

QUESTION 94

Superstition: Idolatry

Next we have to consider idolatry (*idololatria*). And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Is idolatry a species of superstition? (2) Is idolatry a sin? (3) Is idolatry the most serious sin? (4) What causes idolatry?

The question of whether one should commune with idolaters was discussed above, when we were talking about unbelief (q. 10, a. 9).

Article 1

Is idolatry correctly posited as a species of superstition?

It seems that idolatry is not correctly posited as a species of superstition (*idololatria non recte ponatur species superstitionis*):

Objection 1: Just as heretics are non-believers, so, too, are idolaters. But as was established above (q. 11, a. 1), heresy is a species of unbelief (*infidelitas*). Therefore, idolatry is a species of unbelief and not a species of superstition.

Objection 2: Worship belongs to the virtue of religion, to which superstition is opposed. But idolatry (*idololatria*) seems to be called *worship* univocally with those things that pertain to true religion. For just as a desire for false beatitude is said univocally with a desire for true beatitude, so the worship of false gods (*cultus falsorum deorum*), which is called idolatry (*idolo-latria*), seems to be said univocally with the worship of the true God, i.e., the worship (*latria*) that belongs to true religion. Therefore, idolatry is not a species of superstition.

Objection 3: What is nothing cannot be a species of any genus. But idolatry seems to be nothing. For in 1 Corinthians 8:4 the Apostle says, “We know that an idol is nothing in the world,” and later (10:19) he says, “What then? Do I say that what is offered in sacrifice to idols is anything? Or that an idol is anything?”—implying that the answer is ‘no’. But offering things to idols belongs properly to idolatry. Therefore, idolatry, being, as it were, nothing existent, cannot be a species of superstition.

Objection 4: It belongs to superstition to offer divine worship to something that it should not be offered to. But just as divine worship should not be offered to idols, so neither should it be offered to other creatures. Hence, in Romans 1:25 certain individuals are criticized for worshiping and serving creatures rather than the creator. Therefore, it is inappropriate for this species of superstition to be called *idolatry*; instead, it should be called *worship of a creature* (*latria creaturae*).

But contrary to this: Acts 17:16 says, “While Paul was waiting [for them] at Athens, his spirit was stirred within him, seeing that the city was given over to idolatry.” And afterwards it adds, “He said, ‘Men of Athens, I judge by all these things that you are very superstitious.’” Therefore, idolatry belongs to superstition.

I respond: As was explained above (q. 92, aa. 1-2), superstition involves transgressing the appropriate manner of divine worship. The principal way in which this happens is when divine worship is offered to something that it should not be offered to. Now as was established when we were discussing [the virtue of] religion (q. 81, a. 1), divine worship should be offered only to the highest God, who is uncreated (*debet exhiberi soli summo Deo increato*). And so if divine worship is offered to any creature, then it is superstitious. Now just as divine worship was offered to sentient creatures through certain signs, e.g., sacrifices, public games, and other things of this sort, so, too, it was offered to the creature as represented by a certain sensible form or figure, which is called an *idol*.

However, divine worship was offered to idols in different ways:

Some people constructed, through a certain nefarious art, images that had certain fixed effects through the power of demons, and so they thought that there was something divine in the images

themselves and that, as a result, divine worship was owed to the images themselves. As Augustine reports in *De Civitate Dei* 8, this was the opinion of Hermes Trismegistus. By contrast, others offered divine worship not to the images themselves, but to the creatures whose images they were.

The Apostle touches on both of these views in Romans 1. With respect to the first he says in 1:23, “They exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for the likeness of an image of a corruptible man, and of birds, and of four-footed beasts, and of serpents. With respect to the second he adds in 1:25, “They worshiped and served the creature rather than the creator.” Still, these latter were of three opinions:

(a) Some of them thought that certain men—e.g., Jupiter, Mercury, and the others—were the gods whom they were worshiping through their images.

(b) On the other hand, some of them thought that the whole world was one God, not because of its corporeal substance, but because of its soul, which they believed to be God, claiming that God is nothing other than the soul that governs the world by its movement and reason, just as a man is called wise because of his soul and not because of his body. Hence, they thought that divine worship must be offered to the whole world and to all its parts—the heavens and the air and the water and all things of this sort. And as Varro claimed, and as Augustine reported in *De Civitate Dei* 7, they associated the names and images of their gods with these things.

(c) By contrast, others, viz., the Platonists, claimed that there is one highest God, the cause of all things. After God, they posited certain spiritual substances who had been created by the highest God and whom they named ‘gods’, viz., by participation in the divine nature, though we call them ‘angels’. After them, they posited the souls of the celestial bodies and, under them the demons, whom they claimed to be certain animals of the air. And under them they posited the souls of men, which they believed to be taken up into the company of the gods or of the demons through the merit of their virtue. And as Augustine reports in *De Civitate Dei* 18, they offered divine worship to all of these.

The last two opinions were said to belong to *natural theology* (*physica theologia*), which the philosophers carefully reflected on in the world and taught in the schools. The other opinion, having to do with the worship of men, was held to belong to *mythical theology* (*theologia fabularis*) and was represented in the theaters through the depictions of the poets. The remaining opinion, which had to do with the images, was held to belong to *civil theology*, which was celebrated by the high priests in the temples.

Now all of these belong to the superstition of idolatry. Hence, in *De Doctrina Christiana* 2 Augustine says, “The superstitious is whatever is instituted by men and which pertains (a) to making and worshiping idols or (b) to worshiping a creature or any part of a creature as God.”

Reply to objection 1: Just as [the virtue of] religion is not [the virtue of] faith, but is instead a profession of faith through certain exterior signs, so superstition is a sort of profession of unbelief through exterior worship (*quaedam infidelitatis protestatio per exteriorem cultum*). The name ‘idolatry’ signifies this profession, but the name ‘heresy’ does not; ‘heresy’ signifies only a false opinion. And this is why heresy is a species of unbelief, whereas idolatry is a species of superstition.

Reply to objection 2: The name *latria* can be taken in two ways:

In one way, it can signify a human act that belongs to the worship (*cultus*) of God. And on this score, the signification of the name *latria* does not vary, no matter what it is offered to, since what it is offered to does not, given this reading, occur in its definition. And *latria* in this sense is predicated univocally of what belongs to true religion and of what belongs to idolatry, just as ‘giving tribute’ is predicated univocally, regardless of whether the tribute is being offered to a true king or to a false king.

In the second way, *latria* is taken to be the same as ‘religion’. And since, on this score, it is a virtue, it is part of its nature that divine worship is offered to what it ought to be offered to. And in this sense *latria* is predicated equivocally of the *latria* of true religion and of idolatry, just as ‘prudence’ is predicated equivocally of the prudence which is a virtue and of the prudence that belongs to the flesh.

Reply to objection 3: The Apostle understands an idol to be “nothing in the world” because the images that were called idols were not alive and did not have any divine power—in the way that Hermes had claimed an idol to be, as it were, something composed of spirit and body.

Similarly, the claim that what is sacrificed to the idols is not anything should be taken to mean that through sacrifices of this sort the sacrificial flesh acquired neither sanctification, as the Gentiles thought, nor uncleanness, as the Jews thought.

Reply to objection 4: Because of the common custom by which the Gentiles worshiped creatures of all sorts under certain images, the name ‘idolatry’ was imposed to signify any sort of worship of a creature, even if it was done without images.

Article 2

Is idolatry a sin?

It seems that idolatry is not a sin (*idololatria non sit peccatum*):

Objection 1: Nothing that the true Faith takes up into the worship of God is a sin. But the true Faith has taken up certain images into divine worship. For instance, as we read in Exodus 25:18ff., there were images of the Cherubim in the tabernacle, and in the Church certain images are set up that the faithful offer adoration to (*quaedam imagines ponuntur quas fideles adorant*). Therefore, it is not the case that because idols are adored, idolatry is a sin.

Objection 2: Reverence should be shown to every superior. But angels and the souls of the saints are superior to us. Therefore, if reverence is shown to them through some sort of worship involving sacrifices or other things of this sort, there will be no sin.

Objection 3: According to John 4:24 (“It is necessary to adore God in spirit and in truth”), the highest God is to be worshiped by an interior worship of the mind. And in *Enchiridion* Augustine says that God is worshiped “by faith, hope, and charity.” But it can happen that someone worships idols exteriorly even though he does not depart from the true Faith interiorly. Therefore, it seems that someone can worship idols exteriorly without prejudice to divine worship.

But contrary to this: As a Gloss comments on Exodus 20:5, talking about carved statues and images, “‘You shall not adore them’—i.e., exteriorly—‘nor shall you worship them’—i.e., interiorly.” Therefore, it is a sin to offer either exterior or interior worship to idols.

I respond: There are two ways in which individuals have gone wrong on this topic:

(a) Some have thought that offering sacrifice, as well as other things pertaining to *latria*, not only to the highest God, but also to the other things spoken of above, is *fitting and good in its own right*, because they thought that divine reverence should be shown to every nature that is higher in the sense of being closer to God.

But it is unreasonable to say this. For even if we ought to revere all higher beings, we should not show the *same* reverence to all of them; instead, something special is owed to the highest God, who excels above all things in a singular way. And this is the worship of *latria*.

Nor can it be said, as some have thought, that “these visible sacrifices are fitting for other gods, whereas better sacrifices, viz., the service of a pure mind, are fitting for the highest God as a better being” (*De Civitate Dei* 10, chap. 19). For as Augustine replies in the same place, “Exterior sacrifices are signs of interior sacrifices in the same way that spoken words are signs of realities. Just as when we pray and give praise, we direct meaningful words to Him to whom we offer the very things that we signify in our hearts, so, too, when we offer a sacrifice, we know that the visible sacrifice is to be offered to no one other than to Him whose invisible sacrifice we ourselves ought to be in our hearts.”

(b) By contrast, others have thought that the exterior worship of *latria* should be offered to idols

not as something good or fitting in its own right, but instead *as consonant with popular custom*. Thus, in *De Civitate Dei* 6 Augustine cites Seneca as saying, “We will adore [the idols] even as we keep in mind that worship of this sort has more to do with custom than with reality.” And in *De Vera Religione* Augustine replies, “Religion is not to be sought from the philosophers, who accept the same things as sacred as the people do, and who in their schools sound off with diverse and contrary opinions about the nature of the gods and about the highest good.”

Certain heretics also followed this error, asserting that it is not pernicious for someone who is apprehended during a time of persecution to worship idols exteriorly while nonetheless preserving the Faith in his mind. But this is manifestly false. For since exterior worship is a sign of interior worship, it follows that just as it is a pernicious lie if someone asserts with his words the contrary of what he holds by the true Faith in his heart, so, too, it is a pernicious falsehood if someone offers to a thing exterior worship that runs contrary to what he discerns in his mind. Hence, in *De Civitate Dei* 6 Augustine says in opposition to Seneca, “His worship of idols was all the more damnable because what he did deceitfully was acted out in such a way that he was thought to be acting in all sincerity along with the people.”

Reply to objection 1: In neither the tabernacle nor the temple of the Old Law, nor at present in the Church, are images set up in order for worship to be offered to them; rather, they are set up for their signification, in order that through these sorts of images faith in the excellence of the angels and saints might be imprinted on and confirmed in the minds of men. However, it is otherwise with the image of Christ, to whom, by reason of his divinity, *latría* is owed. This will be explained in the Third Part (*ST* 3, q. 25, a. 3).

Reply to objection 2 and objection 3: The replies to the second and third objections are clear from what has been said.

Article 3

Is idolatry the most serious of sins?

It seems that idolatry is not the most serious of sins (*idololatria non sit gravissimum peccatorum*):

Objection 1: As *Ethics* 8 says, “The worst is opposed to the best.” But interior worship, which consists in faith, hope, and charity, is better than exterior worship. Therefore, unbelief, despair, and hatred of God, which are opposed to interior worship, are more serious sins than idolatry, which is opposed to exterior worship.

Objection 2: A sin is more serious to the extent that it is more contrary to God. But someone seems to act more directly against God by blaspheming or by attacking the Faith than by offering the worship of God to another. Therefore, blasphemy or attacking the Faith is a more serious sin than idolatry.

Objection 3: Lesser evils seem to be punished by greater evils. But as Romans 1:23ff. says, a sin of idolatry is punished by a sin against nature. Therefore, the sin against nature is more serious than the sin of idolatry.

Objection 4: In *Contra Faustum* 10 Augustine says, “Nor do we say that you”—viz., the Manicheans—“are pagans or a sect of pagans; instead, we say that you have a certain similarity to them, because you worship many gods. Indeed, we say that you are far worse than they are, because they worship things which exist but which should not be worshiped as gods, whereas you worship things that do not exist at all.” Therefore, the vice of heretical perversity is more serious than idolatry.

Objection 5: Jerome’s Gloss on Galatians 4:9 (“How is it that you turn again to the weak and needy elements?”) says, “The observance of the Law, which they were at that time given over to, was a sin almost equal to serving idols (*paene par servituti idolorum*), which they had been devoted to before

their conversion.” Therefore, the sin of idolatry is not the most serious sin.

But contrary to this: A Gloss on Leviticus 15 (the verse that talks about the uncleanness of a woman undergoing menstruation) says, “Every sin is an uncleanness of soul, but especially idolatry.”

I respond: There are two ways in which the seriousness of a sin can be thought of:

(a) *on the part of the sin itself.* And on this score the sin of idolatry is the most serious. For just as in an earthly republic it seems especially serious to show the honor that belongs to kings to someone other than the true king, since, taken in its own right, this disturbs the entire order of the republic, so among sins which are committed against God, even though they are [all] very great sins, the most serious seems to be that someone should offer divine honor to a creature. For, taken just in its own right, it sets up another God in the world, thus diminishing God’s preeminence.

(b) *on the part of the sinner,* in the sense in which it is said that the sin of someone who sins knowingly is a more serious sin than the sin of someone who sins in ignorance. And on this score nothing prevents it from being the case that heretics who knowingly corrupt the Faith that they have received sin in a more serious way than idolaters who sin in ignorance. Similarly, certain other sins can be greater than idolatry because of a greater contempt on the part of the sinner.

Reply to objection 1: Idolatry presupposes an interior unbelief and adds an exterior undue worship. However, as has previously been explained (a.2), if the idolatry is exterior only, without an interior unbelief, then it is the sin of deceitfulness (*culpa falsitatis*) that is added.

Reply to objection 2: Idolatry includes a great blasphemy, insofar as what is taken away from God is the singularity of His dominion. In addition, idolatry, by its workings, attacks the Faith.

Reply to objection 3: Since it is part of the nature of punishment to be contrary to the will, a sin by which another sin is punished must be *more manifest*, in order that by it a man is rendered more detestable to himself and others, but it need not be *more serious*. Accordingly, a sin against nature is a lesser sin than a sin of idolatry, but because it is more manifest, it is posited as an appropriate punishment for the sin of idolatry—so that, more specifically, just as a man perverts the order of divine honor through idolatry, so through a sin contrary to nature he suffers the shameful perversion of his own nature.

Reply to objection 4: The heresy of the Manicheans, even with respect to the genus of the sin, is more serious than the sin of other idolaters, because it detracts more from God’s honor by positing two contrary gods and making up many empty fables about God. It is different with other heretics, who confess the one God and worship Him alone.

Reply to objection 5: As regards the genus of the sin, the observance of the Law during the time of grace is not altogether equal to idolatry. However, it is *almost* equal to idolatry, because both of them are species of baleful superstition.

Article 4

Did idolatry have a cause on the part of man?

It seems that idolatry did not have a cause on the part of man:

Objection 1: In a man there is nothing except either *nature* or *virtue* or *sin*. But the cause of idolatry could not have come from the *nature* of man, since natural reason instead dictates that there is one God and that divine worship is to be offered neither to dead things nor to inanimate things. Similarly, idolatry likewise does not have a cause in man because of his *virtue*, since, as Matthew 7:18 says, “A good tree cannot bear bad fruit. Likewise, idolatry does not come from *sin*, since, as Wisdom 14:27 says, “The worship of unspeakable idols is the cause of evil, both its beginning and its end.” Therefore, idolatry does not have a cause on the part of man.

Objection 2: Things that are caused on the part of man are found among men at every time.

However, idolatry has not always existed, but we read instead that it came to be in the second age, either from Nimrod, who, it is said, forced men to adore fire, or from Ninus, who brought it about that the image of his father, Bel, was adored. On the other hand, according to Isidore, among the Greeks Prometheus was the first to make statues of men from clay. By contrast, the Jews claim that Ismael was the first to make statues of clay. Likewise, idolatry disappeared for the most part in the sixth age. Therefore, idolatry did not have a cause on the part of man.

Objection 3: In *De Civitate Dei* 21 Augustine says, “It was not possible to learn for the first time except from their”—that is, the demons’—“own teaching, what each of them desired and what he disliked, and by what name to call or compel him, and this is where the magical arts and their practitioners came from.” But the same line of reasoning seems to hold for idolatry. Therefore, there is no cause of idolatry on the part of men.

But contrary to this: Wisdom 14:14 says, “This vanity of men”—that is, the idols—“came into the world.”

I respond: There are two causes of idolatry:

(a) The first is a *disposing cause*. This cause was on the part of men, and in three ways.

First, from *disordered affection* (*ex inordinatione affectus*), viz., insofar as men, excessively loving or excessively venerating some man, offered him divine honor. And this is a cause assigned by Wisdom 14:15 (“A father afflicted with bitter grief made for himself an image of the son who had been suddenly snatched away from him; and he now began to worship as a god the son who had recently died as a man.”) And the same place (14:21) adds, “Men, serving either their own affections or their kings, imposed the incommunicable name”—that is, the divine name—“on wood and stones.”

Second, *because men take delight in representation*, as the Philosopher says in his *Poetics*. And so uneducated men, seeing for the first time, through the diligence of artists, the expressively fashioned images of men, offered them divine worship. Hence, Wisdom 13:11,13-17 says, “If an artist, a carpenter, has cut the right sort of wood in the forest ... and if through the knowledge of his art he shapes and fashions it into the image of a man, he then makes a prayer to it (*votum faciens*), asking it about his own substance and about his children and about his marriage.”

Third, *because of ignorance of the true God*. When men fail to consider His excellence, they offer divine worship to certain creatures because of their beauty or power. Hence, Wisdom 13:1-2 says, “Nor, attending to the works, did they recognize who the Maker was. Instead, they thought that fire or air or wind or the circle of the stars or the great waters or the sun or the moon are the gods that rule the world.”

(b) The second cause of idolatry was a *consummating cause*, on the part of the demons, who, by giving replies and by doing things that seemed miraculous to men, showed themselves in the idols to wayward men in order to be worshiped. Hence, Psalm 95:5 says, “All the gods of the nations are demons.”

Reply to objection 1: As has been explained, the disposing cause of idolatry on the part of man was a defect of *nature*, either through ignorance in the intellect or through disorder in the affections.

And this also pertains to *sin*. Idolatry is said to be “a cause of every sin, its beginning and its end,” because there is no genus of sin that idolatry does not at some time or other produce, either (a) by expressly inducing it in the manner of a cause, or (b) by presenting an occasion for it in the manner of a beginning, or (c) in the manner of an end, insofar as certain sins are taken up into the worship of idols, e.g., the killing of men, the mutilation of bodily parts, and other things of this sort. And yet there are some sins which precede idolatry and which dispose men toward it.

Reply to objection 2: There was no idolatry in the first age because of the recent memory of the creation of the world, in light of which the cognition of the one God was still lively in the minds of men. On the other hand, in the sixth age idolatry was ruled out by the doctrine and power of Christ, who had triumphed over the Devil.

Reply to objection 3: This argument goes through for the *consummating cause* of idolatry.