

The Encyclopedia of Religion

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SUPERSTITION. [This entry traces the history of the term as it is used in religious contexts, especially by one group to distinguish its "legitimate" beliefs from the so-called superstitions of another group. For examples of superstition in its second, nontheological meaning—that is, beliefs of an indigenous culture that persist after the introduction of a second, dominant culture—see Folk Religion and Folklore.]

Superstition is a judgmental term traditionally used by dominant religions to categorize and denigrate earlier, less sophisticated or disapproved religious attitudes and behavior. A belief is perceived as superstitious by adherents of a particular religious orthodoxy, and it is from their perspective that the category acquires its meaning. An anthropological description of the same belief would use different, nonjudgmental language drawn from the perspective of people engaged in the beliefs and practices condemned as superstitious by others. The use of the term *superstition* is inevitably pejorative rather than descriptive or analytical, for super-

stition is defined in opposition to a given culture's concept of true religion. Its specific meanings vary widely in different periods and contexts, so that a survey of its historical application rather than an abstract definition is the best approach to the concept of superstition.

Origin and Classical Usage. The classical world criticized certain religious behaviors as irrational, or as reflecting an incorrect understanding of both nature and divinity. Greek writers from Theophrastus to Plutarch mockingly described a cringing, obsessive fear of the gods (*deisidaimonia*) as an inappropriate religious attitude. Roman philosophers sometimes echoed this theme, but the etymology of the Latin word *superstitio* (from *superstes*, "surviving, witnessing") indicates a separate evolution from a possibly neutral meaning of divination to a pejorative term. According to Émile Benveniste, *superstitio* included the idea of surviving an event as a witness and referred originally to divination concerning the past, the power to witness a distant event as though it were present. In its earliest Latin literary usage by Plautus and Ennius, *superstitio* was already a negative term describing divination, magic, and "bad religion" in general. Cicero gives a concrete example, explaining that "those who spent whole days in prayer and offered sacrifices, that their children might outlive them, are called superstitious" (*On the Nature of the Gods* 2.28). For classical Roman observers like Seneca, Lucretius, and Cicero, *superstitio* meant erroneous, false, or excessive religious behaviors stemming from ignorance of philosophical and scientific truths about the laws of nature. Such ignorance was associated with the common people (*vulgus*) and with the countryside (*pagus*), so that superstitious behavior had a social locus in the uneducated, lower orders of Roman society. As the empire expanded, the term *superstitio* was applied to exotic foreign religions of which the Romans disapproved, such as the Egyptian cult of Isis and later the Jewish sect of Christianity. Its meaning became more collective, referring to the "religion of others" in pejorative terms rather than to an individual Roman's inappropriate or exaggerated religious attitudes.

Early Christianity. The early Christians adopted this collective meaning, turning the category of superstition back on the Romans. In the period after the second century, pagans and Christians reciprocally condemned each other's religious beliefs and ceremonial practices as the superstitious cult of false deities. But the militant monotheism of Christianity intensified the negative meanings of these charges. The church fathers interpreted Roman statues as idols, their sacrifices as offerings to the devil, and their oracles as the voices of demons. Such false beliefs did not deserve the name of

religion, for, as Lactantius explained, "religion is the worship of the true, superstition is that of the false" (*Divine Institutes* 4.28). Wishing to condemn the pagans out of their own mouths, Augustine of Hippo quoted Cicero's description of superstitious attitudes among the Romans, but he rejected Cicero's distinction between religion and superstition as an inadequate attempt "to praise the religion of the ancients which he wishes to disjoin from superstition, but cannot find out how to do so" (*City of God* 4.30). This use of *superstitio* to categorize the whole of classical pagan religion as idolatrous and even demonic constitutes a basic core of meaning that persists throughout the Christian era.

Medieval Christianity. The religions of the Germanic tribes were perceived in a similar way by the Christian missionaries who undertook the conversion of these so-called barbarians in the period following the fall of the Roman empire. The cure for their idolatry and superstition was baptism and the acceptance of Christianity as the true religion. But even after the evangelization of whole tribes, attitudes, beliefs, and practices associated with pre-Christian religions persisted. Early medieval denunciations of such paganizing observances in sermons and treatises against the *superstitiones rusticorum* were frequent. The epistle *On the Correction of Rustics* (c. 572) by Bishop Martin of Braga condemned popular magical practices, divination, and the worship of "rocks, trees and springs" as apostasy to the devil. Not all superstition was rustic, however. Martin also rejected the use of Latin calendrical vocabulary, since the days of the week were named after pagan gods (in his view demons) like Mars, Jove, and Venus. The limited, local success of such polemics is witnessed by the fact that Portuguese, alone among the emergent European vernaculars, purged this ancient vocabulary under church pressure.

The difficulties of weaning newly evangelized peoples from their old ways led Pope Gregory I (590-604) to suggest a gradualist approach to their conversion. Writing to Augustine of Canterbury, a missionary in England in the early seventh century, he acknowledged that "it is doubtless impossible to cut out everything at once from their stubborn minds" (Bede, *History of the English Church and People* 1.30). Gregory proposed that heathen shrines be reconsecrated as churches and that existing days of celebration be adapted to the Christian calendar. The Feast of Saint John the Baptist, for instance, was fixed on the former date of a midsummer festival. These syncretic fusions of old and new religious observances were often the target of later reformers' campaigns against "pagan survivals" within Christianity. Throughout the medieval period, church councils and synods condemned paganizing and superstitious

observances in an effort to complete the process of christianization by enforcing more orthodox standards.

Scholastic theologians brought the analysis of superstitious error to a new level of thoroughness and sophistication. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) defined superstition as "the vice opposed to the virtue of religion by means of excess . . . because it offers divine worship either to whom it ought not, or in a manner it ought not" (*Summa theologiae* 2.2.92.7). The idea of "undue worship of the true God" revived the classical meaning of exaggerated or overscrupulous religious behavior, now seen as occurring within Christianity rather than wholly or partially outside of it. Aquinas's systematic exposition also classified idolatry, divination, and magical practices in general as superstitious by virtue of the inappropriate object (demons rather than God) toward which they were directed. The Scholastic theory of the diabolical pact as the causative mechanism behind magical effects assured that superstition in its medieval version was perceived as neither "harmless" nor inefficacious. Even if a magical procedure did not directly invoke the power of the devil to gain its ends, it nevertheless drew on forces outside those controlled or sanctioned by the church and was therefore presumptively diabolical.

The gradual extension of the medieval Inquisition's jurisdiction to include cases of superstition as well as heresy was a turning point in the European attitude toward magical beliefs. Founded in the early thirteenth century to combat organized heretical groups such as the Waldensians and the Albigensians, the Inquisition was initially empowered to hear only those cases that involved an explicit diabolical pact and therefore "manifestly savored of heresy." Infrequent fourteenth-century sorcery trials involved literate men accused of conjuring demons or casting spells by using the techniques of learned, ritual magic associated with handbooks like the *Key of Solomon*. By the fifteenth century, however, the theory of the implicitly diabolical pact was invoked to extend inquisitorial jurisdiction to the magical activities of the illiterate population. As a result, the "new crime" of witchcraft emerged in this period, combining existing peasant beliefs in the possibility of magical harm (*maleficium*) with the scholastic theory of the implicit diabolism of all magical effects.

While customary law in many parts of Europe had treated magical harm (*maleficium*) like any other crime causing physical harm to persons, livestock, or crops, without attention to the fact that such harm was alleged to have occurred through magical means, the new theological approach focused directly on the means employed, not the end pursued. All magical activity implied that the perpetrator had obtained the power to

achieve those effects by apostasy to the devil. Superstitious offenses were no longer simply the topic of pastoral reprimand by bishops and synods. By the late Middle Ages such activities had been criminalized, and they were increasingly prosecuted in both secular and church courts during the late sixteenth and the seventeenth century.

This campaign against popular magic emphasized those activities that were, in Aquinas's terms, superstitious by virtue of their presumptively diabolical object. The humanist and Protestant reform movements of the early sixteenth century stressed another meaning of the term *superstition*. Many traditional Catholic religious observances were now judged superstitious because of the "inappropriate manner" in which they offered worship to God. The Catholic humanist reformer Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536) denounced the externalized ceremonialism of the late medieval church as a superstitious deformation of the true religion. His *Praise of Folly* satirized clerical attachment to repetitious prayer, fasting, and other ascetic practices as well as popular devotion to relics, saints, and shrines. A character in his *Colloquies* observes that "Of all Our Ladies, I like best Our Lady of Walsingham," to which his companion replies, "And I Our Lady of Mariastein." These attitudes constituted, in Erasmus's view, a series of distractions from the central moral teachings of Christianity. People might travel to see a saint's bones, he complained, but they did not attempt to imitate the saint's holy life.

Catholicism and the Protestant Reformation. The Protestant Reformation intensified humanist critiques of Roman Catholicism. Starting with Martin Luther's attack on indulgences in the *Ninety-five Theses* (1517), the new theology of justification by faith rather than by works provided the theoretical basis for rejecting Roman Catholic reliance on external devotions as "works righteousness." To John Calvin, superstition was the "pharisaical opinion of the dignity of works" maintained by the "false religion" of Rome. Having rejected most of the ceremonial aspects of Catholicism, from holy water and saints' cults to transubstantiation and the Mass, Protestants of all denominations agreed in their denunciations of the papist religion as magical and superstitious. The term was also used to describe backsliding within the reformed camp, whether high-church fondness for vestments and incense or lingering attachments to rosaries and shrines among the less advanced segments of the population. In the extensive vocabulary of sixteenth-century religious polemics, one of the most common charges was that of superstition.

Although the Roman Catholic church had finer lines to draw in deciding what was and was not superstitious, a parallel effort to identify and eliminate popular

"ignorance and superstition" became a major preoccupation after the Council of Trent (1545–1563). Responding in part to humanist criticism, the church discouraged exaggerations of orthodox observances, such as the "desire for fixed numbers of candles and Masses" described as superstitious in the Tridentine decrees. The definition adopted by the Council of Malines in 1607 expressed the Counter-Reformation position: "It is superstitious to expect any effect from anything, when such an effect cannot be produced by natural causes, by divine institution, or by the ordination or approval of the Church." This ultimately jurisdictional approach left intact the indulgences and exorcisms condemned as "ecclesiastical magic" by the Protestants, but it rejected popular magic by asserting an institutional monopoly on access to the supernatural.

Following the anti-Protestant heresy trials of the mid-sixteenth century, the Holy Offices of Spain and Italy turned their attention to the suppression of popular beliefs and practices categorized as superstitious. Trials for magical healing, divination, and love magic occupied a prominent place in inquisitorial prosecution throughout the seventeenth century. This campaign against superstition occurred in different forms in both Protestant and Catholic countries as part of a wider "reform of popular culture," a systematic attempt by members of the clerical and lay elites to raise the religious and moral level of the European population. Historical studies of early modern Europe have shown that these efforts to suppress popular magical beliefs were not wholly successful; the persistence of magical assumptions among the peasantry has also been documented by twentieth-century anthropological field studies.

Enlightenment and Post-Enlightenment Attitudes. If the Protestant Reformation viewed the entire Roman Catholic religion as superstitious, the radical anticlerics of the French enlightenment used the term in an even wider sense, dismissing all traditional religions as superstitious. Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764) asserts that "superstition was born in paganism, adopted by Judaism and infested the Christian church from the beginning." In place of the fanaticism and intolerance associated with organized religion, the *philosophes* proposed a "natural religion" that would acknowledge a supreme being but regard his creation as sufficient revelation. The scientific study of nature was thus proposed as a new cultural orthodoxy, and the concept of superstition was redefined to fit this frame of reference. From "bad religion" it came to mean "bad science," assuming its modern sense of misplaced assumptions about causality stemming from a faulty understanding of nature. Thus magical beliefs and prac-

tices continue to be regarded as superstitious, although the original religious sense of the diabolical efficacy of such practices has been replaced with a scientific sense of the impossibility of magical effects in a universe governed by natural law.

[See also Magic.]

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SUPREME BEINGS are divinities whose nature reveals a unique quality of being—generally, a transcen-

dent spiritual power—in a culture's religious system. Such divine beings figure in many different religious systems, yet they manifest values and symbolic associations that display remarkable similarities. The first section of this article presents, in a general way, the power, attributes, and values common to a large number of supreme beings. The second section illustrates these features by referring to specific historical forms of supreme beings. The final section summarizes the history of scholarly interpretations of the origin, nature, and meaning of these singularly important and complex supernatural beings.

General Features

A supreme being is generally described in symbolic terms that reflect the values most highly appraised in a specific historical situation. Considering the complexities of any culture's history, it is extraordinary that a comparative discussion of the nature of supreme beings constantly returns to the same cluster of religious ideas. Without prejudice to one or another aspect of supreme being highlighted in one historical moment or another, I present here a general view of the kinds of power and value revealed in supreme beings. It should be noted that the intricacies of history make general statements a source of great controversy. The supremacy of these divine figures marks with an appropriate intensity the heat of debate over their origin, nature, and form. Since each supreme being is a creative and unique composition of elements, the attributes described herein best serve to define the general category of supreme being, and, as we shall see, apply to specific beings only in one degree or another.

The power of supreme beings is inherently ambivalent, because they manifest their potent omnipresence in a passive mode. Unlike the activities of culture heroes, which are abundantly described in epic cycles of myth, the presence of supreme beings is generally acknowledged in mythology only in brief accounts. In contradistinction to the dramatic activities of vegetation deities, totems, ancestors, and solar and lunar divinities, supreme beings occupy almost no place in scheduled public cults. It has long been acknowledged that sky divinities, or "high gods," admirably reveal many of the central attributes and powers of supreme beings.

Not limited to any single sphere of concern or influence (e.g., fertility of plants or of animals), supreme beings are omnipresent and omnipotent, but, by that very fact, they remain uninvolved with particular activities. Their power—unreckoned by time, unbounded by space—applies to all spheres of life and not to any one alone. Great power and presence reside in a supreme being's inactive transcendence of historical particulari-