

**Catechism of the Catholic Church** on Superstition - Superstition is the deviation of religious feeling and of the practices this feeling imposes. It can even affect the worship we offer the true God, e.g., when one attributes an importance in some way magical to certain practices otherwise lawful or necessary. To attribute the efficacy of prayers or of sacramental signs to their mere external performance, apart from the interior dispositions that they demand, is to fall into superstition (2111).

### **The Perils of Superstition** by Trent Horn from [Catholic Answers](#) 9/1/2013

People of religious faith are often stereotyped as uncritical, gullible simpletons who will believe any idle tale. In contrast, non-religious people are the paradigm of rationality and skeptical thought who aren't fooled by silly beliefs.

But a 2007 Baylor University study showed that nonreligious people were *more* likely to believe in the existence of paranormal phenomena than religious people. While only about 8 percent of regular churchgoers exhibited "high" levels of belief in phenomena like ghosts or psychics, the figure jumped to 31 percent of those respondents who never attend church (Rodney Stark, *What Americans Really Believe*, p. 113).

I'm not saying Christians are never duped by superstition and that nonreligious people always are. There are many atheistic skeptics who, though I disagree with them about religion, I enjoy reading because they mercilessly refute hoaxers. Skeptic James Randi calls paranormal claims "flim-flam" and has debunked them for decades. He has continually offered to pay \$1 million to anyone who can prove paranormal abilities within the boundaries of a controlled scientific experiment. The money has gone unclaimed.

Likewise, I always cringe when a fellow Catholic forwards me an email with a story that could be disproven with a few mouse clicks. Religious people may be less likely to believe in the paranormal, but you can still find plenty of them willing to believe the truly unbelievable. St. Paul urged believers to "test everything and hold fast to that which is good" (1 Thess. 5:21). Believers can't afford to be deceived by empty philosophy (cf. Colossians 2:8), false prophets (cf. Matthew 7:15), or any of the following beliefs that can potentially lead us away from Christ.

### **Horoscopes and astrology**

[Astrology](#) is a pseudoscience that claims that the location of stars and planets can affect the personalities and futures of human beings. Most people come into contact with the claims of astrologers when they read horoscopes, which are astrological interpretations found in newspapers or on astrology websites. Horoscopes rely on interpreting the position of the zodiac, or a belt of twelve constellations, in relation to the location and date of a person's birth. Free horoscopes are quite vague and say things like "a new relationship will be forged today!" To get accurate predictions about the future one has to consult a "professional" astrologer, and wouldn't you know it, it's not free.

Although these more costly horoscopes are just as vague and as useless as free ones, they all rely on the *Forer effect*, or a bias toward believing positive descriptions about ourselves to be accurate that could apply to a wide variety of people. The name comes from psychologist Bertram Forer, who told his students he was giving each of them a unique personality profile. While the students were impressed with how accurate the profiles were, it turns out they all said the same thing. Here's an excerpt:

You have a great deal of unused capacity which you have not turned to your advantage. While you have some personality weaknesses, you are generally able to compensate for them. . . . You have found it unwise to be too frank in revealing yourself to others. At times you are extroverted, affable, sociable, while at other times you are introverted, wary, reserved.

Of course, everyone thinks they could do better, and we all have moments of introversion and extroversion, so it's no surprise people would find a resemblance to their own life. Some critics might reply that even if astrology is fake it is harmless fun and there's no reason to criticize it. However, the Church has a far different attitude toward astrology and psychic phenomena. The *Catechism* states unequivocally that:

All forms of divination are to be rejected: recourse to Satan or demons, conjuring up the dead or other practices falsely supposed to “unveil” the future. Consulting horoscopes, astrology, palm reading, interpretation of omens and lots, the phenomena of clairvoyance, and recourse to mediums all conceal a desire for power over time, history, and, in the last analysis, other human beings, as well as a wish to conciliate hidden powers. They contradict the honor, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone (CCC 2116).

Besides the belief in or practice of astrology being a serious sin (which should be reason enough to avoid it), [Catholics should not engage in astrology because it doesn't work](#). The 2009 Proceedings of the International Astronomical Association state that “astrological practice is by no means scientific” (*Astronomy and Astrology*, vol. 5, symposium S260). St. Augustine noted this in the fourth century by pointing out that twins would grow up to have very different futures and personalities (*Confessions* 7:6). Augustine went so far as to say that heresy and astrology “both come from the serpent, and desire to corrupt the Church's virginity of heart, which she holds in undefiled faith” (*Homilies on John* 8:10).

## Mediums and contacting the dead

While astrologers claim they can give us secret knowledge by consulting the stars, mediums claim they can give us secret knowledge by consulting the spirits of human beings who have died. On their television shows these psychics seem impressive as they pick a random stranger from the audience and recite things about a dead loved one that seem impossible for the psychic to know.

How do they do it? Some use paid actors or have information about their targets delivered to them via tools like earbud receivers. Others can pull the trick off even without help by using a technique called *cold reading*. First, the medium will talk about a particular subject, such as the pain of losing a parent. Then, they scan the audience to see if anyone, even subtly, is emotionally reacting to what they are talking about. They then ask their target a series of questions that reveal exactly what they are trying to discover. An exchange might go like this:

*Psychic:* I'm sensing that there was a man in your life whom you were close to who is gone. There's something around his chest or abdomen. It's causing a problem.

*Target:* Yes! My father died of stomach cancer.

*Psychic:* Okay, now I'm getting that you and him had something special related to December. There's an M. . . . He wants you to have peace about that. It's time to let that go.

*Target:* We used to always visit my Aunt Mary over Christmas, and the last time they had a huge fight, and I took her side ,and I just wish I had told him that I—

*Psychic:* Don't worry, your father loves you and wants you to let that go. He wants you to have peace.

In this example, the psychic has used vague descriptions that could apply to almost anyone. Who hasn't lost a father, brother, uncle, grandfather, or even a close male friend? What fatal diseases don't inevitably affect the chest cavity? What couldn't be connected to the holidays in December or the letter “M”?

When the psychic gets an answer wrong he simply moves on to the next clue. He counts on his targets generally remembering his successes and forgetting his failures. This error in thinking is called *confirmation bias*, or the tendency to value facts that support our favorite beliefs and discard facts that disprove those beliefs. This bias

also explains why people remember accurate horoscopes and fail to remember the many inaccurate ones that disprove astrology.

## **Not harmless fun**

Some people may say that these mediums provide entertainment, and it's nothing to worry about. Well, tell that to the relatives of missing persons who are tricked by mediums into spending thousands of dollars as a last-ditch effort to find the person they love. All that happens is that these relatives are given false hope that the person will be found (they never are, or at least they are never found based on the psychic's help). The family may also be traumatized by fake descriptions of the person's murder and a vague clue that the person's body is "in a dark place near running water."

Even regular psychics can dupe people into spending as much as hundreds of dollars *per hour* for their services, and so they are far from harmless. Finally, the possibility that psychics could be aided by demonic forces presents another grave reason to stay away from them.

One of the best ways to debunk these charlatans is by consulting faithful believers who know their tricks, especially professional magicians. My colleague and host of *Catholic Answers Live*, Patrick Coffin, is himself an able magician and knows the tricks behind making it seem like you can read someone's mind. Patrick scoffs at so-called psychics and asks, "If they have psychic abilities, then why do they always have to ask you what your name is?"

The Church does not condemn stage magic such as the kind Patrick practices, because in those cases the audience knows that the source of the illusion is the magician's ingenuity and not any supernatural force. However, the Church does condemn the act of summoning the dead in order to communicate with them, a practice called *necromancy* (cf. Deuteronomy 18:10). A vivid biblical example of necromancy is found in 1 Samuel 28, where Saul summons the ghost of the prophet Samuel with the assistance of the witch of Endor.

A contemporary form of necromancy involves the use of the Ouija board. Participants place their fingers on a pointer, and "spirits" allegedly move the pointer over letters and numbers on the board in a way that enables the spirits to transmit a message to the living. As a youth prior to his conversion, G. K. Chesterton and his brother would play with the Ouija board and receive strange and even evil messages through it. He writes in his autobiography, "I would not altogether rule out the suggestion of some that we were playing with fire; or even hellfire" (*Autobiography*, p. 88).

Some fundamentalist critics of Catholicism claim that praying to saints is a form of necromancy. The key difference between saintly intercession and necromancy is that intercession involves only asking the saints to present our petitions to God, which is an ability God has granted heavenly beings since they dwell with him in the beatific vision (Rev. 5:8-9). Necromancy, on the other hand, involves *two-way* communication that summons the dead through magic in order to extract information from them. This desire to circumvent God and exchange information with the dead makes necromancy a grave sin. Finally, as the 1973 movie *The Exorcist* terrifyingly portrayed, it's possible the spirits who are summoned by the Ouija board may not be the friendly kind.

## **Catholic superstition**

Some of you may be thinking, "I stay away from all that paranormal stuff. I only read and listen to Catholic things, so I'm safe from being duped." Of course, even God's own house is not safe from superstition and false beliefs that believers must guard against. One doesn't need to look far to find online novenas that are "guaranteed" to grant any prayer intention, or Catholic prophets who claim to know the future based on a private revelation from God.

How can Catholics protect themselves from erroneous or dangerous beliefs that appear to be Catholic? By judging these beliefs in light of the public revelation God has provided his Church. According to the *Catechism*, superstition occurs when one attributes “the efficacy of prayers or of sacramental signs to their mere external performance, apart from the interior dispositions that they demand” (CCC 2111).

A novena that will grant any petition the person desires is a spiritual vending machine that is condemned by James 4:3: “You ask but do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.” Belief that the act of saying a prayer, or leaving nine copies of it in the church vestibule, will guarantee a certain outcome defeats the entire purpose of prayer.

Similarly, the practice of burying a statue of St. Joseph upside down in hopes that God will sell your home faster (because St. Joseph is irritated to be in such a position and would like it ended immediately) dishonors God. These superstitions put us in the position of trying to manipulate God to do *our will* instead of honestly praying to God and being willing to submit to *his will*, even if that involves God not granting our petitions.

What about prophets or people who claim to have a private relation from God about matters like heaven or the future? Can they be trusted? According to the *Catechism*, God may reveal sacred truths to people in a private way, and the Church has even authenticated some of these revelations (such as the revelation of the Sacred Heart to St. Margaret Mary). However, these private revelations neither add to nor correct public revelation, and no one is obligated to believe them. Any alleged revelation is false if it contradicts the public revelation entrusted to the magisterium in either Sacred Scripture or Sacred Tradition (CCC 67). If a claim to private revelation does not contradict Church teaching, then it *may* be truthful but not necessarily so. The faithful should approach alleged prophets with a healthy dose of skepticism, putting their ultimate faith not in prophets or seers of God but in the Spirit of God himself.

### **Spoiling fun or saving faith?**

“C’mon, Trent. Why do you have to spoil things for everyone? Why can’t you just let people believe?” The answer is because I care too much about people to let them be deceived. Jesus says, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free” (John 8:32). God didn’t create us for blissful ignorance; he made us for holiness and knowledge of him. Furthermore, how can nonbelievers take us seriously if they think Catholics will believe any idle tale or superstition that sounds interesting or plausible? Being a skeptic doesn’t mean rejecting everything; it means only rejecting those things that lack good evidence.

Catholics do not follow cleverly devised myths (cf. 2 Peter 1:16) but instead believe in wonderful things we know to be true. We don’t worry about the future and consult psychics, because Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, and our futures are safe with him (cf. Hebrews 13:8). We appreciate private revelations, but we measure them against the trustworthy public revelation God has entrusted to the magisterium. We don’t need psychics, horoscopes, Ouija boards, magical statues, guaranteed novenas, or any other superstition because, as Paul said in 2 Corinthians 12:9, “God’s grace is enough.”

# New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia - Superstition

There are four species of superstitions:

- improper worship of the **true God** (*indebitus veri Dei cultus*);
- **idolatry**;
- divination;
- vain observances, which include magic and occult arts.

This division is based upon the various ways in which religion may be vitiated by excess. Worship becomes *indebitus cultus* when incongruous, meaningless, improper elements are added to the proper and approved performance; it becomes **idolatrous** when it is offered to creatures set up as divinities or endowed with divine attributes. Divination consists in the attempt to extract from creatures, by means of religious rites, a **knowledge** of future events or of things known to **God** alone. Under the head of vain observances come all those **beliefs** and practices which, at least by implication, attribute **supernatural** or preternatural powers for good or for **evil** to causes evidently incapable of producing the expected effects. The number and variety of superstitions appear from the following list of those most in vogue at different periods of history:

- **astrology**, the reading of the future and of man's destiny from the stars;
- aeromancy, divinations by means of the air and winds;
- amulets, things worn as a remedy or preservative against evils or mischief, such as diseases or **witchcraft**;
- chiromancy, or palmistry, divination by the lines of the hand;
- capnomancy, by the ascent or motion of smoke;
- catroptomancy, by mirrors;
- alomancy, by salt;
- cartomancy, by playing cards;
- anthropomancy, by inspection of human viscera;
- belomancy, by the shuffling of arrows (**Ezekiel 21:21**);
- geomancy, by points, lines or figures traced on the ground;
- hydromancy, by water;
- **idolatry**, the worship of idols;
- **Sabianism**, the worship of the sun, moon, and stars;
- Zoolatry, Anthropolatry, and **Fetishism**, the worship of animals, man, and things without sense;
- **Devil-worship**;
- the worship of abstract notions personified, e.g. Victory, Peace, Fame, Concord, which had **temples** and a **priesthood** for the performance of their cult;
- necromancy, the evocation of the dead, as old as history and perpetuated in contemporary **Spiritism**;
- oneiromancy, the interpretation of dreams;
- philtres, potions, or charms intended to excite **love**;
- omens or prognostics of future events;
- **witchcraft** and magic in all their ramifications;
- lucky and unlucky days, numbers, **persons**, things, actions;
- the **evil** eye, spells, incantations, ordeals, etc.

## Origin

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The source of superstition is, in the first place, subjective. Ignorance of natural causes leads to the **belief** that certain striking phenomena express the will or the **anger** of some invisible overruling power, and the objects in which such phenomena appear are forthwith deified, as, e.g. in Nature-worship. Conversely, many superstitious practices are due to an exaggerated notion or a **false** interpretation of natural events, so that effects are sought

which are beyond the efficiency of physical causes. Curiosity also with regard to things that are hidden or are still in the future plays a considerable part, e.g. in the various kinds of divination. But the chief source of superstition is pointed out in Scripture: "All men are vain, in whom there is not the [knowledge](#) of [God](#): and who by these good things that are seen, could not understand him that is, neither by attending to the works have acknowledged who was the workman: but have imagined either the fire, or the wind, or the swift air, or the circle of the stars, or the great water, or the sun and moon, to be the gods that rule the world" ([Wisdom 13:1-2](#)). It is to this [ignorance](#) of the [true God](#), coupled with an inordinate veneration for human excellence and the [love](#) of artistic representations appealing to the senses, that [St. Thomas](#) ascribes the origin of [idolatry](#). While these are dispositive causes, the consummative cause, he adds, was the influence of [demons](#) who offered themselves as objects of worship to [erring](#) men, giving answers through idols and doing things which to men seemed marvellous ([II-II:94:4](#)).

These causes explain the origin and spread of superstition in the [pagan](#) world. They were to a large extent eliminated by the preaching of [Christianity](#); but so deep-rooted was the tendency to which they gave rise that many of the ancient practices survived, especially among peoples just emerging from barbarism. It was only by degrees, through the legislation of the [Church](#) and the advance of scientific [knowledge](#), that the earlier forms of superstition were eradicated. But the tendency itself has not wholly disappeared. Side by side with the [Rationalistic](#) philosophy and the rigorous scientific methods which are characteristic of modern thought, there are still to be found various sorts of superstition. So far as this includes the worship of things other than [God](#), it is not only an essential part, but the foundation also of the Positivistic system (Comte), which sets up humanity as the object of religious worship (see [POSITIVISM](#)). Nor can [Pantheism](#), which identifies [God](#) and the world, lead consistently to any but superstitious practices, however it may in theory disclaim such a purpose. The [human mind](#), by a natural impulse, tends to worship something, and if it is convinced that [Agnosticism](#) is [true](#) and that [God](#) is unknowable, it will, sooner or later, devise other objects of worship. It is also significant that just when many scientists supposed that a [belief](#) in a future life had been finally [proved](#) an illusion, [Spiritism](#), with its doctrines and practices, should have gained such a strong hold not only on the [ignorant](#), but also, and in a much more serious sense, on leading representatives of [science](#) itself. This may indeed be interpreted as a reaction against [Materialism](#); but it is none the less, at bottom, an evidence of man's restless desire to penetrate, by any and every means, the mystery that lies beyond death. While it is easy to condemn [Spiritism](#) as superstitious and vain, the condemnation does not do away with the fact that [Spiritism](#) has become widespread in this age of enlightenment. Now as in the past the rejection of Divine [truth](#) in the name of reason often opens the way to [beliefs](#) and practices which are at once unworthy of reason and dangerous to morality.

### Sinfulness of superstition in general

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Superstition of any description is a transgression of the First Commandment: "I am the [Lord thy God](#),-- thou shalt not have strange gods before me. Thou shalt not make to thyself a graven thing, nor the likeness of anything that is in [heaven](#) above, or in the earth beneath . . . thou shalt not adore them nor serve them" ([Exodus 20:2-5](#)). It is also against the positive law of the [Church](#), which visits the worst kinds of superstitions with severe punishments, and against the [natural law](#) inasmuch as it runs counter to the dictates of reason in the matter of man's relations to [God](#). Such objective sinfulness is inherent in all superstitious practices from [idolatry](#) down to the vainest of vain observances, of course in very different degrees of gravity. With regard to the subjective guilt attaching to them it must be borne in mind that no [sin](#) is mortal unless committed with full [knowledge](#) of its grievous wickedness and with full deliberation and consent. Of these essential factors the first is often wanting entirely, and the second is only imperfectly present. The numerous cases in which the event seemed to justify the superstitious practice, and the universality of such incongruous [beliefs](#) and performances, though they may not always induce inculpable [ignorance](#), may possibly obscure the [knowledge](#) and weaken the will to a point incompatible with mortal [sin](#). As a matter of fact, many superstitions of our own day have been acts of genuine [piety](#) at other times, and may be so still in the hearts of simple folk.

The principal species of superstition — [idolatry](#), divination, occult arts — have received adequate treatment in other articles. Something remains to be said on:

- *cultus indebitus*, or the [pious](#) vagaries which people intermingle with [Catholic](#) religion;
- vain observances in daily life.

### *Improper worship*

The first type of improper worship, *cultus indebitus*, consists in introducing *false* or superfluous elements into the practice of [true](#) religion. Such [false](#) elements, be their origin culpable deceit or inculpable credulity, vitiate (to debase or corrupt) the virtue of religion by substituting [error](#) for [truth](#) in the service of [God](#).

A [layman](#) performing [priestly](#) functions, a pardoner selling spurious [indulgences](#), a fanatic devotee inventing [false miracles](#) and answers to [prayers](#) in order to introduce or spread his own favorite devotion, wholesale believers in [supernatural](#) apparitions, visions, revelations, which serve no good purpose — all these are guilty of superstition, at least material. As regards formal guilt, this is often reduced to the vanishing point by the prevailing credulity and common practice of the period. The worship of imaginary [saints](#) or [relics](#), devotion based upon [false](#) revelations, apparitions, supposed [miracles](#), or [false](#) notions generally, is usually excusable in the worshipper on the ground of [ignorance](#) and [good faith](#); but there is no excuse for those who use similar means to exploit popular credulity for their own profit. The originators of such falsehoods are liars, deceivers, and not rarely thieves; but a milder judgment should be pronounced on those who, after discovering the imposture, tolerate the improper cultus. For it is no easy matter, even for the highest authorities, to eradicate [beliefs](#) or to check the growth of devotions which have taken a strong hold on the popular mind: the long struggle of the [Inquisition](#) with the Spiritual [Franciscans](#), who, on the assumption that the rule of St. Francis was a direct revelation from [heaven](#), attributed to the practice of poverty an exaggerated importance, and cheerfully went to the stake rather than relinquish their ways, is but one example among scores that could be cited. There is always the fear of uprooting the wheat with the tares, and the hope of seeing the improper worship die a natural death; for devotions also have their changing seasons. The [pope](#) and the [bishops](#) are the proper authorities to act in these matters, for to them belongs the regulation of worship, both public and private, and it is the [duty](#) of every [Catholic](#) to abide by their decision.

The same reflections apply to another kind of improper worship, the *cultus superfluus* which consists in expecting from certain pre-arranged circumstances a greater efficacy of the religious performance; e.g. to expect a greater benefit from Masses said before sunrise with a certain number of candles disposed in a certain order, by a [priest](#) bearing a special saint's name or being of the supposed stature of Christ. Triduums, novenas, First Friday Communions, nine consecutive First Friday Communions, Saturday [fasting](#), though they seem to attach special importance to number and dates, are approved by the [Church](#), because these dates and numbers are convenient for shaping and regulating certain excellent devotions. The [Catholic](#) devotions which are connected with holy places, holy shrines, holy wells, famous [relics](#), etc. are commonly treated as superstitious by non-Catholics who either reject all worship of [saints](#) and [relics](#) or assume [pious frauds](#) on the part of the [priests](#) who benefit by the worship. It must be admitted that these hallowed spots and things have occasioned many legends; that popular credulity was in some cases the principal cause of their celebrity; that here and there instances of [fraud](#) can be adduced; yet, for all that, the principles which guide the worshipper, and his good intentions, are not impaired by an undercurrent of [errors](#) as to facts. If superstition there be, it is only material. Moreover, the [Church](#) is always careful to remove any [fraud](#) or [error](#) inconsistent with [true](#) devotion, although she is tolerant of "pious [beliefs](#)" which have helped to further [Christian piety](#). Thus, alleged [saints](#) and [relics](#) are suppressed as soon as discovered, but [belief](#) in the [private revelations](#) to which the feast of [Corpus Christi](#), the [Rosary](#), the Sacred Heart and many other devotions owe their origin is neither commanded nor prohibited; here each man is his own judge.

## *Vain observances in daily life*

Turning now to vain observances in daily life, properly so called, we first meet with the superstitions observed in the administration of justice during many centuries of the Middle Ages, and known as ordeals or "judgments of God". Among the early Germans a man accused of a crime had to prove his innocence, no proof of his guilt being incumbent on his accusers. The oath of a free man, strengthened by the oaths of friends, sufficed to establish his innocence, but when the oath was refused or the required number of "compurgators" failed, the defendant, if he was a free man, had to fight his accuser in single combat; bondmen and women had either to find a champion to fight for them or to undergo some other form of ordeal as fixed by law, arranged by the judge, or chosen by one of the parties. Besides the judicial combat the early German laws recognized as legitimate means to discriminate between guilt and innocence the casting or drawing of lots, trial by fire in several forms — holding one's hand in fire for a determined length of time; passing between two piles of burning wood with no covering for the body except a shirt impregnated with wax; carrying with the naked hand a red-hot iron weighing from one to three pounds a distance of from nine to twelve paces; walking barefoot over nine red-hot ploughshares disposed in a line nine steps long. At the root of these and many analogous practices (see ORDEALS) lay the firm belief that God would work a miracle rather than allow the innocent to perish or the wicked to prevail. These "judgments of God" gave rise to new superstitions. Whether guilty or not, persons subjected to the trials would often put more confidence in charms, magic formulas, and ointments than in the intervention of Providence. The ordeals gradually gave way before the rationalistic temper of modern times; trials by torture, which survived the ordeals, seem to have been inspired by the same idea, that God will protect the innocent and give them superhuman endurance.

The power of the evil eye (fascinatio) has been believed in for a long time, and is still dreaded in many countries. The number thirteen continues to strike terror into the breasts of men who profess not to fear God. The apparent success which so often attends a superstition can mostly be accounted for by natural causes, although it would be rash to deny all supernatural intervention (e.g. in the phenomena of Spiritism). When the object is to ascertain, or to effect in a general way, one of two possible events, the law of probabilities gives an equal chance to success and failure, and success does more to support than failure would do to destroy superstition, for, on its side, there are arrayed the religious instinct, sympathy and apathy, confidence and distrust, encouragement and discouragement, self-suggestion and — perhaps strongest of all — the healing power of nature.