion in their superstition.” Therefore, it is not the case that superstition is a vice opposed to religion.

Objection 2: In *Etymologia* Isidore says, “Cicero says that they are called superstitious who pray and sacrifice all their days in order that their children might survive them (*ut sui sibi liberi superstites fierent*).” But this can likewise be done according to the worship that belongs to the true religion. Therefore, superstition is not a vice opposed to religion.

Objection 3: Superstition seems to imply some sort of excess. But religion does not admit of excess, since, as was explained above (q. 81, a. 3), with respect to religion it is impossible for us to render to God as much as we owe Him. Therefore, it is not the case that superstition is a vice opposed to religion.

But contrary to this: In *De Decem Chordis* Augustine says, “You strike the first chord, by which the one God is worshiped, and the beast of superstition has fallen headlong.” But the worship of the one God belongs to [the virtue of] religion. Therefore, superstition is opposed to religion.

I respond: As was explained above (q. 81, a. 3), religion is a moral virtue. But as was established above (*ST* 1-2, q. 64, a. 1), every moral virtue consists in a mean. And so for every moral virtue, there are two vices opposed to it, one as *excess* and the other as *deficiency*.

Now it is possible to exceed the mean of a virtue not only with respect to the circumstance called *how much?* (*quantum*), but also with respect to the other circumstances. Hence, in the case of certain virtues, e.g., magnanimity and magnificence, the vice does not exceed the mean of the virtue because it tends toward more of something than the virtue does—it might even tend toward less—and yet it goes beyond the mean of the virtue insofar as it does something to someone *to whom* it ought not to, or *when* it ought not to, and so on with respect to other circumstances of this sort. This is clear from the Philosopher in *Ethics* 6.

So, then, superstition is a vice opposed to religion because of *excess*, not because it exhibits more of divine worship than genuine religion does, but because it exhibits divine worship either to someone *whom* it not ought to or *in a manner that* it ought not to.

Reply to objection 1: Just as *good* is predicated metaphorically in the case of bad things, as when we say *good thief*, so, too, the names of the virtues are sometimes used in a transferred sense (*transumptive*) in the case of bad things, in the way that *prudence* is sometimes used for *craftiness*

(*astutia*)—this according to Luke 16:8 (“The children of this age are more prudent than the children of light”). And this is the way in which *superstition* is called *religion*.

Reply to objection 2: The *etymology* of a name is different from the name’s *signification*. The etymology has to do with that *because of which* the name is imposed to signify, whereas a name’s signification has to do with *that which* the name is imposed to signify. These are sometimes diverse from one another; for instance, the name *rock* (*lapis*) is *imposed* because of the hurting of the foot (*laesio pedis*), and yet it does not *signify* the hurting of the foot; otherwise, iron, which hurts the foot, would be a rock. Similarly, the name *superstition* (*superstitio*) need not signify that because of which the name was imposed.

Reply to objection 3: [The virtue of] religion cannot have an excess with respect to its *absolute quantity*, but it can have an excess with respect to its *quantity of proportion*, viz., insofar as, in the worship of God, one does something that ought not to be done.

Article 2

Are there diverse species of superstition?

It seems not to be the case that there are diverse species of superstition:

Objection 1: According to the Philosopher in *Topics* 1, “if one of two opposites is said in many ways, the other is as well.” But [the virtue of] religion, to which superstition is opposed, does not have diverse species; instead, all its acts are traced back to one species. Therefore, neither does superstition have diverse species.

Objection 2: Opposites have to do with the same thing. But as was established above (*ST* 1-2, q. 72, a. 9), religion, to which superstition is opposed, has to do with those things by which we are ordered toward God. Therefore, it cannot be the case that superstition, which is opposed to religion, has species that focus on the divination of human events or on certain observances in human acts.

Objection 3: A Gloss on Colossians 2:23 (“... which have the appearance of religion in superstition”) says, “That is, in simulated religion.” Therefore, even simulation would have to be posited as a species of superstition.

But contrary to this: In *De Doctrina Christiana* 2 Augustine enumerates diverse species of superstition.

I respond: As was explained above (a. 1), the vice of superstition consists in overstepping the mean of the virtue with respect to certain circumstances. Now as was explained above (*ST* 1-2, q. 72, a. 9), not every sort of diversity in corrupted circumstances makes for a variation in the species of sin; instead, this occurs only when the diverse circumstances are traced back to diverse *objects* or to diverse *ends*. For as was established above (*ST* 1-2, q. 18, aa. 2 and 6, and q. 72, a. 1), moral acts receive their species according to their objects and ends.

Therefore, the species of superstition are diversified in the first place on the part of their *object*.

For divine worship can be given to the one to whom it ought to be given, viz., the true God, and yet *in an inappropriate manner*, and this is the first species of superstition.

Alternatively, divine worship can be given to *something that it should not be given to*, viz., some creature. And this is a second genus of superstition, which is itself divided into several species according to the diverse *ends* of divine worship.

For divine worship is ordered, first, toward showing reverence for God. Accordingly, the first species of this genus is *idolatry* (*idololatria*), which inappropriately shows divine reverence to a creature.

Second, divine worship is ordered toward man’s being instructed by the God whom he worships. And what is relevant here is *divining superstition* (*superstitio divinitiva*), which consults demons through

certain pacts undertaken with them, whether tacit or explicit.

Third, divine worship is ordered toward the direction of human acts according to what has been instituted by the God who is worshiped. And what is relevant here is the *superstition of certain sorts of observances* (*superstitio quarundam observationum*).

In *De Doctrina Christiana* Augustine touches upon these last three species when he says that “the superstitious is whatever has been instituted by men and has to do with making and worshiping idols,” and this pertains to the first species. And a little later he adds, “... or agreements and alliances made with demons for consultations and arrangements concerning foretokens,” which pertains to the second species. And a little later he adds, “... all sorts of amulets, etc., belong to this genus,” which pertains to the third species.

Reply to objection 1: As Dionysius says in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, “Good emerges from a unified and integrated cause, whereas evil comes from individual deficiencies.” And so as was established above (q. 10, a. 5), more than one vice is opposed to a single virtue.

Reply to objection 2: Some divinations and observances involve superstition insofar as they depend on the actions of demons. And it is in this sense that they depend on pacts entered into with the demons.

Reply to objection 3: As follows in the Gloss, what is here called ‘simulated religion’ occurs “when the name ‘religion’ is applied to a human tradition.” Hence, this sort of simulated religion is nothing other than the worship of God, but worship given in an inappropriate manner—as, for instance, if someone living in the time of grace willed to worship God according to the rites of the Old Law. And this is what the Gloss is literally talking about.