

QUESTION 96

Superstition: Observances

Next we have to consider superstitions involving observances. And on this topic there are four questions: The first question concerns observances which are aimed at acquiring knowledge and which are handed down in the *ars notoria*. The second question concerns observances that are ordered toward producing alterations in certain bodies. The third question concerns observances which are ordered toward making conjectures about good and bad fortunes. The fourth question concerns the hanging of sacred words from one's neck.

Article 1

Is it illicit to make use of the observances of the *ars notoria*?

It seems that it is not illicit to make use of the observances of the *ars notoria* (*videtur quod uti observantiis artis notoriae non sit illicitum*):

Objection 1: There are two ways in which something is illicit: (a) *because of the genus of the act*, as with homicide or theft; and (b) *because it is ordered toward a bad end*, as when someone gives alms for the sake of vainglory. But the things that are observed in the *ars notoria* do not seem to be illicit because of their genus, since they are certain kinds of fasts and prayers to God. Again, they are ordered toward a good end, viz., acquiring knowledge. Therefore, making use of observances of this sort is not illicit.

Objection 2: In Daniel 1:17 we read that to the abstaining children “God gave knowledge and understanding in every sort of book and wisdom.” But the observances of the *ars notoria* are in accord with certain fasts and types of abstinence. Therefore, it seems that the *ars notoria* achieves its effect in a godlike way. Therefore, it is not illicit to make use of it.

Objection 3: As has been explained (q. 95, a. 1), the reason why it is disordered to ask the demons about future events seems to be that they do not know those events, but that this is instead proper to God. But as Augustine points out, the demons do know the truths of the sciences, since the sciences have to do with those things which exist always and by necessity and which are subject to human cognition and, much more, to the cognition of the demons, who are more perspicacious. Therefore, it does not seem to be a sin to make use of the *ars notoria*, even if it achieves its effect through the demons.

But contrary to this: Deuteronomy 18:10-11 says, “Let there not be found among you those who seek truth from the dead”—an inquiry that depends on the assistance of the demons. But through the observances of the *ars notoria* cognition of truth is sought by means of certain pacts of signification (*per quaedam pacta significationum*) entered into with the demons. Therefore, it is not licit to make use of the *ars notoria*.

I respond: The *ars notoria* is both *illicit* and *ineffective*.

It is *illicit* because it makes use of certain means for attaining knowledge which do not in their own right (*secundum se*) have the power to cause knowledge, e.g., inspecting certain shapes, uttering strange words, and other such things. And so the *ars notoria* makes use of these things not as *causes*, but as *signs*—but not as divinely instituted signs in the way that the sacramental signs are. Hence, it follows that they are empty signs and, consequently, signs “that pertain to the pacts of signification that are agreed to and established with the demons.” And so, as Augustine continues in *De Doctrina Christiana* 2, that *ars notoria* “should be repudiated and avoided by the Christian, along with all the other arts of useless and harmful superstition.”

The *ars notoria* is likewise *ineffective* for acquiring knowledge. For since what is intended through an art of this sort is not the acquisition of knowledge in a manner that is connatural to man, viz., by discovery and learning, it follows that the effect is expected either from *God* or from *demons*.

Now it is certain that some individuals have had wisdom and knowledge from God, as we read of Solomon in 3 Kings 3:11-12 and 2 Paralipomenon 1:11-12. Likewise, in Luke 21:15 our Lord says to His disciples, “I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to resist and contradict.” But this gift is not given to everyone, nor is it accompanied by certain observances; instead, it is given in accord with the judgment of the Holy Spirit—this according to 1 Corinthians 12:8 and 11 (“To one indeed, by the Spirit, is given the word of wisdom; and to another, the word of knowledge, according to the same Spirit,” and later, “All these things are done by one and the same Spirit, giving a portion to each one as He will”).

However, as was established in the First Part of this work (*ST* 1, q. 109, a. 3), it does not belong to the demons to illuminate the intellect. But the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom is effected by the illumination of the intellect. And so no one has ever acquired knowledge through the demons. Hence, in *De Civitate Dei* 10 Augustine says, “Porphyry admits that through the theurgic rites (*theurgicis teletis*)”—i.e., in the operations of the demons— “no purification occurs in the intellectual soul that makes it fit to see its God and to perceive truths” of the sort that the theorems of scientific knowledge are. In speaking in words to men, the demons could, to be sure, express certain scientific teachings, but this is not what is being sought through the *ars notoria*.

Reply to objection 1: It is good to acquire scientific knowledge. However, it is not good to acquire it in an inappropriate way; and it is this end which is intended by the *ars notoria*.

Reply to objection 2: The children in question abstained not in accord with the vain observances of the *ars notoria*, but in accord with God’s law, not wanting to be defiled by gentile food. And so they received knowledge from God as a reward for their obedience—this according to Psalm 118:100 (“I understand more than old men, because I have sought out Your precepts”).

Reply to objection 3: To seek cognition of future events from the demons is a sin not only because they themselves do not know the [relevant] future events, but also because of the association that one enters into with them—and this applies even in the proposed case.

Article 2

Are the observances ordered toward altering bodies, for health or something else of this sort, licit?

It seems that the observances ordered toward altering bodies, for health or something else of this sort, are licit (*observationes ordinatae ad corporum immutationem, puta ad sanitatem vel ad aliquid huiusmodi, sint licitae*):

Objection 1: It is licit to make use of the natural powers of bodies in order to induce their proper effects. But natural things have certain hidden powers (*quasdam virtutes occultas*), the explanation for which cannot be designated by men, e.g., that a magnet (*adamas*) should attract iron, and many others that Augustine enumerates in *De Civitate Dei* 21. Therefore, it seems that it is not illicit to make use of things of this sort in order to alter bodies.

Objection 2: Just as natural bodies are subordinated to the celestial bodies, so, too, are artificial bodies. But depending on their species, natural bodies acquire certain hidden powers from impressions made by the celestial bodies. Therefore, artificial bodies, e.g., images, likewise acquire some hidden power from celestial bodies in order to bring about certain effects. Therefore, to make use of them and of other similar things is not illicit.

Objection 3: As Augustine points out in *De Trinitate* 3, demons are able to alter bodies in many ways. But their power is from God. Therefore, it is licit to use the demons’ power in order to make certain alterations of the sort in question.

But contrary to this: In *De Doctrina Christiana* 2 Augustine says that what pertain to superstition “are the endeavors of the magical arts (*molimina magicarum artium*), amulets (*ligaturae*), and remedies that the medical science of the physicians also condemns—whether in the form of incantations, or of certain imprints that they call *characters*, or of certain pendants or engravings.”

I respond: In the case of things that are done in order to induce certain corporeal effects, one must consider whether they seem capable of causing these effects naturally. For if so, then there is nothing illicit, since it is permissible to use natural causes for their proper effects.

However, if they do not seem capable of causing the effects in question, then the result is that they are being used for causing those effects not as *causes* but only as *signs*. And so they involve pacts of signification that have been entered into with the demons. Hence, in *De Civitate Dei* 21 Augustine says, “The demons are attracted by creatures which God has created, and not they themselves, and which, given their diversity, are such that different demons delight in different ones, not in the way that animals delight in food, but in the way that spirits delight in signs that suit the taste of each—various kinds of stones, herbs, trees, animals, songs, and rites.”

Reply to objection 1: If natural things are used in a simple way to produce effects for which they are thought to have a natural power, then this is not superstitious or illicit. By contrast, if they have joined to them certain characters or certain names or any of the other various observances which, it is clear, do not have their efficacy naturally, then this will be superstitious and illicit.

Reply to objection 2: The natural powers of natural bodies follow from their substantial forms, which they acquire from impressions made by the celestial bodies, and so from those same impressions they acquire certain active powers. But the forms of artificial bodies proceed from the conception of a craftsman, and since, as *Physics* 1 points out, artificial bodies are nothing other than composition, order, and shape, they cannot have a natural power to act. And so it follows that, insofar as they are artificial, they do not have any power from the impressions made by the celestial bodies; rather, they have power only because of their natural matter. Therefore, as Augustine says in *De Civitate Dei* 10, what seemed true to Porphyry is false, viz., that “by means of herbs, stones, animals, certain fixed sounds and words, and shapes, as well as by means of certain configurations observed as the heavens change because of the movements of the stars, men are able to fashion on earth powers proper to the stars for bringing about various effects,” as if the effects of the magical arts proceeded from the power of the celestial bodies. But as Augustine adds in the same place, “All of this has to do with the demons, who play games with the souls that are subject to them.”

Hence, even the images that they call ‘astronomical’ have their effect because of the operation of the demons. An indication of this is that they have inscribed in them certain characters that do nothing naturally, since a shape is not a principle of a natural action. Still, these astronomical images are a far cry from necromantic images, because in the case of necromantic images certain explicit invocations and tricks are used, and so they involve *explicit* pacts entered into with demons, whereas in the case of the other images there are certain *implicit* pacts through certain signs consisting of the shapes and characters.

Reply to objection 3: It belongs to the dominion of God’s majesty, to which the demons are subject, that He makes use of the demons for whatever He wills. By contrast, a man is not entrusted with power over the demons, so that he might licitly make use of them for whatever he wills; instead, warfare against the demons is imposed on him. Hence, there is no way in which a man is permitted to make use of the assistance of the demons through either an implicit or explicit pact with them.

Article 3

Are observances ordered toward the precognition of good or bad fortune licit?

It seems that observances ordered toward the precognition of good or bad fortune are not illicit:

Objection 1: Among the other misfortunes of men are illnesses. But illnesses in men are preceded by certain signs that are observed by physicians. Therefore, it does not seem illicit to pay attention to (*observare*) signs of this sort.

Objection 2: It is unreasonable to deny what everyone commonly experiences. But everyone experiences that certain times or places, or words overheard, or gatherings of men or animals, or unseemly or distorted acts, are foreshadowings of future goods or evils. Therefore, it is not illicit to pay attention to these things.

Objection 3: Human acts and events are arranged by divine providence in a certain order, and it seems to belong to this order that preceding things are signs of subsequent things. Hence, as is clear from the Apostle in 1 Corinthians 10: 6 and 11, the things that happened to our ancient fathers are signs of those things which are brought to completion in us. Now it is not illicit to pay attention to the order that proceeds from divine providence. Therefore, it does not seem to be illicit to pay attention to foreshadowings of the sort in question.

But contrary to this: In *De Doctrina Christiana* 2 Augustine says, “A thousand vain observances are involved in pacts entered into with the demons, e.g., the sudden movement of a bodily limb; a stone or a dog or a boy coming between friends who are walking together; kicking the doorpost when someone passes in front of your house; going back to bed if you have sneezed while putting on your shoes; going back into your house if you stumble while you are going out the door; when rats have gnawed a hole in your clothes, superstitiously fearing a future evil more than regretting the present damage.”

I respond: Men think of all the observances of the sort in question not as *causes* but as certain *signs* of future good and bad outcomes. However, these signs are not observed as signs given to us by *God*, since they have been introduced not by God’s authority, but instead by human vanity, with the cooperating malice of the demons, who are trying to entangle the minds of men with vanities of the sort in question. And so it is clear that all observances of this sort are superstitious and illicit.

And these observances seem to be remnants of idolatry, insofar as they pay attention to auguries and to certain lucky and unlucky days (which in some way involves the divination that makes use of the celestial bodies (*astra*), in accord with which the days are diversified)—except that observances of this sort lack reason and art. Hence, they are vain and superstitious.

Reply to objection 1: The causes of illnesses come first in us, and they give rise to signs, which physicians licitly take into account, of future sickness. Hence, it will not be illicit for someone to pay attention to a forerunner of future outcomes on the basis of its cause, just as if a servant, seeing his master’s anger, fears being flogged. A possibly similar case would be if someone feared harm to a child because of a bewitching glance (*ex oculo fascinante*); this was discussed in the First Part (*ST* 1, q. 117, a. 3). However, the observances under discussion here are not like this.

Reply to objection 2: The fact that at the beginning men have experienced something true in the observances under discussion is something that happens by accident. But later on, when men begin to entangle their minds with observances of this sort, it is through the deceptions of the demons that many things happen in accord with these observances, “in order that men, entangled in these observances, might become more curious and involve themselves more and more in the many traps of a pernicious error,” as Augustine puts it in *De Doctrina Christiana* 2.

Reply to objection 3: As Augustine points out in *Contra Faustum*, among the people of the Jews, from whom the Christ was to be born, many prophetic things were not only said but also done. And so it is licit, for our instruction, to take those deeds as divinely given signs. However, not all the things that are

done through divine providence are ordered in such a way as to be *signs of future things*. Hence, the argument does not go through.

Article 4

Is it illicit to hang divine words from one's neck?

It seems that it is not illicit to hang divine words from one's neck:

Objection 1: It is not the case that divine words have less efficacy when they are written than when they are spoken. But it is permissible to speak divine words for certain effects, e.g., healing the sick—words such as the Our Father, the Hail Mary, or any in which way the name of the Lord is called upon—this according to Mark 16:17-18 (“In my name they will cast out devils, they will speak in new tongues, they will take up serpents”). Therefore, it seems licit to hang sacred writings from one's neck as a remedy against illness or any other sort of harm.

Objection 2: Sacred words work no less on the bodies of men than on the bodies of serpents and other animals. But certain incantations have efficacy for keeping serpents in check or for healing certain other animals; hence, Psalm 57:5-6 says, “... like the deaf asp which stops her ears and which will not hear the voice of the charmers or the wizard who charms wisely.” Therefore, it is permissible to hang sacred words from one's neck as a remedy for men.

Objection 3: The word of God is no less holy than the relics of the saints; hence, Augustine says, “The word of God is of no less account than the Body of Christ.” But it is permissible to hang relics of the saints from one's neck, or to carry them around in some other way, for one's protection. Therefore, by parity of reasoning, it is permissible for a man to appropriate the words of Sacred Scripture, spoken or written, for his own protection.

But contrary to this: In *Super Matthaicum* Chrysostom says, “Some wear around their necks a written part of the Gospel. But is the Gospel not read every day in church and heard by all? Therefore, if having the Gospels placed in his ears does him no good, how can they save him by being hung around his neck? After all, wherein lies the power of the Gospel? In the shapes of its letters or in the understanding of its meaning? If in the shapes, then you do well to hang the words around your neck; if in the understanding, then the words will do more good being placed in your heart than being hung around your neck.”

I respond: It seems that there are two things to guard against in all incantations or hanging scripts.

The first has to do with what it is that is spoken or written. For if it is something that involves the invocation of demons, then it is clearly superstitious and illicit. Similarly, it seems that one should be wary of an incantation or hanging script if it contains strange names, lest there be something illicit hidden in them. Hence, in *Super Matthaicum* Chrysostom says, “Following the example of the Pharisees, who enlarged their fringes, there are many now who invent and write Hebrew names for the angels and fasten them to themselves. Such things seem fearsome to those who do not understand them.” Also to be avoided are incantations or hanging scripts that contain anything false. For in that case the effect of the incantation or hanging script could not be expected from God, who is not a witness to falsehood.

Next, in the second place, one should guard against an invocation or hanging script involving anything vain along with the sacred words—for instance, any inscribed characters other than the sign of the cross, or if hope is placed in a certain manner of writing or of fastening or in any other vanity of this sort that has nothing to do with reverence for God.

Otherwise, [this practice] is licit. Hence, *Decretals* 26, q. 5, chap. *Non liceat Christianis*, says, “In blending together medicinal herbs, it is not licit to make use of observances or incantations other than the divine symbol or the Lord's Prayer, so that only God, the Creator of all things, will be honored.”

Reply to objection 1: It will likewise be licit to speak divine words or to call upon God's name, as long as one pays regard only to reverence for God, out of which the effect is hoped for. However, if regard is paid to anything else that is vainly observed, then it will be illicit.

Reply to objection 2: In the case of incantations having to do with serpents or any other animals, it will likewise not be illicit if regard is paid only to the sacred words and to God's power. But most of the time these incantations involve illicit observances and achieve their effect through the demons—especially in the case of serpents, since the serpent was the first demonic instrument for deceiving man. Hence, a Gloss on the passage in question says, "Notice that Scripture does not praise everything from which comparisons are drawn in Scripture; this is clear from the case of the unjust judge who scarcely listened to the widow's plea."

Reply to objection 3: The same line of reasoning holds for carrying around relics. For if they are carried out of trust in God and in the saints whose relics they are, then it will not be illicit. But if one were paying attention to something else that was vain, e.g., that the container should be triangular or something else of this sort that has nothing to do with reverence for God and the saints, then it would be superstitious and illicit.

Reply to the argument for the contrary: Chrysostom is talking about cases where more regard is being paid to the written shapes than to an understanding of the words.