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# THE TREND IN SUPERSTITION

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## Introduction

'Your religion: my superstition, my superstition: your religion'. This appears to be the general trend in the understanding of the term, 'superstition'. While this perception seems to promote religious tolerance, a consideration of the historical trend in the rendering and the interpretation of the word may still affect the popular notion.

*The Oxford Classical Dictionary*<sup>1</sup> refers to superstition as a 'relative' term used in expressing beliefs and practices which 'have been abandoned by general or at least by educated opinion of the time'. *Superstio*, the root of the word is from *supersto* the Latin word that means 'a stand over or by a thing'. It conveys the sense of baffled amazement in the face of certain natural phenomena, wonder; dread, especially of the supernatural.<sup>2</sup>

Cicero<sup>3</sup>, associating superstition with standing in terror, or baseless fear of the gods would differentiate superstition from religion. The former he describes as *timor inanis deorum* (groundless fear of the gods), while the latter he renders *deorum cultu pio continetur* (piously worshipping of the gods). With this understanding, he notes: 'superstition has been separated from religion by our ancestors'. This goes beyond a case of morbid or irrational fear. Lanctatius,<sup>4</sup> sharing the negative view of superstition says: *Religio veri dei cultus est, superstitiō falsi* (religion is worship of the true god, superstition is false). While admitting that the *indebitus cultus* (improper worship) vitiate true piety.

Cicero<sup>5</sup> argues that the existence of superstition with its unwholesome influence does not necessarily mean the end of [true] religion. Isidorus agrees with this as he tries to show the boundary between two concepts by the expression: *superflua observantia in cultu super statua seu instituta superiorum* (observances added to the prescribed or established worship)

Having a similar perception, Seneca<sup>6</sup> identifies superstition with 'error' and declares: *superstitio insanus est*.

In post-Augustan prose, *superstitio* is used interchangeably with *religio* (religious scruples) and may simply suggest 'religious awe' 'sanctity'<sup>7</sup> (Lewis and Short). Considered, though, generally from classical historical perspective, the two words are not just synonymous. Meanwhile let us briefly refer to the Greek context of the *word usage*.

No Greek expression other than *deisidamonia* appears more relevant in meaning to *superstitio*. A Greek-English Lexicon<sup>8</sup> defines it *bono sensu* (in a good sense) as 'being religious'. It means displaying 'fear of the gods' that is associated with religious scruples. This is, by the standard that is generally acceptable, piety (*Eusebia*); *debitus cultus* (proper worship). This usage is 'rare' though.

Of more interest are many instances of *Malo sensu* (in a bad sense) usage of the word. *Deisidamonia* is clearly portrayed by the Superstitious Man of Theophrastus' Character<sup>9</sup>. The absurdity and irrationality manifest, as the man supposedly exhibits fear of the gods, exaggerates and mock his piety. He ridicules piety as he torments himself over every unlucky portent and sees every startling thing as warning or encouragement from the gods. Clearly, this surpasses the recommendation of Hesiod<sup>10</sup>

Appease the immortals with libations  
When you go to bed and when the holy  
Light returns that you may have a kindly  
Heart and spirit toward you

Plutarch, a native of Greece who had served as priest at the famous religious shrine at Delphi in his treatise *De Superstitione*<sup>11</sup> further presents a picture similar to that of Theophrastus' Superstitious Man. The man's fear of the gods is borne out of ignorance of the true nature of the divine and this prompts his cringing and trembling before the gods, portraying them as vicious and unloving. This is a man who would not use his intelligence to have the right perception of the gods but rather conjure images of horrors, which lead to behaviours of an extremist or a fanatic.

Plutarch further notes that, to a superstitious man, the gods are “rash, faithless, fickle, vengeful, cruel and easily offended”. To such a man religion is nothing but trying to placate a sinister being.<sup>12</sup> Of interest is how Lucretius<sup>13</sup> identifies with Plutarch on superstition. He attributes superstition to lack of knowledge and ignorance of the natural law. After drawing attention to the zeal and fervor widespread in reverencing the gods, he contrasts superstition with piety.

This is not piety.....  
Deluging of altars with blood of beasts,  
This heaping of vow on vow  
True piety lies rather in the  
Power to contemplate the universe  
with a quiet mind.

Lucretius also shows how superstition can be produced by baffled amazement when confronted by natural phenomena. What may prevent such feeling causing morbid fear? According to Lucretius,<sup>14</sup> this would be a better understanding of the natural laws governing the phenomena. In the absence of such understanding, it is best to continue ‘to contemplate the universe with a quiet mind’.

Using the 18th century European model, the ‘Enlightenment’ which began in the sixth century B.C. among the Greeks with the activities of Philosophers like Anaximander and Anaximenes introduced ‘objectivity’ (which can be understood as opposite to illusion) that challenged the traditional superstitious representation of the Cosmos. The Philosophers found the material principle more realistic in explaining their strange experiences than the Hesiod’s poem of Theogony and the fanciful stories of the supernatural beings in Homer’s Illiad and Odyssey.

Noteworthy too in the leaning toward ‘objectivity’ were the approaches of the Hellenistic ‘scientists’. The excitement of one leading physical scientist of the ancient times, Archimedes, at the discovery of the true nature of a particular crown was the background to the shouting ‘Eureka!’ (I have discovered it). This characterized the departure from superstition. Epicurus<sup>15</sup> similarly is critical of superstition. He refers to fear of the gods, of death and pain as one of the two things disturbing man. The Epicureans

advocated that proper 'scientific' understanding of universe phenomena such as thunderstorms and eclipses would liberate superstitious people from bondage to ignorance of the natural explanation of these common experiences. Epicurus portrays superstition as seeing the gods in every occurrence and without hesitation, concludes that this is harmful to the world.

In cognizance of this conclusion, the Epicurean speaker in Cicero's *de Natura Deorum*<sup>16</sup> argues that those who understand the truth about the gods attain true piety having found them deserving of reverence because of their 'eternal' and exalted nature. Far from burdening the mind with anxieties over religious duties, this would mean freedom from superstition, the improper fear of the divine 'would be banished'.

Could anyone who understands the truth about the gods be guilty of superstition? That would be the case if, he, according to the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*<sup>17</sup> exaggerates 'a reasonable belief in some supernatural agents or agencies with a readiness to accept unverified statements as to spiritual or magical interference in the material world'.

The common trend in the various definitions of superstition is distortion or exaggeration of what may be truthful in nature. David Hume<sup>18</sup> terms this as 'corruption of the best things'. While this may not necessarily be with a deliberate intention to harm the truth, yet it is no less insidious. 'Weakness, fear, melancholy, together with ignorance'<sup>19</sup> are said to be the true sources of this kind of superstition.

Associating 'weakness, fear and melancholy' with ignorance, the *Encyclopedia*<sup>20</sup> notes that 'the superstitious mind', then, is one that is not educated of evidence'. What should be done when no evidence is available? 'Patience to suspend judgment in the presence of unfamiliar phenomena' is suggested. But this is not native to a superstitious person.

*Quot hominess tot sententiae sunt* (as there are many men, so there are many opinions). This expression conveys the same sense as 'your religion, my superstition, my superstition, your religion', cited at the outset of the paper. Definitions of the word are not only generally subjective but also often negative. History has shown that people are not inclined to say they are superstitious, it has often been 'a log of wood in other people's eyes'.

Rome as the world power having the authority of orthodoxy recognized exotic religions disapproved by the state as superstitious. Three Roman writers, Pliny, Tacitus and Suetonius employ the term to refer to religious activities of the Christians at variance with the Romans' religious practices.<sup>21</sup> For example, Tacitus, the man who wrote with anger and bias said concerning the Christians:

To suppress this rumor, Nero fabricated scapegoats and punished with every refinement the notoriously depraved Christians (as they were popularly called) Their originator Christ had been executed in Tiberius reign by the governor of Judaea, Pontius Pilatus. But in spite of this temporary setback, the deadly superstition broke out not only in Judaea (where the mischief had started), but even in Rome. All degraded and shameful practices collect and flourish in the capital<sup>21a</sup>

The Roman upper classes would also designate the practices of the cults that infiltrated Rome, such as the cult of Isis, the religion of the Germanic tribes and the Celts as superstition. Their "excesses" were manifest in the strong adherent to practices that were strange to the Romans. This was the case with the Jewish refusal to eat pork, the practice of circumcision, observance of the Sabbath and celebration of holidays and festivals.

Ardent zeal was demonstrated by the first century Christians, and their activity was particularly viewed as superstitious because, to the Romans, it was 'subversive'. The Roman Religion was inseparable from the State affairs, or better still, it served the interest of the state. While individuals practicing the religion may be seen as superstitious in the context of 'religion of excesses', however, the application of the term to the early Christians was eventually more of politics than of religion. Interestingly, although, being 'mystical', some foreign religions were ill-famed as superstitious, the Romans, related to them as *religio licita* (tolerated religion).

Granted, some cults like Bacchanalia were at a time suppressed for their orgiastic excesses and magic, but 'Bacchicorgy' and magic persisted. Christianity also persisted but

under most vicious persecution and hostility. If there was any reason why Christianity was reputed as superstitious, principal was the Christians' popularizing of the "second coming" of the Messiah who would destroy their "wicked regime". This was a political threat to the Roman established order.

As the resistance of the Roman political authority waned, the reputation of Christianity as it was known in the second century, changed. It would no longer be defensive on the matter of superstition. The pagans and the Christians began to use the word in condemning each other's beliefs. As the church fathers ascended the ecclesiastical ladder, with the state's authority at their disposal, the predominant power to define and persecute those guilty of superstition shifted to them.

The Medieval in Europe was a world where religion was hand in glove with politics. Then, missionaries were active in trying to replace "pagan practices" with the church teachings. Magical practices, divination and religious attitudes of Theophrastus Superstitious Man were widespread. It seems "Superstition" thrived most in the Middle Ages. The period has been known to be a time of suppression of free thought. Consequently, people lived in perpetual fear of the unseen. The popular inclination was *cui bono?* (whose advantage?). While the official stand of the church was against superstition, often privately, the practices of superstition would be maintained by those who profited by them - from medicine men of the Savage tribe to the officers of an established church monarchy.<sup>22</sup>

Fear, sorrow and depression of spirit characterized this period. Engulfed by this melancholic atmosphere, people groped in spiritual darkness, turning to ecclesiastical power that found solution in adopting and adapting the existing days of pagan celebration to Christianity. Although the church synods condemned 'paganizing' as 'superstition', the fusion of "true worship" and "superstition" prevailed.

Superstition, seemingly an institution, usually has an authority as its custodian or preserver. The 'subjects' are those who having become victims of fears, sorrow and despair; easily prone to illusion and feeling of worthlessness, turn to person(s) of "His Holiness" status or to the ones whose Regalia and comportment have made to appear most favoured by the Divinity. When the



status of superiority is maintained even by way of pretense, superstition flourishes among its disillusioned or fearful 'subjects'. One may conceive two forms of authority: the one that promotes and the one that condemns. Circumstances have made their roles change though.

The Catholic Church, for instance, in the Middle Ages had the authority typical of that of the Romans when Christianity was branded superstition. Then the church assumed the right to define and condemn 'superstition'. Pope Gregory<sup>23</sup> did not only assent to the reconstruction of heathen shrines as churches but also advocated christianizing the celebration of their pagan converts who were anything but eager to part with deeply entrenched 'superstitious practices'. The 'superstition' was 'transformed' into religion. This is a burning issue among scholastic theologians.

Thomas Aquinas,<sup>24</sup> tending towards the Classical view of 'Superstition' as 'undue worship of the gods' defined the word as 'religion by means of excess'. He saw this in magic, divination and the use of charismatic amulets. According to him, it is offering 'divine worship to whom it ought not, or in a manner it ought not'. *Indebitus Cultus*

In a similar vein, associating 'superstition' with diabolical objects and inappropriate worship approach, Desiderius Erasmus<sup>25</sup> condemned repetitious prayer, fasting, ascetic practices, devotion to relics and shrines. He held this opinion because, to him, these detracted and distracted from the Christian standard.

The church had enough of state authority to include practices of magic and witchcraft among the targets of the Inquisition. But the interesting turn of events was the Protestants' challenging of the Roman Catholic Church's authority over 'superstition'. John Calvin<sup>26</sup>, a Protestant Reformer believed that the church had assimilated the 'pagan practices' so much that it should be labeled as superstitious. He applied the word to the ceremonies of the 'holy waters' and saints cults. Yet, despite this development, the Catholic Church retained a stronger status to assert the meaning of superstition and resisted any contrary opinion. The rendering of the word adopted by the council of Malines (1607) was, as it were, a reaction to the Protestants stand:

It is superstitious to expect any effect  
 from when an effect cannot be produced by natural  
 causes,  
*by divine institution or by the ordination or approval of  
 the church*<sup>27</sup>

(Emphasis mine)

With this statement, the church proclaimed the right to determine what was superstitious. Subsequently, it continued taking the lead in the Mediaeval in suppressing practices and beliefs that were thus categorized; magical healing, divination and magic ranked high among these. However, Voltaire would not see any difference between 'paganism' and the church in the matter of superstition. To him, the trend is the same.

Superstition was born in paganism  
 Adopted by Judaism and infested  
 The Christian Church from the beginning<sup>28</sup>

From Voltaire's standpoint, even when various religious authorities believe they have condemned superstitious practices, their own religious practices could be perceived as irrational or outrageous when weighed on the scale used for the unpopular religion. Evidently considering the 'pernicious effects' of superstition, he would associate it with organized religions with the record of fanaticism and intolerance. For this reason he proposed a 'natural religion' or a scientific approach to interpreting natural phenomena and strange experiences. A different view, according to him, would lead to 'bad science'.

Opinions like Voltaire's have been considered as enlightenment, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century when the authority of science held sway. However, scientific explanations to human strange encounters have apparently failed to eliminate morbid fear and vices attributed to the control of superstition over man. Worse still, science ironically has introduced another phase of displaying Unreasonable Fear of Objects or the fear of the unknown manifest in the concern over the Unidentified Flying Objects. The recrudescences of superstition clearly do not only reflect how inadequate man's knowledge is but also show his

insecurity and how impatient he could be in reaching conclusions and reacting in the face of puzzling situations.

We must admit, nevertheless, that the amazing feats of science and technology have significantly weakened the authority of, or over superstition. Verifiable proofs of science have faulted some superstitious teachings or beliefs. Medical science, for example, can provide physiological cause of epilepsy and not simply see it as expression of anger from the gods. With the explanation of causes of diseases, which in the past lurked in mystery, people, to some extent, have been relieved from the abnormal fear of the unknown and are inclined to be more objective.

More societies now secular seem to turn to science as the ultimate and most reliable authority in interpreting phenomena hitherto superstitiously conceived. This trend as noted earlier does not mean the demise of superstition. While science may contrast with superstition, it can subtly be the power appealed to in order to retain superstitious control or effects, especially over the unwary and those who are always plagued by fear.

Recently, experts in psychology engaged in psychical research and reportedly provided basis for telepathy, thought transference and other related processes generally categorized as superstitious, perhaps an attempt at rationalizing superstition or presenting the 'Science of Superstition'. As a result increasing number of people with 'Scientific Mind' have now supposedly used scientific methods to conduct a means of communication between the living and the dead. This has generated a lot of controversies. The effort made to explain away superstition is faulted by the allegation of fraud in science of 'media' of 'uncertain character' and obscurity used. The research has unwittingly created more of excessive fear of the unknown and failed to end mystery and misery.

The 'primitive man, is often referred to as living in a supernatural and natural world at a time when beliefs were freely mixed up with 'superstition'. Even in the fifth and fourth century B.C, the use of amulets was considered superstitious, especially among the 'enlightened minds'. In the light of the history of superstition, the valid question is: Is there any need for concern

over superstition? Perhaps we should add: Is superstition still rife?

The answers must be positive when the negative effects of 'fear of the unknown' still very prevalent is considered; and when the 'excesses of religions' manifest in the damaging effects they have over the people are given attention. Cicero's view in his work, *De Divinatione*, best describes the contemporary world of superstition. He writes:

Superstition which is widespread among the nation  
has taken advantage of human weakness to cast  
its spell over the mind of almost every man<sup>29</sup>

He further considers superstition as harmful to the public interest and believes that he has a role to play in exterminating it:

For I thought that I should be rendering a great service  
To both myself and to my country men if I could tear this  
Superstition up by the roots<sup>30</sup>.

Even now, anyone who can perceive the disillusioning effects of the seemingly innocuous superstitious behaviours may want to share the feeling of Cicero after visualizing a society free from superstitious insinuations. When religiously inclined, he could still be comfortable, realizing that 'the destruction of superstition does not [necessarily] mean the destruction of religion'<sup>31</sup>.

### End Notes

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12. Plutarch,, *Moralia*, 170e

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29. Ibid
30. Cicero, *De Dicatione* 72
31. Ibid
32. Op cit