

Superstition And Credulity

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Foreword.

The account of superstitions given in this booklet is derived almost wholly from a short work of the late Rev. Herbert Thurston, S.J., "Superstition," published in 1933 by the Centenary Press, in the "Standpoints" series. The writer wishes to make due acknowledgment of his indebtedness to the learned author.

CHAPTER I.

SUPERSTITION.

I suppose there is no word of contempt to which Catholics are more exposed at the present time than that of "superstitious." To the secular-trained "modern mind" of our age, traditional beliefs and sanctities of all kinds are linked, in thought, with the ideas of "out-worn superstition," and "discredited dogma." They are part of the old, pre-scientific order of things from which the more highly civilized peoples have emancipated themselves through the increase of knowledge. The more sensitive, humanistic kind of "modern" may admit that this emancipation has been attained at a certain cost to the beauty and joy of living. He may sigh, romantically, for the time when life was filled with supernatural significance and when a network of ritual observance governed all human activities: when men believed fervently and created a beauty inspired by faith. But he looks back to it as one looks back regretfully to the poetic world of childhood, with its bright magic and fairy lore, from the adult's "light of common day." He does not dream that the world of faith might be a reality, any more than the world of faerie, or of pagan myth and legend. And he finds the "mediaevalism" of adult orthodox Christians — above all, of Catholics — who still take all that sort of thing with solemn seriousness, both incomprehensible and exasperating.

There are many "moderns," like the late H. G. Wells, who can hardly believe that the more educated of the Catholic clergy and laity are really sincere about accepting the Faith at all: they imagine them as making all kinds of internal winks, and nods, and reservations; and "swallowing" dogmas by means of "Pickwickian" interpretations of their own, while keeping straight faces for the sake of the simple.

THE IGNORANCE OF SUPERIOR MODERN MINDS.

This attitude of "superiority," however, whether manifest in sympathetic smiles towards the Italian peasant lighting candles before "the Madonna," or in angry denunciation of the "reactionary" priests who insist on ignoring "science" and asserting mumbo-jumbo in the midst of the march of progress, is nearly always accompanied by a very substantial ignorance of what orthodox Christianity really stands for, and the beliefs on which its practices are really based. One man puts a St. Christopher medal in his car: another puts some "luck-charm" like a Billiken image. It is assumed lightly that the mental processes behind these two actions are much the same, and that both are irrational. The

scapular is regarded as a sort of amulet, the Sign of the Cross as a “magic charm”: the cultus of saints, and the belief in miracles, is assimilated to the pagan cultus of local nature-gods, goddesses, and heroes, and the wonder-tales connected with them. False parallels are drawn between the “sacramentalism” of the Faith, in which the physical world becomes a means through which spiritual graces are conveyed to men and the fetishism which attributes secret inherent virtue to certain kinds of natural objects, or places, or symbols. Formal prayers are compared with spells — the priest becomes a sort of enchanter... and so on. Because pagans once worshipped Astarte as “Queen of Heaven,” and used the symbol of the moon in images of Isis, therefore Christians who pray to Mary of Nazareth as “Queen of Heaven” and represent her star-crowned, with the moon under her feet, are supposed to be carrying on the same ancient cult. These accidental resemblances are made the basis of all sorts of imaginative speculations about the “evolution of modern religion from antique myth and nature-worship: while the real history of the Faith is ignored, as well as the clear explanation which Catholic teaching provides for the veneration of saints and the relics and images of saints, for the sacramental observances of the Church, and for the authority and power of the priesthood.

The clever people who would take all sorts of pains to make an accurate study of the cults of some pagan tribe or nation which they are describing for purposes of “comparative religion” will write arrant rubbish about the Catholic use of the Rosary, or holy water, or the meaning of liturgical rites and sacred images, without attempting to enlighten themselves concerning what Catholics themselves — or their clergy — have to say about these matters in relation to their particular system of theistic belief.

So much, then, may be said by way of prelude concerning the ideas commonly held by non-Catholic modern people in regard to Catholic “superstition.” But, having pointed out that these ideas are founded, very largely, on ignorance, and on slap-dash judgments based on surface-impressions, it is time for us to discuss the true meaning of “superstition,” and its relation to the “faith” which Our Lord so highly commended — and which the modern world also grossly misunderstands.

RELIGION AND SUPERSTITION.

For the Christian, the religious sense is something of the highest worth, opening the mind to the influence of noble ideals: upon it are founded such virtues as loyalty, purity, sincerity, fortitude, fraternal love and reverence for lawful authority. Now, Our Saviour undoubtedly appealed to this instinct when He commended “faith” and enjoined a child-like humility and docility upon His disciples: and, while He certainly did not commend superstition, it may well be suggested that the language He used about “becoming as little children” threw the door wide open to credulity, from which superstition is most likely to be engendered. For the child is not only ready to accept truth “in faith” from his parents, but to believe in all kinds of myths about fairies and giants and magical doings, and to adopt and invent weird superstitions of his own.

The truth is that the religious sense in fallen man is naturally liable to this abuse and “deviation”; so that wherever the reality of the spiritual order is strongly realized in human communities, the parasite of superstition is likely to be developed. It is not possible, here, to describe in detail the horrid perversions of the religious sense which are a constant feature of the older polytheistic paganism in all lands, both- among savage and sophisticated peoples. They were rampant, as we shall see, in the civilized Empire under whose rule Our Lord Himself was born, and the “problem of

superstition” was discussed in the first century B.C. by one of its most eminent thinkers, the great Cicero.

For him “superstition” was a corruption of true religion; an exaggerated “vain fear” of the gods which he contrasted with the “dutiful homage” paid to them by good citizens. The word is similarly understood in later days by St. Augustine, but he, like Cicero, did not attempt to draw the distinction more exactly. It was left to the great Schoolmen, notably St. Thomas Aquinas, to do this. For St. Thomas, superstition errs against true religion “in point of excess,” not by paying too much attention to Divine worship, obviously, since that is not possible; but by paying worship to some wrong object, or in some way in which it ought not to be paid. He goes on to point out that the worship of angels or demons is “superstition”, and that animal sacrifice is, under the New Law’s dispensation now prevailing, to be blamed on similar grounds.

A MODERN DEFINITION.

It will be seen, however, that this definition does not correspond to current modern usage. Catholics do not commonly employ the word “superstition” to describe the worship of false gods or their images — they use the term “idolatry”: while the worship of the true God in wrong ways is “heretical” worship. Meanwhile, not only lesser Catholic customs, but the very heart of our religious worship, the Sacrifice of the Mass itself has been described in Protestant official formularies as “superstitious”; not to mention the invocation of the Virgin Mary and the Saints, and prayers for the dead. Finally, modern militant unbelievers — and, in particular, Marxists — do not hesitate to deny the Ciceronian distinction entirely, holding religious faith and superstition to be one and the same thing, in contrast with adherence to the truth of materialistic “science.” In fact, the term of reproach has become a sedative one, whose significance in each case depends on the convictions of the person using it.

We offer two modern definitions of superstition as worthy of attention:

(1) In the “Oxford New English Dictionary” it is declared to be “unreasoning awe or fear of something unknown, mysterious or imaginary — especially in connection with religion; religious belief or practice founded upon fear or ignorance.”

(2) Professor Albert Lehmann introduces the standards of contemporary knowledge and culture into his definition, rendering it both clearer and sounder by doing so. “The word superstition,” in his opinion, “may be applied to any general persuasion which, having no warrant in a recognized religious system, is in conflict with the scientific conception of nature prevalent at the time.”

This means that what is “superstition’ in one period and set of circumstances need not necessarily be so in other conditions. The mediaeval alchemists, those pioneers of science, provide an excellent example of this. To cling, today, to a serious belief in the “philosopher’s stone” as a means of transmuting metals would be indulgence in absurd superstition. It was not so, however, with the Arabs who transmitted their science to Western Europe. Their idea was founded on the theory of a “materia prima” differentiated into substances by its conjunction with the “elements” of Aristotle — earth, air, fire and water. Noting the action of mercury on gold and silver, and that of sulphur on heated iron, they conceived the hope of discovering a refined substance — a “grand Elixir” which would change grosser into more perfect metallic substances. The experiments founded on this theory were, in the strictest sense, “scientific,” therefore; and they laid the foundations of modern chemistry.

Similarly, the revival of astrology which has taken place in our time must be regarded as an outbreak of ignorant superstition. But in the Middle Ages — despite the adverse judgment of St. Augustine in the fourth century — the idea that the stars had an influence over human lives and affairs was very commonly held by educated men, who were influenced, once again, by the Arabic tradition of science derived from Hellenistic Alexandria. It is only in quite modern times that something of the real character of the starry universe has become known, and rendered divinations based on this theory, and the “casting of horoscopes” a palpable absurdity.

If the greater knowledge of our time has discredited alchemy and astrology, it has served to modify, or to remove, the stigma of “superstition” attaching to other beliefs and practices. Scientists — as opposed to pseudoscientific rationalist popularizers — are far less prone than they were fifty years ago to treat with mere contempt the strange and uncanny phenomena of Spiritualism, and the so-called “magical” powers of faiths, witch-doctors, mediums and faith-healers: the evidence for the existence of hidden and mysterious forces which these people use is recognized as too strong to be disregarded, and as meriting serious inquiry. Even the miracles performed by Christian saints and in our own “holy places” are now no longer treated with the contempt which was shown to them yesterday by a “science” which did not even condescend to examine the evidence.

Are Catholics Superstitious?

Clearly, the belief of Catholics in the possibility of miracles cannot be set down accurately as “superstitions” in any sense, unless the whole Christian conception of the universe — to which that belief is related — is shown to be in conflict with the known truth about it as revealed by scientific discovery. This cannot happen, because the field of the natural sciences lies entirely apart from that of theology and philosophy. Scientists can describe the way in which the universe normally works, and formulate “laws” to express that working; but they cannot — as scientists — make any pronouncement about its ultimate invisible government or purpose. It is impossible for them, therefore, to state with genuine professional authority that the special interventions from a higher Order suspending the normal operations of nature do not and cannot take place. They can merely pronounce judgment, in the light of current knowledge, upon the evidence for particular miracles brought to their notice, and express a view whether what has occurred can be accounted for, or not, by known “natural causes.” In the case of miraculous wonders occurring in Scripture and history, the credibility of the first rests on the evidences upon which faith in Christ and the teaching Church are founded: of the second group, each individual instance is a matter of private judgment, to be decided in the light of its own evidence.

It would be foolish to deny that there has been, in the past, considerable “superstition” among Christians, in the form of irrational credulity concerning particular supposed miracles for which evidence was inadequate or nonexistent.

Those in authority have not always checked these follies of over-credulity; and they have too often shared in them, especially in ages when the religious sense was intensely keen and there was little notion about sound historical method or the critical judgment of evidence.

The idea, however, that the rulers of the Church in modern times are indifferent to dangers and scandals of this kind can only be held by those who know very little about Catholicism. As an example, in the two famous cases of Fatima and Lourdes, the Church has been very slow to give any kind of official endorsement to supernatural wonders for which the evidence is overwhelmingly

strong: and the rule laid down about unofficial publicity in these matters by Leo XIII in the Constitution, "Officiorum ac Munerum," is a strict one.

"Books and writings," it declares, "which recount new apparitions, revelations, visions, prophecies and miracles, or which introduce new devotions, even under the plea of their being for private use, supposing such to be published without the lawful permission of ecclesiastical authority, are forbidden."

The Credulity of the "Rationalist".

If "pious" superstitions, some of them foolish and indefensible, have been found in the past among Catholic believers, and are found among some of them even in our time, they have no relation whatever to the Catholic system of faith, and are firmly discountenanced by the highest spiritual authorities of the Church. - On the other hand, we may point out what may fairly be termed a "superstition" on the rationalistic and Protestant side, in regard to the beliefs and worship of Catholicism itself. Many of us have had experience of how ubiquitous is the currency among plain people of lies about such matters as confession, indulgences, "the worship of images," "Jesuitism," and so on: and how ready they are to attribute immoralist principles and practices to ourselves and our ecclesiastical authorities. The "rationalist" pseudo-scientific rubbish about "comparative religion" - of which we have already spoken - is matched by the official "black legend" in history, and the current elaborations of a hostile propaganda whose origins can be traced back to the Tudor and Stuart age. In many cases, the slightest serious investigation is sufficient to expose the falseness of these beliefs, some of which are self-refuting once the light of common-sense is turned upon them. Yet the pall of ignorance and prejudice still remains heavy over the secular "enlightened" world in matters relating to the Faith — as is frequently apparent even in the writings and utterances of men who are highly reputed for their intelligence, knowledge and honesty.

Too often, these people are ready to accept and retail the most idiotic and infamous stories about Catholic faith, practices and personalities without the least attempt at a critical assessment of their value. For example, there was the yarn of Mr. Bagot, in his book, "My Italian Year," about the "ritual burning" of twenty living infants at Bassano in a "Carriage of Purgatory" in 1705. The writer, who had quoted the event as illustrating "the lengths to which religious superstition was capable of going," claimed that his account was based on "local records": and it was three years before he could be induced to admit that the event was not a religious rite at all, but simply an accident, in which a number of children were burnt when a carriage caught fire.

Again, Mr. E. Clodd, in an address on "Folklore" in 1894, described in detail a "custom" of ritual murder, called "dying for Christ" in an Abruzzi village. The 'custom' was, of course, a pure myth — and would never have been accepted as anything else, but for the ingrained prejudice, founded on ignorance, which made its "scientific" retailer ready to swallow without inquiry any random tale to the discredit of religion — and, in particular, of Catholicism.

The superstitions of simple folk are excusable — springing, as they do, partly from ignorance and bad example, and partly from the perversion of a natural appetite for sanctifying local life and daily life by intimate ritual observances. They express, even at their worst and silliest, the need of a "God in the dust," close to man's childishness, which was answered by the Incarnation.

No such excuse can be offered for the irrational, blind prejudice based on hatred and contempt for revealed religion, which is too often met with among those who pride themselves on their

“enlightenment” and respect for truth. The proper name for this is “Theophobia” — and it is one of the most common, and most virulent superstitions of the age in which we live.

Finally, it is worth observing how the tendency to “myth-making” and masquerade of a bogus character has reappeared in the modern infidel cults and “ideologies” — such as Deistic freemasonry, with its rubbish about Boaz and Jachin and Hiram, King of Tyre; Nazism, with its deliberately contrived “race-myth,” and Communism with its mystic veneration for the prophets, Marx, Engels and Lenin, and their infallible interpreter, the mighty Stalin, who is “deified” like the kings of the Hellenistic age, as the centre of a hero-cult in which the young are carefully indoctrinated. [In 1950, Mr Jackson could have had no fore-knowledge of Stalin’s ‘fall from communist grace’ or the even later fall of the Iron Curtain.]

CHAPTER II.

The pre-Christian “civilized world” of the Mediterranean was riddled with superstition, which pervaded every class of its communities, and governed their way of life to an extent we can scarcely conceive. Sorcery and incantations were regarded as so dangerous in old Republican Rome that they were dealt with in her earliest written Code, that of the Twelve Tables, which forbade the casting of spells over a neighbour’s fields in order to divert their fertility to one’s own. In his “Natural History” Pliny — who wrote under the Empire — describes how one Furius Cresimus, accused of sorcery because of the unusual fertility of his small farm, repelled the accusation before the Curule Aedile by showing that his “charms” consisted of the hard labour of a household who were well fed and well clad, and provided with proper implements and equipment. In the late Republic and early Empire, while genuine faith in the old Roman gods was in decay, there was an influx of Oriental cults and superstitions of every kind. Belief in the arts of magic, divination and astrology, according to Sir Samuel Dill, was the strongest force in the pagan sentiment of this age. According to Dean Inge — a great authority on the thought of later classical paganism — the effects of astrology and magic as then practised were a fruitful cause of misery, and Christian apologists have not claimed nearly sufficient credit for their liberation of Western thought from this “permanent nightmare of the spirit.” The higher culture of Athens and Alexandria, the two great “university centres” of the time, did not free them from the evil — on the contrary, they were perhaps even worse than Rome. It was common for people to carry a little oil-flask for ceremonial unctions to avert the anger of the gods in case it was accidentally provoked in some way. Theophrastus, in his “Characters,” paints a curious picture of the superstitious man, whose whole life is bound up in a network of petty ritual, and governed by fears of “unlucky” days, animals and events.

Pagan Prison of Fears.

These credulities were not exclusive to the ignorant and vulgar: they obsessed the ruling class and the “intelligentsia” also; even men like the Emperor Marcus Aurelius were by no means immune from their influence.

Fear of “ill-omened” dreams was universal: no one was in the least ashamed of confessing the most ridiculous apprehensions, and resorting to equally absurd remedies. For example, the picture is drawn by Petronius of Trimalchio’s dismay when a cock crows at a feast which he is giving. He at once spills his wine beneath the table, changes the rings on his fingers, and orders the offending bird to be killed. Plutarch speaks of the craven fear of men which “filled the whole universe with

spectres,” and declares that unbelief itself is less dishonouring to Divinity than “to cringe before gods who are worse than the worst of men.”

At a later period, St. John Chrysostom describes the mass of vain fears which infected the souls of the people of a world still largely pagan, or but partially Christianized in its thought. A braying donkey, a crowing rooster, a man sneezing — almost anything in the least out of the common was interpreted as “an omen,” he says, by crazy people shut up in a prison of dark fears — “more abject in their misery than a whole marketful of slaves.”

In the life of the low-born Marius, who kept a Syrian prophetess in his train of followers, and the cultured aristocrats, Sulla and Caesar, we meet with much the same irrational element of superstition. Sulla wore an amulet of Venus as a lucky charm, and was seen to whisper prayers to it at the critical moment in a battle at the gates of Rome: he had a belief in Fortune like that of Bonaparte in his “Star.” Caesar — a skeptical “rationalist” as regards the gods — was accustomed to rely on a thrice-repeated spell against accidents when driving in a chariot. Another eminent politician, Mucianus, three times a consul, kept a live fly, wrapped in linen as a charm against ophthalmia!

The Christians and Sorcery.

St. Augustine shows how the Christians of his time were prone to fall into pagan superstitions in time of sickness — when charms and incantations were recommended, it seems, by pagan neighbours in a good-natured way, much as patent medicines are nowadays. There were “ligatures” tied on to limbs; “inaures” which covered the ear; written spells called “characters,” and various kinds of healing sorcery. All this, said the great Bishop of Hippo, was simply devil-worship — health was being promised in exchange for a denial of Christ and a reliance on the evil powers of the air. Like the martyrs, the Christian patients must stand firm in the hour of temptation. “Your sick-bed is your arena: as you lie helpless, you are wrestling with your foe. Only hold fast to the Faith, and as the end of life is reached, the victory is gained.” Incidentally, the faith in ligatures and similar devices which the saint denounced was still rampant a thousand years later — and is described by Scott in his “Discovery of Witchcraft,” written in Queen Elizabeth’s time, when it was common to resort to “periapts” given by wise women — such as the “five leaves of charmed valerian tied loosely to the thumb with a green thread,” which are described by St. Thomas More in his “Comfort Against Tribulation,” a book written to encourage his family to take comfort from Christ and not worldly pomps.

Some Modern Survivals.

Another ancient superstition which survived at least till the eighteenth century is faith in the curative powers of the spittle of a fasting person. It is referred to by Pliny in his “Natural History” as a remedy against snake-bite, and was one of the subjects of a medical treatise by one Nicholas Robinson, M.D., which was last reprinted in 1767.

The worthy Dr. Robinson descanted on its salutary effects when rubbed on “old aches, pains, recent cuts, wounds, old ulcers, corns, sore eyes and gouty nodes.” The practice of perforating eggshells after consuming their contents is referred to by the same Roman authority: if this is not done, says Pliny, they may become lurking places for maleficent forces. Dean Wren — the father of the great architect, spoke of the witches using unperforated shells as boats “to sail in by night” — this being apparently an alternative form of transport to the better-known broomstick!

As late as the 19th century, an instructor in etiquette corrected the Emperor Napoleon III for neglecting to destroy his egg-shells after eating eggs.

Remaining superstitions of somewhat obscure origin are connected with such matters as ear-tingling, and sneezing — a bad omen, to be averted by calling upon Zeus: hence, “God bless you” — as well as with spitting. [Since sneezing was once an early symptom of having caught the deadly plague Christians were encouraged to say “God bless you” and to really mean it!] They are now, of course, harmless enough, and those who indulge in superstitious tricks and fantasies connected with them, almost always do so in a lighthearted manner, without seriously considering why they do so. It was different, however, in the fifth and sixth centuries, when old civilized paganism was dying in the Mediterranean lands and the barbarian paganism of the North and West was being combated by Christian teachers and rulers.

CHAPTER III.

People who read brief historical accounts of the “conversion” of the English, Irish, Franks, Germans and others often have little realization of the enormous difficulty of really Christianizing these Western peoples. Their whole way of life was knit into a pattern of pagan traditional custom connected with the observance of days and seasons, and of popular rites which were often sensual and sometimes horribly cruel. In order to uproot these evils thoroughly, an adequate supply of earnest, holy and well-trained priests was needed, backed by an enlightened authority which could enforce peace and settled government. But none of these conditions prevailed in the period of the “Dark Ages,” when Christendom was being made. It was a time of frightful violence, and the world was desolated by constant war, while “lawful” authority of all kinds was ill-secured and weak in face of militant gangsters. In such conditions, it was enormously difficult to test and prepare candidates properly for the ministry: and also, to secure real instruction for the “converted” and baptized flock in the Word of God: while all sorts of unfit men were liable to be pitch-forked into spiritual office by ruling princes or “racketeers” of various kinds, in order to give them a hold on power and property. When all this is considered, it is not surprising that frightful, barbarous evils, both among the clergy and laity, should continue to exist in the kingdoms where Catholic Christianity was the established faith. The surprising thing is that any sort of Christianity should have survived in such an age — and that its story should not only have been stained by ghastly inequities and abuses, but also glorified by the splendid sanctity and heroic sacrifices of innumerable saints.

The Fight Against Pagan Survivals.

Naturally enough, the weeds of superstition flourished rankly in this world. Some of them remained from the pagan practices of the past: others came in the wake of Christianity — as a consequence of the credulity of the people and the ignorance of too many of the clergy, and the general absence of the critical or scientific sense. The first, however, were the most dangerous, and the war against them occupied much of the attention of the Church’s holy men and reformers. Thus, in the sermons of St. Caesarius of Arles (d. 542) we find constant references to the need of destroying the idolatrous temples, cutting down the sacred trees which were the object of pagan veneration, and so on — and he advocates stern measures — including flogging and chaining — against baptized Christians who apostatised by reverting to their ancestral practices.

“Why,” the saint cries out, “did these wretched people ever enter the Church? Why did they receive the sacrament of baptism, if they were bent on going back afterwards to the sacrilegious worship of their idols?”

The abuses about which he speaks are also mentioned often in “Penitentials” (rules covering matters of Church discipline for various offences) during this century and the three following. One notable one is the tumults which took place whenever there was an eclipse of the moon — based on the belief that the moon-goddess must be backed up by clamorous supplications in her conflict with hostile forces seeking to devour her. Incidentally, practices based on this superstition are recorded as prevailing among the Irish and Welsh as late as 1686; Aubrey, a writer of the time, speaks of them “beating pans” in times of eclipse, by way of assisting the higher orbs! Another evil denounced by St. Caesarius is the observance of Thursday — the day of Thor or Jove — as a sort of rival holy day to Sunday: and he says that there were many who would not work on that day who had no hesitation in doing so on the Christians’ weekly feast. A variety of superstitions centred around Midsummer Eve (later called “St. John’s Eve”), including midnight bathing, dancing round bonfires and jumping through the flames, watching, in the church porch, for the wraiths of next year’s dead. The habit of consulting soothsayers, and performing propitiatory rites at holy wells or fairies’ trees was very common indeed, even among devout Christians — and these, with other pagan legacies, are prohibited in a series of Church Councils, both in the East and West. That of Constantinople in 692, for example, deals with the practices of sorcery and divining, the sale of charms, the drawing of omens from cloud shapes, the lighting of fires at the time of the new moon, and also with revels in honour of Pan and Bacchus.

Even the practice of giving New Year presents was at one time considered objectionable, so much was New Year associated with pagan rites and excesses. To counteract this, the day was even made a “fast” — and St. Augustine urged his hearers to give alms, not “strenas” (“Christmas boxes,” as we should say). But it was long before the pagan mummeries linked with January the first were got rid of, or reduced to the harmless customs which still remain in France and many other parts of Europe.

THE “CHRISTIANIZING” OF PAGAN OBSERVANCES.

As one would expect, pagan usages connected with the burial of the dead were deeply-rooted and difficult to overthrow. In some cases, there were animal sacrifices, and valued belongings of the deceased were put in the grave with him: while there was unseemly feasting at the graveside. The strange practices of “the wake” and the like, which have survived among the Irish almost to our own day, are well known. In England, there was a curious custom of “burning corn” at the burial, as a safeguard for the health of survivors. These pagan superstitions were the subject of penal Church legislation in the middle ages — but the Christian missionaries and rulers saw well enough how difficult it was to deal with the ancient seasonal observances of the peasantry simply by suppression.

For this reason, they frequently adopted the method of compromise, giving a new Christian significance to the ancient pagan observances and feasts. Christmas replaced the Winter-feast of the Sun: instead of the Lupercal, there were the Candlemas processions in February. Unfortunately, the pagan spirit often survived the “Christianizing” of the older observance — as in the case of the “all-night vigils” in cemeteries and at the shrines of certain saints, which were sometimes accompanied by excesses of various kinds. In most instances, however, the Christian ‘adoption’ of pagan usages

was wise and beneficial in its consequences; for instance, in the case of the renewed funeral rites offered on the third, seventh and thirtieth days after the burial, where the Church substituted her own Holy Sacrifice of the Mass for the pagan feasts and offerings.

Yet even in the case of “month’s minds” and anniversaries, a “Capitulary” of Rheims in 832 refers to objectionable customs in which the clergy were involved — such as “drinking to the soul of the dead man, dancing, laughter and ballad “singing, together with masked buffooneries,” which are declared to be “devilry.”

CHAPTER IV.

So far, we have discussed the struggle of the church with pagan superstitions and sorceries, and with the surviving customary observances of the old world. But, in an age of fervent popular faith, when scientific criticism was unknown, it was inevitable that there should be a good deal of credulity which we would now call “superstitious” connected with purely Christian belief and practice. There was a tendency to regard everything out of the ordinary — good or bad — as due to the direct intervention of spiritual agencies. Accounts of miracles and Divine revelations were easily accepted on little or no evidence, and grew more and more exaggerated as they passed from mouth to mouth. The lives of some of the saints came to be loaded with a legendary element of a fantastic “fairy tale” kind — often beautiful and noble in its symbolism, but entirely unrelated to facts. Again, there was a readiness to invoke “the judgment of God” in place of using competent human judgment in legal cases — as in the “ordeals” by fire, battle and other processes which were ultimately condemned by the Church. Here, the evil was not the giving of undue honour to false divinities: but the honouring of the true God in an irrational and infantile way.

The error of credulity was largely unavoidable, in the absence of any systematic canons of criticism: but it must be admitted that it was to be found in all classes, and among the wisest and most holy of the men of the middle ages.

RELICS AND CREDULITY.

For example, in the life of St. Anselm, the great Archbishop and Church doctor, we read of him as being “enraptured” at learning of the relics brought back by one Ilgyrus from the Crusades — including some hairs of Our Blessed Lady, torn out by her in her agony before the Cross, which had been given to him by the Patriarch of Antioch. The “ancient records” in which, the Patriarch claimed, their authenticity was attested, were not inquired into at all — the truth of the incredible story was accepted quite simply, and the “sacred hairs” were received with veneration by the saint himself, along with the Archbishop and Canons of the city of Rouen. Actually, there were some fifty or more churches which claimed to have similar relics, supposedly gathered from the soil of Calvary on the evening after the Crucifixion.

In the inventory of Westminster Abbey in the fifteenth century are found a variety of relics of Our Lady — including pieces of her dress, garments she had woven, part of the window recess where she had stood at the Annunciation, relics of her “milk,” her shoes, her bed and her girdle. King Athelstane had presented a veil of hers; King Offa a piece of the tomb from which she had arisen at the Assumption. It is now known, incidentally, that the supposed “milk” was simply an exudation of a substance now called galactite, found in a cave in Egypt, where the Holy Family was supposed to have taken refuge.

The enthusiasm of St. Anselm for doubtful relics is typical of his age; and in his case, as in that of St. Hugh of Lincoln, St. Louis and others, it is clear that their motives in acquiring these memorials were those of the purest devotion — just as were the motives of the early Christians who sought to be buried near to the tombs of the martyrs. The instinct which inspired such a craving is deeply human — it is found outside Catholicism, not only in the Orthodox and other Eastern Churches, but among Moslems and Buddhists. Even in the Protestant world, there are unexpected examples of the kind — such as the case of the much-venerated Calvinistic Methodist Prophet, William Huntington, whose furniture and possessions fetched “extraordinary prices when they were auctioned, at his death, among his devoted followers.

The inventories of great shrines of the Middle Ages furnish all too much material for the mockery of modern infidels. There were the tears — gathered up by angels — of Our Lord weeping at the tomb of Lazarus, which were preserved at various places. St. Medard (died 545) treasured a milk-tooth lost by the Child Jesus at the age of nine. In the Lateran there was the blossoming rod of Aaron, with relics of the Saviour’s cradle, the five barley loaves and two small fishes, the cloth used to wipe the feet of the disciples, the seamless vesture and the purple garment, phials of the sacred blood and water from Christ’s side... Frequently the same articles are found in different lists of relics.

Needless to say, those who accepted traditions which appeared to possess authority regarding these treasures, and venerated them in good faith, were not guilty of anything which can be justly stigmatized as “superstition”: and the general readiness to believe in preternatural explanations for unusual happenings is also excused by the almost universal ignorance of physical science. The trouble is that the credulity of an age which knew little of how to distinguish between false and true relics and false and true marvels, has helped to confirm the universal skepticism of later days, so that all have frequently been mingled in a common condemnation as fraudulent and legendary with equal lack of critical discernment.

THE “EVIL EYE”.

Meanwhile, the more commonplace kind of superstitions went on flourishing, in spite of Church denunciations; for instance, the observance of “lucky” and “unlucky” days; and faith in auguries and omens was still common among the ignorant. Belief in the “Evil Eye” at this period should be regarded rather as an erroneous opinion than a superstition, since it was linked up with the physical theories of Aristotle. It is on the word of “the Philosopher” that St. Thomas Aquinas accepts the myth of the baleful effect of “*oculus fascinans*” as a generally recognized fact.

The eyes were supposed to infect the air in contact with them for a certain distance: so that “when a soul is vehemently moved to wickedness, as occurs mostly in little old women” — according to this opinion — the countenance can inflict damage, especially on the delicate bodies of the young. Similarly, the moon was regarded as hurtful to the weak-minded — hence the term “lunatic.” The explanation offered by St. Thomas (once again on Aristotle’s authority) is that since the moon acts on moist things — as, for example, the sea, which is drawn by it so as to form the tides — it acts also on the brain, as the most moist part of the human body: and the demons take the opportunity provided by this circumstance to disturb man’s imagination.

But if the acceptance of general beliefs which seemed to be founded on scientific principles could not be held superstitious, the case was different with the methods used to counteract the “evil eye.” For this amulets were sometimes worn, shaped like horns, or a hand, - or some obscene symbol.

Herbs — notably the one called “Mugwort,” were worn as a protection against both the Evil Eye and diabolical possession. In Southern Europe, where this particular illusion is still rampant, blue beads and blue jewels are often worn as a precaution against it — in Spain, fragments of mirrors, or of foxskin or sheepskin, used to be tied round children’s necks as an antidote.

The “sign of the horns”, made with the fingers, is used in Italy. Even when the Evil Eye danger was seriously believed in, these practices were denounced as superstitious — as, for instance, by Archdeacon Martin of Arles in his work on superstitions.

The same authority speaks of the custom of “ducking” a statue of St. Peter in time of drought, and that of tying the girdle of a woman lying in childbirth to the church gong and then ringing it thrice. He mentions a number of written spells and charms in which gibberish was blasphemously mingled with prayers.

FAITH AND FOLLY MINGLED.

The prejudice against a priest’s presence on board ship has been attributed to the Biblical story of Jonah — hence the name often given to such ill-luck bearers. It is certainly a very ancient one. It was bad luck to meet a priest or friar at certain other times — for instance, when going hunting: horsemen must pass them on the left... and so on.

Divinations of the year’s weather were made by that prevailing on certain days. Superstitions were linked up with certain forms of devotion — such as fasting on the week day on which “Our Lady in Lent” (the Feast of the Annunciation) occurred; among the populace the actual sight of the consecrated Host at Mass was often regarded as supremely important — even as sufficient for the fulfilment of the Sunday obligation; and it was held to be a safeguard against a variety of material ills.

In medical prescriptions we often find religion and superstition curiously mingled. A specimen of this is a “leechdom” for the cure of certain cysts called wens, in which a maiden dips three cups of water from a stream flowing east into another vessel, singing Creeds and Paternosters while she does so; this “treatment” to be repeated for nine days. A “holy salve” is formed of various herbs mingled with butter from a single-colour cow, which has the names of the Evangelists written upon it, and is then stirred up while the Psalm, “Beati Immaculati,” “Blessed are the undefiled” [Psalm 119 (or 118 in the Vulgate)] is recited.

CHURCH CONDEMNATIONS OF CREDULITY.

There were not lacking intelligent churchmen who spoke out against all these follies, however, as well as against the current belief in fairies, witches, wizards, etc., and the habit of attributing all kinds of calamities to direct diabolical action and sorcery. St. Agobard of Lyons [died 840] declared that it was not the devil’s work to cause plagues or tempests, but rather to instil superstitious ideas into men’s minds, from which all sorts of silliness and injustice resulted. He instances a case in which a number of innocent persons were put to death on the accusation of having acted as agents of Grimoald, Duke of Benevento, in causing a murrain of cattle by poison-powder.

In Penitentials of the ninth century, prevalent beliefs about the powers of witches are condemned as pagan falsehood: and Burchard’s “Corrector” in the tenth century treats belief in the possibility of their marvellous powers of riding through the air, changing men into animals, holding intercourse with demons and so on, as being itself a sin of superstition deserving heavy penance.

The “Ordeals” by combat, water, red hot iron and so on dominated the administration of justice in a baleful fashion for a long time. Their origin was pagan — but they were adopted and adapted by Christian authorities and continued for a long time before their principle was exposed as thoroughly unsound from the theological standpoint, and they were formally condemned by the fourth Council of the Lateran in 1215. Even then they lingered on in secular tribunals until the seventeenth century.

CHAPTER V.

The Reformation swept away the veneration of relics, whether false or true, and discredited many of the marvels connected with holy men and holy things in which Catholic Christendom had believed. Nothing, however, could be more erroneous than the notion that it diminished superstition, which remained rampant in all classes — through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

“Good Queen Bess” herself employed Dr. John Dee, a clergyman of the new Church of England, as her domestic astrologer for over forty years, and called in his services in a panic in order to counteract the malignant activities of someone who had made a wax image of her and stuck a pin in it. Prosecutions for witchcraft had been rare in the Middle Ages, and seldom led to the death penalty — but in the age of Elizabeth and her successors they were multiplied a hundredfold. The wise James I was a strong believer in the “witch menace,” and wrote an authoritative work on the subject in Scotland, which was republished in England after his accession to the throne there. Incidentally, the mass of cruelties committed by the witch-hunters in England and Scotland during this period enormously outweighs the much-advertised (and grossly exaggerated) cruelties of the Spanish Inquisition in the same period — and the Inquisition was notably mild and skeptical in its attitude towards supposed cases of sorcery.

France and Germany, however, were infected much with the prevalent witch-mania, which was common to Protestants and Catholics. Superstitious and magical practices were rife everywhere; and everywhere the terror of sorcery was prevalent. Even such men as Sir Thomas Browne, who exposed many common errors of his time, accepted the current belief in witchcraft, which is expressed in a number of the plays of Shakespeare. In a work on “Character of Virtue and Vice,” written by Joseph Hall in 1600, a picture is painted of the superstitious man of the time in all his “devout impiety” turning home if a hare crosses his path, or if he recalls that the day is unlucky: turning pale when salt is spilled, listening for the cry of the crow, tormenting himself over dreams, making oracles of St. Swithin’s day and the twelve days of Christmas. “Old wives and stars are his counsellors: his right spell is his guard and charms his physicians.”

MODERN SUPERSTITIONS.

The salt-spilling superstition, which has survived to our own time, seems to be fairly modern: one of the earliest signs of it is in Leonardo da Vinci’s “Last Supper” picture, where the salt cellar in front of Judas has been upset.

Another recent notion is that of disaster portended by a crossed knife and fork — forks, of course, were not used in England before the age of Elizabeth. The fears connected with umbrellas opened in the house or left on tables are of even later development, since these conveniences were first introduced in the eighteenth century.

Since glass mirrors did not come into general use in Europe until at least the seventeenth century, the belief about the “seven years’ bad luck” connected with breaking them is obviously of late

origin, though it is widely spread among gentle and simple. Accidents with mirrors are also held sometimes to portend death in the house.

How did such superstitions as these come to appear? It seems probable that they arose in many cases simply from the chance coincidence to two disconnected events. The superstitiously disposed are prone to recall that when such and such an event occurred they had brought peacock's feathers into the house, or had put on a new dress of some particular colour. Perhaps ill-fortune is connected twice with a memory of the same kind. An imaginary link is woven, the suspicion is communicated to friends, and the new superstition starts on its way. Henceforth, whenever instances occur which tend to confirm the notion, they are observed — while those where it fails pass unnoticed.

One can think of a large number of "bad luck" ideas which may have originated in this way — those connected with looking at the new moon through glass, for instance, or halving onions, or lighting three cigarettes with a single match, or being the first to cross a new bridge or enter a new house. On the other hand, there are "lucky" events of an equally arbitrary kind — to be born with a caul: to find a stone with a hole in it: to touch a hunch-back's hump: to dream of the devil. The idea of "touching wood" to avert ill when one boasts of good fortune is linked, perhaps, with the pagan worship of sacred trees — as well as with the ancient instinct to propitiate what Herodotus calls "the grudge of the gods", [or perhaps to unite oneself to the wooden Cross of Christ.] Various explanations are made of the "ill-luck" of passing under a ladder, linking it with the pyramids, ancient grave customs, the gallows, and the Cross; but it may well have arisen simply from the originally rational fear of having something dropped upon one from above!

The ill-omen connected with the number thirteen is perhaps the most seriously held of modern superstitions; and it seems certain that it is derived from the number of persons present at the Last Supper. There is no trace of it at all in old paganism, but a modern hostess will go to great lengths to prevent thirteen from sitting together at her table — and the fears connected with forming one of such a group are very real, though utterly irrational. The stigma on thirteen has grown so that builders avoid it in numbering houses, and hotelkeepers in numbering rooms, and extra steps have even been constructed to avoid the evil number in a flight. Similarly, the idea of Friday being an ill-omened day is certainly connected with the Crucifixion — and it has had a serious effect up to our own day, in diminishing journeys by land and sea, and marriages in certain places. The superstition about weddings in May is more obscure; it appears in Ovid, but was unknown in the Middle Ages.

CONCLUSION.

But it is impossible here to discuss even a small number of the manifold superstitions yet current in this "age of enlightenment" — some of them most strange and far-fetched, some, perhaps, relics of earlier notions once held scientific. The two last wars were accompanied by outbursts of superstition relating to astrological forecasts, prophecies, and spiritualistic communications — not to mention amulets and mascots; the air force has produced a brand-new goblin of its own — the gremlin.

Clearly, man finds it very hard indeed to rid himself of irrational beliefs which have no basis in real religious or philosophic teachings, and which are — from the scientific standpoint — pure absurdity. In general, the superstitions of modern civilized people are childish rather than a real menace to faith or sane social life — to that extent progress has been made. From the Christian standpoint, they have at least the merit of keeping alive, to some extent, the half-belief in a strange,

immaterial order affecting human life, in a world obsessed by the opposite error of materialist incredulity.

In the Roman empire of the fifth century, Christian faith had to struggle out of a jungle of polytheism and magic which seemed very real indeed to plain people — as they do in many parts of Asia and Africa even today. The danger that the mud and tendrils of the former belief of the new Christian might cling to him, or that he might blend his older beliefs with the new, was one of the major problems of the Church, and the reason for the fierce intolerance of practices which they regarded as an apostate reversion to the cult of devils.

Modern superstitions are still essentially a perversion of the reverence due to real spiritual truth and holiness, and are degrading to human reason; but they are, for the most part, merely venial. God is not seriously dishonoured by the half-belief men give to mascots, or their reaction to spilling salt, breaking mirrors or travelling on Friday; and superstitious excesses of a pious kind are an expression of childish faith which requires education to maturity, rather than any kind of sin. But what is most deplorable in cases of real superstition is that the person concerned is a moral and mental weakling, who refuses to base his life on the firm principles of religion, and is credulous of any tale he hears repeated often enough, following the current fashion in the practice of follies.

The decay of faith makes men ready to gamble on absurd chances — but not to take them seriously. But superstition leads to the neglect of fortitude, sincerity, and confidence in God; it undermines the religious sense — and it is horribly contagious. The man of true faith will seek to purify his mind of such nonsense as he clears his hands and feet of the day's dirt, lest it become ingrained and infect the body with poison.
