

# HPSC1015

Explain why medieval theologians such as Aquinas associated magic with superstition.

## 1 Introduction

Medieval theologians associate magic with superstition due to the idea that direct action can call upon demonic forces to act out a persons will, superstition is derived from the 'over-worship' of God, this means that the superstitious are calling on God for direct action as opposed to 'asking' for divine intervention by means of prayer or worship. Magical practice comes about under the church due to a lack of communication between the upper echelons and the village parishes (as is typical of the time). This lead to a tight regulation of magical practices in for fear of demonic influence in the congregation.

In this essay I analyse the reasons why superstition perceived to be dangerous, and what superstition meant to the late medieval theologians; mainly focusing on Thomas Aquinas and his definition of superstition and then look at the politics of deciding what and what is not superstition later on in the period.

## 2 Discussion

Throughout the middle ages, people relied on Aquinas' definition of superstition. This borrowed from the Roman idea of *Superstitio* that is, an excess of worship in that they did more than that was deemed necessary, confined to an individual vice (that is, in the sense of a habit that leads to sin); Aquinas later redefines this to be a more general, that of a sort of dichotomy between Christianity (that which he calls 'true religion') and non-Christian belief systems.

In Rome, *superstitio* was related to the practise of magic and was deemed to be this sort of 'excess of worship'. Aquinas states that there are different forms of superstition, that of *idolatry*, *divinatory*, and *observances*. *Observances* refers to (in part) that of the magical observance; he says that this is unlawful and futile. Aquinas says that signs used in magical observances are not those as in the sacramental signs but are instead demonic and are used to communicate an agreement with demons. (Aquinas, 1485, II-II Q96) This relates to the need for scholasticism and to be learned in the theology, such that a member of the clergy does not knowingly (or accidentally) become superstitious.

Aquinas says that religion is opposed to superstition: "Accordingly superstition is a vice contrary to religion by excess" (Aquinas, 1485, II-II, Q92 A2). Essentially that the excess of worship is a vice, or an action that leads to sin. When considering the above, the magical observances are therefore a vice. This is a form of Hubris in Aquinas' eyes and therefore is a form of pride. Biblically pride has been one of the most important sins to consider, for example the tower of babel was a prideful act for humanity. Magic at the time was often related to calling on demonic powers whether directly or indirectly, however most of time time it also included a natural medicine element.

Aquinas was one of the main players of the scholastic movement, based on the Aristotelian logic it was a particularly academic school of thought. This meant that the upper caste of the Christian world were all highly educated men. Throughout the medieval period this school of thought was used, emphasising the use of logic in theology. For some members of the church this was broadly uncomfortable, as the act of making a logical God was an affront to the sensibilities of an

overarching powerful deity who transcends human constructs like logic and reason. That isn't to say that Aquinas didn't recognise this, in fact he was aiming for a synthesis of both reason and faith. Hence, he made the distinction between natural and supernatural revelation (Brent, 2019). Natural revelation coming from reason and observation of the real world and supernatural coming from the word of prophets, The Bible, etc.

Overall this led to a separated culture between the learned elite and the peasants, this also led to a separation in how the Christian religion was practised. Often the parish priests were not well educated (however, they were more educated than the villagers they would serve) and thus had to try their hardest to follow the advice the church gave. To try and prevent this superstition in local parishes, the church were involved in writing field guides that detailed how to identify magical practice and tell them apart from legitimate Christian worship. These were often written for the parishes' priests who were not *much* more learned than that of the clergy. The methodology of research for which particular acts were deemed magical by the church was often to go to a community and observe. This is how we can tell what was actually going on in the rural European church community for the most part. There would be unexplained phenomena and a panic to try and explain it under God, leading to a hysteresis through superstitious reaction. The field guides sought to manage this under the church i.e. dispel the supernatural.

These field guides were made such that the average pastor could interpret and change his or his congregation's actions as to not stray into superstitious actions. These were useful largely because most of the works that instructed on magic and superstition were dense and large, and these pastors would often not be well educated. Also worth noting is the blame of newly converted Christians being a perceived conduit for this superstition (Bailey, 2009).

Aquinas and other scholars saw this as a challenge to the institution of the church so much that they had to legislate against it in a way that meant there was a crackdown on these magical practices, inquisitions were sent out across Europe to find these magical practices at work and stop them by punishing the perpetrators. Aquinas in fact was one of the key perpetrators of the inquisition happening at the time, as a papal advisor he justified the inquisition by saying that if a heretic is stubborn enough there is no hope of mercy, and is therefore excommunicated and then separated *by secular court* from the material world, by death (Aquinas, 1485, II-II, Q11 A3). There is an emphasis on the secular court here, since Aquinas believed that execution should not be completed by the church but by the non-religious court (this is in essence what the inquisitions sought to achieve). Throughout the medieval period there was a shift from the accusatory practise to that of the inquisitorial, going from having to prove to the church that an individual was practising banned rites or magic to having the church probe into communities.

Throughout the late medieval period many scholars would seek to control the behaviours of the masses for fear of the devil and demons. Fifteenth century scholars declared idolatry to be the greatest danger inherent in superstition (Bailey, 2009). There are also many cases of divinatory issues being a problem for scholars, such as the viewing of bird flight or astrology past what the church had deemed to be allowable. Throughout all of this it is clear there is a squabbling disagreement between members of the clergy. Some justifying practices and others condemning them. This creates a hot political climate in essence there was a dialogue between priests and bishops who claimed that these practices showed a determinism in the nature and those who thought that it was false and that God more tightly controlled it. There was all sorts of advice given through word of mouth, field guides, and from priests regarding what was superstitious and what was not. From a complete ban on saying any incantations to specifying what ones were legitimate.

Astrology was a big point of contention for many scholars, some scholars agreeing that it was a 'noble and admirable science' (Bailey, 2009); however others were saying that astrology was out and out superstitious, whilst others saying that there was a line to be drawn between learned astrology and superstitious astrology. This of course meant there was a heated political climate when it came to who was in the wrong and right in the late medieval period. However it did not always lead to out and out disagreement. In fact it was said that the church had a certain forbearance towards differing thought (of course in the church's elite) (Bailey, 2009). The understanding of

the astral plane at that point in history allowed for some influence to take place on the material world (remember we are operating within the Aristotelian framework), but straying outside of the agreed influence of the stars was bad news and put you in shaky ground. Most people agreed that predicting the future using the stars was too far for example.

An important note to make is that official prayers were never said to control the world directly, instead they called upon divine powers to do the requested action. Whereas the 'magical' practices were said to have a direct action on the world. Further the rites committed by priests had to be understood correctly lest demonic powers be invoked (hence scholasticism), this led to a time in which things must have been understood perfectly lest there be issues.

Overall it's also important to remember that these people were acting under the ideological climate of the times, that of the Aristotelian separation between heaven and earth, and there were some things that to us would be utterly preposterous that they took for granted. Most priests sought to protect their congregation from demonic influence out of love rather than a need for power and control (although I'm sure that had some effect), this bickering in the clergy was for the man on the street's own good, and hence I think this is why it was tolerated.

Later on our definition of superstition has expanded to acts outside of religion but remains grounded in religious practice, for instance the use of amulets and charms nicely corresponds onto the gambling world of today, with some services even basing their entire brand identity around this ('Lucky Pants bingo'). This is *still* what theologians such as Aquinas would call magic, a manipulation of the material world (or perceived manipulation) via supernatural means. Perhaps we do not rely on demons for this but we are not 'asking nicely' for a divine intervention that's for sure.

### 3 Conclusion

Magical and superstition were linked hand in hand in medieval Europe, practices that were taken by the common folk tended to be branded as magical if they believed that there was a direct effect produced by an action. This meant that superstition, or an over belief in God to respond to your will through amulets, divination, etc. was regulated by the clergy in the elite of the church. This also caused a political climate in which disagreements between scholars would

Superstition is, broadly speaking any action that which is in opposition to the true religion (as defined by Aquinas). This means that actors that take part in superstition are therefore enemies of the church, and whether as a political, power, or genuine compassionate act must be prosecuted; first by excommunication and later, potentially by death.

There was plenty of debate in the time period to discuss what exactly was superstitious however and a surprising amount of it was civil considering the punishments handed out at the time. This is perhaps due to the scholastic nature of the time period and the Aristotelian framework that was behind each argument no matter if it was more or less reliant on rigid reasoning.

Throughout all of this there was not ever a real 'reform' in the sense of *The Reformation* instead a tweaking of what the church wanted and perhaps some regional differences in worship, mostly in reaction as to what was happening in the parishes. Magic was associated with superstition because of its attempts to change the material world in supernatural ways outside of divine influence, calling on demons etc.

## References

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