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978-0-521-02948-3 - Summa Theologiae: Volume 40 - Superstition and Irreverence, (2a2ae. 92-100)

Thomas Franklin O'Meara O.P. and Michael John Duffy O.P.

Excerpt

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SUMMA THEOLOGIAE, 2a2ae. 92, I

DEINDE CONSIDERANDUM EST de vitiis religioni oppositis.^a Et primo, de illis quæ cum religione conveniunt in hoc quod exhibent cultum divinum; secundo, de vitiis manifestam contrarietatem ad religionem habentibus, per contemptum eorum quæ ad cultum divinum pertinent.

Primum autem horum pertinet ad superstitionem; secundum ad irreligiositatem. Unde primo considerandum est de ipsa superstitione, et de partibus ejus; deinde de irreligiositate et partibus eius.

Quæstio 92. de superstitione

Circa primum quærentur duo:

1. utrum superstitio sit vitium religioni contrarium;
2. utrum habeat plures partes seu species.

articulus 1. utrum superstitio sit vitium religioni contrarium

AD PRIMUM sic proceditur:¹ I. Videtur quod superstitio non sit vitium religioni contrarium. Unum enim contrariorum non ponitur in definitione alterius. Sed religio ponitur in definitione superstitionis: dicitur enim superstitio esse *religio supra modum servata*,² ut patet in glossa^b ad *Coloss.* super illud, *Quæ sunt rationem habentia sapientiæ in superstitione*.³ Ergo superstitio non est vitium religioni oppositum.

2. Præterea, Isidorus dicit, *Superstitiosos ait Cicero appellatos qui totos dies precabantur et immolabant ut sui sibi liberi superstites fierent*.⁴ Sed hoc

¹cf 2a2ae. 122, 3. III *Sent.* 9, 1, 1, 1, iii ad 3

²Lombard, interlinear gloss. PL 192, 278. The *Sentences* of Peter Lombard (d. 1160) provided the basic theological text, apart from the Bible, for the Middle Ages

³Colossians 2, 23

⁴*Etymologies* x, 244. PL 82, 393. St Isidore of Seville (d. 636); his twenty books of etymologies, definitions, and opinions from authorities in all fields were an encyclopedic compendium of all knowledge

^aThe plan for the entire *Summa* is found at the beginning of the work, and that for man's return to his Creator is found at the beginning of the *Secunda Pars*. Religion expresses man's free though strict debt to his Creator and Redeemer, and so it is considered under the broad category of justice. At the beginning of Question 81 we have the outline of how the virtue of religion will be treated. After the positive aspects of religion have been studied, the author turns to some negative consequences which are perversions or disorientations of authentic religion.

^bThe section frequently quotes the Glosses. There are two of these: the *Glossa*

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SUPERSTITION

OUR NEXT SECTION will investigate those evil actions and habits which stand in opposition to the virtue of religion.^a First we shall examine the vices which, though opposed to religion in some way, have in common with it the fact that they are directed towards some form of divine worship. A second group is totally opposed to religion, and contemns the basic elements of divine worship.

First, then, we will be concerned with the general category of superstition;

secondly, we will be concerned with the denial of religion, namely irreligion (97-100).

We will examine both the general nature of superstition (92)

and then the various kinds of superstition (93-96);

the same method will be followed when we treat irreligion.

Question 92. superstition

Under this heading, the general nature of superstition, there are two points of inquiry:

1. is superstition a vice contrary to religion?
2. are there various kinds or 'species' of superstition?

article 1. is superstition a vice contrary to religion?

THE FIRST POINT:¹ 1. It seems that superstition is not a vice which is diametrically opposed to religion. A term is not normally defined by stating its opposite. Yet the term 'religion' can be found in the definition of superstition. There is a gloss^b saying that *superstition is religion carried to excess*,² on the passage in *Colossians: those things which have a show of wisdom in superstition*.³ Therefore we can conclude that superstition is not a vice diametrically opposed to the virtue of religion.

2. Moreover, Isidore cites Cicero as saying, *Superstitious people were so called because they spent the whole day praying and offering sacrifices that their children might survive them*.⁴ But this could be done by people who

ordinaria, a collection from the Fathers explaining the various texts, phrases and even words of the Scriptures; it was written in the margins of the Bible. The *Glossa interlinearis* is similar but was written between the lines. Both glosses stem from the school of Laon. The gloss in PL 114 is attributed to Walafrid Strabo, a tenth-century Benedictine, but probably it is not the work of one man but of the school. The sections on *Psalms* and St Paul are by Anselm of Laon.

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etiam fieri potest secundum veræ religionis cultum. Ergo superstitio non est vitium religioni oppositum.

3. Præterea, superstitio quemdam excessum importare videtur. Sed religio non potest habere excessum; quia sicut supra dictum est,⁵ secundum eam non contingit æquale Deo reddere ejus quod debemus. Ergo superstitio non est vitium religioni oppositum.

SED CONTRA est quod Augustinus dicit, *Tangis primam chordam, qua colitur unus Deus, et cecidit bestia superstitionis*.⁶ Sed cultus unius Dei pertinet ad religionem. Ergo superstitio religioni opponitur.

RESPONSIO: Dicendum quod, sicut supra dictum est,⁷ religio est virtus moralis. Omnis autem virtus moralis in medio consistit, ut supra habitum est.⁸ Et ideo duplex vitium virtuti morali opponitur: unum quidem secundum excessum; aliud autem secundum defectum.

Contingit autem excedere medium virtutis non solum secundum circumstantiam quæ dicitur *quantum*, sed etiam secundum alias circumstantias. Unde in aliquibus virtutibus, sicut in magnanimitate et magnificentia, vitium excedit virtutis medium non quia ad majus aliquid tendat quam virtus, sed forte ad minus: transcendit tamen virtutis medium, in quantum facit aliquid cui non debet, vel quando non debet, et similiter secundum alia hujusmodi; ut patet per Philosophum in *Ethic*.⁹

Sic igitur superstitio est vitium religioni oppositum secundum excessum, non quia plus exhibeat in cultum divinum quam vera religio, sed quia exhibet cultum divinum vel cui non debet, vel eo modo quo non debet.

1. Ad primum ergo dicendum quod sicut bonum metaphorice dicitur in malis, prout dicimus bonum latronem, ita etiam nomina virtutum quandoque transumptive accipiuntur in malis: sicut prudentia quandoque ponitur pro astutia, secundum illud *Luc.*, *Filii hujus sæculi prudentiores filiis lucis sunt*.¹⁰ Et per hunc modum superstitio dicitur esse religio.

2. Ad secundum dicendum quod aliud est etymologia nominis, et aliud est significatio nominis. Etymologia attenditur secundum id a quo imponitur nomen ad significandum; nominis vero significatio attenditur secundum id ad quod significandum nomen imponitur. Quæ quandoque diversa sunt: nomen enim *lapidis* imponitur a *lesione pedis*, non tamen hoc

⁵2a2ae. 81, 5 ad 3

⁶*Sermo IX*, 9. PL 38, 85

⁷2a2ae. 81, 5 ad 3

⁸1a2ae. 64, 1

⁹*Ethics IV*, 1. 1121a21-27

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followed the dictates of true religious worship, and so superstition does not seem to be a vice opposed to the virtue of religion.

3. Moreover, superstition seems to imply a certain excess. Now there cannot be an excess of religion; as we have mentioned above,⁵ we can never give to God an equal return for all he has given to us. Therefore, superstition is not a vice opposed to religion.

ON THE OTHER HAND Augustine says in a sermon, *Strike the first chord by which the one God is given worship, and the beast of superstition falls.*⁶ Since the worship of God is the goal of religion, superstition is opposed to religion.

REPLY: We said previously that religion is a moral virtue.⁷ We have also established⁸ that every moral virtue is determined by a mean standing between two extreme ways of acting. Consequently, there will be a vice at each extreme of the mean in the virtue of religion; one of these is the result of an excess, the other is due to a deficiency.

However, it can happen that the median balance of virtue is upset not only through a quantitative excess but in other ways too. This is the case in virtues such as magnanimity or magnificence; the mean is overstepped not by doing too much, but by doing too little. In addition, the balance of virtue is upset by being generous to the wrong person, or at the wrong time, or by other circumstances, as Aristotle mentions.⁹

We can conclude that superstition is a vice opposed to the virtue of religion by excess, not because it gives too much worship to God, but rather because it offers divine worship to something not deserving it. Or, it offers worship in some manner which is unfitting.

Hence: 1. Sometimes in referring to evil we use the word 'good' metaphorically, for instance when we speak of a good extortioner. When we are discussing the various virtues we do as Christ does in *Luke*, transposing prudence for cunning, he advises his followers that *the children of this world are more prudent than the children of light.*¹⁰ In this way superstition is said to be a kind of religion.

2. Etymology and meaning are quite different. The etymology of a word indicates something of its origin; the meaning, on the other hand, is supposed to convey the reality which here and now corresponds to it. Etymology and meaning can be far apart. For instance, the Latin word for stone, *lapis*, seems to have had its origin in the Latin phrase *laesio pedis*, a wound in the foot. But this does not convey its meaning, else a piece of

¹⁰*Luke* 16, 8

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significat; alioquin ferrum, cum pedem lædat, lapis esset. Similiter etiam nomen superstitionis non oportet quod significet illud a quo nomen est impositum.

3. Ad tertium dicendum quod religio non potest habere excessum secundum quantitatem absolutam. Potest tamen habere excessum secundum quantitatem proportionis: prout scilicet in cultu divino fit aliquid quod fieri non debet.

articulus 2. utrum sint diversæ superstitionis species

AD SECUNDUM sic proceditur: I. Videtur quod non sint diversæ superstitionis species. Quia secundum Philosophum, *si unum oppositorum dicitur multipliciter, et reliquum*.¹ Sed religio, cui superstitio opponitur, non habet diversas species, sed omnes ejus actus ad unam speciem referuntur. Ergo nec superstitio habet diversas species.

2. Præterea, opposita sunt circa idem. Sed religio, cui opponitur superstitio, est circa ea quibus ordinamur in Deum, ut supra habitum est.² Non ergo species superstitionis, quæ opponitur religioni, potest attendi secundum aliquas divinationes humanorum eventuum, vel secundum aliquas observationes humanorum actuum.

3. Præterea, super illud, *Quæ sunt rationem habentia sapientiæ in superstitione*,³ dicit glossa, *idest in simulata religione*.⁴ Ergo etiam simulatio debet poni species superstitionis.

SED CONTRA est quod Augustinus diversas species superstitionis assignat.⁵

RESPONSIO: Dicendum quod, sicut supra dictum est,⁶ vitium religionis consistit in hoc quod transcenditur virtutis medium secundum aliquas circumstantias. Ut autem supra dictum est,⁷ non quælibet circumstantiarum corruptarum diversitas variat peccati speciem, sed solum quando referuntur ad diversa objecta vel diversos fines: secundum hoc enim morales actus speciem sortiuntur, ut supra habitum est.⁸

Diversificatur ergo superstitionis species, primo quidem ex parte objecti. Potest enim divinus cultus exhiberi vel cui exhibendus est, scilicet Deo vero, modo tamen indebito: et hæc est prima superstitionis species. Vel ei

¹*Topics* I, 15. 106b 14–15²2a2æ. 81, 1³*Colossians* 2, 23⁴*Lombard*. PL 192, 279⁵*De doctrina Christiana* 2, 20. PL 34, 50⁶In the preceding article⁷1a2æ. 72, 9

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iron (which can wound a foot) would be called a stone. It can be seen then that the word superstition has a broader meaning than its original etymological one.

3. Religion can never become excessive in the sense of giving to God in a quantitative way too much of the worship owed to him. Still, there is another kind of excess, one which is derived from a lack of correct proportion. This is present in superstition, for when we act superstitiously we perform actions of divine worship in a way which is improper.

article 2. are there various sub-divisions of superstition?

THE SECOND POINT: 1. Apparently there are not different kinds of superstition. Aristotle says in his Topics, *if one of a pair of opposites has several meanings, then its opposing partner does too*.¹ But religion, to which superstition is opposed, does not have different sub-divisions; all its actions are referred to one object. Neither, then, does superstition.

2. Moreover, opposites centre around something in common. Religion, to which superstition stands in opposition, is concerned with matters leading us to God.² And so, superstition, religion's opposite, is not diversified by various methods of discerning future events in the world or by different types of superstitious practices.

3. Moreover, a gloss on *Colossians*, *The precepts and doctrines of men which, to be sure, have a show of wisdom in superstition*³ adds the comment, *that is, in religious worship which is counterfeit*.⁴ Therefore, deceit ought to be numbered among the kinds of superstition.

ON THE OTHER HAND, Augustine enumerates various distinct kinds of superstition.⁵

REPLY: As we have just seen⁶ in the matter of religion, vice consists in this, that the mean of virtue is not kept by certain circumstances. We have already shown⁷ that not every bad circumstance of time, place, or person so affects an evil act as to involve a new type of evil. This occurs only when the added circumstance gives the act a new moral object or goal of action. As we have frequently indicated,⁸ the general rule is that morality in human actions is bestowed and diversified by the action's goal, and it is from this goal that the various species or kinds of sin are designated.

Therefore, we can say that there are diverse kinds of superstition. First, this diversity can come from the object of the action. Worship due to God alone may be given him, yet in a manner which is incorrect: this is the

⁸1a2ae. 1, 3

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cui non debet exhiberi, scilicet cuicumque creaturæ. Et hoc est aliud superstitionis genus, quod in multas species dividitur, secundum diversos fines divini cultus.

Ordinatur enim, primo, divinus cultus ad reverentiam Deo exhibendam. Et secundum hoc, prima species huius generis est *idololatria*, quæ divinam reverentiam indebite exhibet creaturæ. Secundo, ordinatur ad hoc quod homo instruatur a Deo, quem colit. Et ad hoc pertinet superstitio *divinativa*, quæ dæmones consulit per aliqua pacta cum eis inita, tacita vel expressa. Tertio, ordinatur divinus cultus ad quamdam directionem humanorum actuum secundum instituta Dei, qui colitur. Et ad hoc pertinet superstitio quarumdam *observationum*.

Et hæc tria tangit Augustinus, dicens *superstitiosum esse quidquid institutum ab hominibus est ad facienda et colenda idola pertinens*: et hoc pertinet ad primum. Et postea subdit, *vel ad consultationes et pacta quædam significationum cum dæmonibus placita atque fæderata*: quod pertinet ad secundum. Et post pauca subdit, *Ad hoc genus pertinent omnes ligaturæ*, etc.: quod pertinet ad tertium.⁹

1. Ad primum ergo dicendum quod, sicut Dionysius dicit, *bonum contingit ex una et integra causa, malum autem ex singularibus defectibus*.¹⁰ Et ideo uni virtuti plura vitia opponuntur, ut supra habitum est.¹¹ Verbum autem Philosophi veritatem habet in oppositis in quibus est eadem ratio multiplicationis.

2. Ad secundum dicendum quod divinationes et observationes aliquæ pertinent ad superstitionem inquantum dependent ex aliquibus operationibus dæmonum. Et sic pertinent ad quædam pacta cum ipsis inita.

3. Ad tertium dicendum quod simulata religio ibi dicitur *quando traditioni humanæ nomen religionis applicatur*,¹² prout in glossa sequitur. Unde ista simulata religio nihil est aliud quam cultus Deo vero exhibitus modo indebito: sicut si aliquis tempore gratiæ vellet colere Deum secundum veteris legis ritum. Et de hoc ad litteram loquitur glossa.

⁹*De doctrina Christiana* 2, 20. PL 34, 50

¹⁰*De Divinis Nominibus* 4, 3. PG 3, 729. The Pseudo-Dionysius, thought in the early Middle Ages to have been the Areopagite of *Acts* 17; but probably a fifth-century Syrian monk.

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first sub-division of superstition. Next, worship due to God may be given to a creature, an object which has no claim to it. This kind of superstition is a broad category which is itself divided into sub-divisions, corresponding to the several aspects of divine worship.

The first of these is reverence for God; the first sub-division, then, is *idolatry*—reverence due to God but given to a creature. Secondly, in worshipping God man looks to him for instruction; the opposite of this act of religion is *foretelling the future*—a tacit or expressed compact with demonic powers in order to gain knowledge. Thirdly, divine worship offers us certain rules of action prescribed by the God we worship; opposed to this are various *superstitious practices*.

Augustine touches on these three groups when he says that *whatever is done by men for the fashioning and worshipping of idols is superstitious* (this indicates the first group); later he adds, *consultations and contracts made with demonic powers for information* (the second group); finally he says, *all superstitious practices belong to this category of superstition*⁹ (the third group).

Hence: 1. Dionysius says that *a good thing demands that all elements necessary to its being actual contribute their part, whereas evil arises as soon as a single defect is present*.¹⁰ So, as we have shown above,¹¹ to one virtue many vices can correspond. Aristotle's comment is correct when we are discussing opposites in which the ground of diversity is the same.

2. Foretelling the future and superstitious practices come into the general category of superstition inasmuch as they depend upon auxiliary demonic forces, and accordingly require a compact with them.

3. The term 'counterfeit religion' means, as the gloss in question goes on to explain, *the name of religion applied to purely human institutions*.¹² Consequently, this counterfeit religion is nothing other than the worship of the true God performed in an unbalanced way. An example of this is worshipping God according to the Mosaic law now that the new law of Christ has come. This, according to the gloss, is the literal meaning of the passage from *Colossians*.

¹¹2a2æ. 10, 5

¹²Lombard, *ibid*

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SUMMA THEOLOGIAE, 2a2æ. 93, I

DEINDE CONSIDERANDUM EST de speciebus superstitionis.

Et primo, de superstitione indebiti cultus veri Dei;
 secundo, de superstitione idololatriæ;
 tertio, de superstitione divinationum;
 quarto, de superstitione observationum.

Quæstio 93. de superstitione indebiti cultus veri Dei

Circa primum quærentur duo:

1. utrum in cultu Dei veri possit esse aliquid perniciosum;
2. utrum possit ibi esse aliquid superfluum.

articulus 1. utrum in cultu veri dei possit esse aliquid perniciosum

AD PRIMUM sic proceditur:¹ I. Videtur quod in cultu veri Dei non possit esse aliquid perniciosum. Dicitur enim *Joel*, *Omnis quicumque invocaverit nomen Domini, salvus erit.*² Sed quicumque colit Deum quocumque modo, invocat nomen ejus. Ergo omnis cultus Dei confert salutem. Nullus ergo est perniciosus.

2. Præterea, idem Deus est qui colitur a justis quacumque mundi ætate. Sed ante lege datam, justis, absque peccato mortali, colebant Deum qualitercumque eis placebat: unde et Jacob proprio voto se obligavit ad specialem cultum, ut habetur *Gen.*³ Ergo etiam modo nullus Dei cultus est perniciosus.

3. Præterea, nihil perniciosum in Ecclesia sustinetur. Sustinet autem Ecclesia diversos ritus colendi Deum: unde Gregorius scribit Augustino Episcopo Anglorum, proponenti quod sunt diversæ ecclesiarum consuetudines in missarum celebratione: *Mihi, inquit, placet ut, sive in Romanis sive in Galliarum sive in qualibet ecclesia aliquid invenisti quod plus omnipotenti Deo possit placere, sollicitè eligas.*⁴ Ergo nullus modus colendi Deum est perniciosus.

SED CONTRA est quod Augustinus dicit, in epistola *ad Hieron.*, et habetur in glossa, *Galat.* II, quod legalia observata post veritatem Evangelii

¹cf 1a2æ. 103, 4²*Joel* 2, 32; cf *Romans* 10, 13³*Genesis* 28, 20

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UNDUE WORSHIP

WE GO ON TO CONSIDER the various kinds of superstition.

First, the superstition that worships God but in a manner that is undue (93);
secondly, idolatry (94);
thirdly, divination of the future (95);
fourthly, superstitious practices (96).

Question 93. disproportionate worship of the true God

Here there are two points of inquiry:

1. can there be anything injurious to man's salvation in the worship of God?
2. can a man ever worship God too much?

article 1. can there be anything injurious to salvation in the worship of God?

THE FIRST POINT:¹ 1. It seems that in worshipping the true God we cannot endanger our salvation. It is written in the prophecy of *Joel*, *Everyone shall be rescued who calls on the name of the Lord*.² But whenever we worship God, no matter how we do it, we call upon God's name. Consequently every act of worship given to God brings salvation, and as such it could not possibly be an evil.

2. Moreover, it is the same God who is worshipped by just men no matter what the period in the world's history. But before the Mosaic law was given men worshipped God in whatever way they chose. *Genesis* describes Jacob binding himself by a vow to a special form of worship.³ So also today no form of divine worship is wrong.

3. Moreover, the Church does not encourage evil to flourish, yet has allowed different rites for divine worship: Pope Gregory wrote to Augustine, Bishop of Canterbury, stating that there are different customs in individual churches for the celebration of Mass: *I am perfectly content for you to select carefully from the rites of the Romans or the Gauls or of other Churches whatever will further the worship of Almighty God*.⁴ Therefore no manner of worshipping God is pernicious.

ON THE OTHER HAND we have Augustine telling us, and he is quoted by a

⁴*Epistola* LXIV. PL 77, 1187