

QUESTION 93

Superstition: Inappropriate Worship of the True God

Next we have to consider the species of superstition (questions 93-96): first, the superstition of inappropriate worship of the true God (question 93); second, the superstition of idolatry (question 94); third, the superstition of divinations (question 95); and, fourth, the superstition of observances (question 96).

On the first topic there are two questions: (1) Can there be anything pernicious in the worship of the true God? (2) Can there be anything superfluous in the worship of the true God?

Article 1

Can there be anything pernicious in the worship of the true God?

It seems that there cannot be anything pernicious in the worship of the true God:

Objection 1: Joel 2:32 says, “Everyone who calls upon the name of Lord will be saved.” But anyone who worships God in any way calls upon His name. Therefore, every sort of worship of God confers salvation. Therefore, none is pernicious.

Objection 2: It is the same God who is worshiped by the just in any age of the world. But before the Law was given, the just worshiped God, without mortal sin, in any way that pleased them; hence, as we see in Genesis 28:20ff., Jacob obligated himself by his own vow to a specific sort of worship. Therefore, even now there is no sort of worship of God that is pernicious.

Objection 3: Nothing pernicious is sustained in the Church. But the Church sustains diverse rites of worshiping God; hence, Gregory writes to Augustine, the bishop of the English, who had pointed out that there were diverse customs among the churches in the celebration of the Mass, “I wish you to choose carefully, if among the Romans or the Gauls—or in whatever church—you have found something that can please almighty God more.” Therefore, no mode of worshiping God is pernicious.

But contrary to this: In a letter to Jerome—and this is found in a Gloss on Galatians 2:14—Augustine says that now that the truth of the Gospel has been divulged, the legal observances are deadly. And yet the legal observances belong to the worship of God. Therefore, there can be something deadly in the worship of God.

I respond: As Augustine points out in *Contra Mendacium*, lies are especially pernicious when they are told in matters having to do with the Christian religion. Now as is clear from what was said above (q. 81, a. 7), a lie occurs when someone signifies exteriorly what is contrary to the truth. But just as something is signified by a word, so, too, something is signified by a deed, and the exterior worship of religion consists in this sort of signification by a deed. And so if something false is signified by the exterior worship, then the worship will be pernicious.

Now there are two ways in which this can happen:

First, on the part of *the thing signified*, with which the signification of the worship can be discordant. It is in this way that in the time of the New Law, after the mysteries of the Christ have already been accomplished, it is pernicious to use the ceremonies of the Old Law, by which the mysteries of the Christ were signified as future—just as even now it would be pernicious for someone to profess out loud that the Christ is going to suffer.

In the second way, falsity can occur in exterior worship on the part of *the one worshipping*, and this mainly in the common worship that is offered through ministers acting in the personage of the whole Church. For just as an individual would be a falsifier if he offered for sale, on the part of someone, certain things that had not been entrusted to him, so, too, an individual incurs the vice of falsity if, on the part of the Church, he offers to God worship in way contrary to that which has been established by the Church with divine authority and which has become customary in the Church. Hence, Ambrose says, “An

individual is unworthy if he celebrates the mystery in a way other than as Christ has handed it down.” And it is also for this reason that the Gloss on Colossians 2:23 says that superstition occurs “when the name ‘religion’ is applied to a human tradition.”

Reply to objection 1: Since God is truth, the ones who call upon God are they who worship Him “in spirit and in truth,” as John 4:24 says. And so worship that contains falsity does not properly involve a calling upon God that confers salvation.

Reply to objection 2: Before the time of the Law, the just were instructed by an interior instinct concerning the manner of worshiping God, and others followed them. By contrast, afterwards men were instructed about this by exterior precepts that it is pernicious to disregard.

Reply to objection 3: The diverse customs in the Church in the worship of God are in no way incompatible with the truth. And so they should be preserved, and it is illicit to disregard them.

Article 2

Can there be anything superfluous in the worship of God?

It seems that there cannot be anything superfluous in the worship of God:

Objection 1: Ecclesiasticus 43:32 says, “If you glorify God as much as you are able to, He will still far exceed this.” But the worship of God is ordered toward glorifying God. Therefore, there can be nothing superfluous in it.

Objection 2: Exterior worship is a certain profession of the interior worship by which “God is worshiped by faith, hope, and charity,” as Augustine puts it in *Enchiridion*, chap. 3. But there cannot be anything superfluous in faith, hope, and charity. Therefore, there can likewise be nothing superfluous in the worship of God.

Objection 3: It belongs to divine worship that we should offer to God what we receive from God. But all of our goods are such that we receive them from God. Therefore, even if we do everything that we are able to do in giving reverence to God, there will be nothing superfluous in the worship of God.

But contrary to this: In *De Doctrina Christiana* 2 Augustine says, “Let the good and true Christian ... repudiate the superstitious figments that likewise exist in their sacred writings.” But it is shown by the sacred writings that God is to be worshiped. Therefore, superstition stemming from superfluity can likewise exist in divine worship.

I respond: There are two ways in which something is said to be superfluous:

One way is with respect to *absolute quantity*, and on this score that cannot be anything superfluous in divine worship, since there is nothing that a man can do that is not less than what he owes to God;

The second way in which something can be superfluous is with respect to *quantity of proportion*, i.e., in not being proportionate to the end. Now the end of divine worship is that a man give glory to God and subject himself in mind and body to God. And so what is not superfluous in divine worship is whatever a man does that pertains (a) to the glory of God, (b) to the man’s mind being subjected to God, and also (c) to his body being subjected to God through the moderate curbing of disordered desires (*per moderatam refrenationem concupiscentiarum*)—all according to the ordination of God and of the Church and according to the custom of those with whom the man lives.

However, if there is something which, considered in itself (*quantum est de se*), does not pertain to God’s glory, or to a man’s mind being borne toward God, or to the curbing of the concupiscence of the flesh in a moderate way, or even if there is something that goes beyond what has been instituted by God and the Church or that goes contrary to common custom (which, according to Augustine, should be taken as law), then all of this should be thought of as superfluous and superstitious, since, consisting just in exterior things, it does not pertain to the interior worship of God. Hence, in *De Vera Religione* Augustine

cites what is said at Luke 17:21 (“The kingdom of God is within you”) against “superstitious individuals (*contra supersticiosos*),” viz., those whose main concern is with exterior things.

Reply to objection 1: It is implied in the very glorification of God that what is done should pertain to the glory of God. This excludes the superfluity of superstition.

Reply to objection 2: It is through faith, hope, and charity that the soul is subjected to God. Hence, nothing superfluous can exist in them. But it is different with exterior acts, which sometimes do not pertain to these virtues.

Reply to objection 3: This argument goes through for what is superfluous with respect to *absolute quantity*.