

On Superstition

by Voltaire

THE superstitious man is to the rogue what the slave is to the tyrant. Further, the superstitious man is governed by the fanatic and becomes fanatic. Superstition born in Paganism, adopted by Judaism, infested the Christian Church from the earliest times. All the fathers of the Church, without exception, believed in the power of magic. The Church always condemned magic, but she always believed in it: she did not excommunicate sorcerers as madmen who were mistaken, but as men who were really in communication with the devil.

Today one half of Europe thinks that the other half has long been and still is superstitious. The Protestants regard the relics, the indulgences, the mortifications, the prayers for the dead, the holy water, and almost all the rites of the Roman Church, as a superstitious dementia. Superstition, according to them, consists in taking useless practices for necessary practices. Among the Roman Catholics there are some more enlightened than their ancestors, who have renounced many of these usages formerly considered sacred; and they defend themselves against the others who have retained them, by saying: "They are indifferent, and what is merely indifferent cannot be an evil."

It is difficult to mark the limits of superstition. A Frenchman travelling in Italy finds almost everything superstitious, and is hardly mistaken. The Archbishop of Canterbury maintains that the Archbishop of Paris is superstitious; the Presbyterians make the same reproach against His Grace of Canterbury, and are in their turn treated as superstitious by the Quakers, who are the most superstitious of all in the eyes of other Christians.

In Christian societies, therefore, no one agrees as to what superstition is. The sect which seems to be the least attacked by this malady of the intelligence is that which has the fewest rites. But if with few ceremonies it is still strongly attached to an absurd belief, this absurd belief is equivalent alone to all the superstitious practices observed from the time of Simon the magician to that of Father Gauffridi.

It is therefore clear that it is the fundamentals of the religion of one sect which is considered as superstition by another sect.

The Moslems accuse all Christian societies of it, and are themselves accused. Who will judge this great matter? Will it be reason? But each sect claims to have reason on its side. It will therefore be force which will judge, while awaiting the time when reason will penetrate a sufficient number of heads to disarm force.

Up to what point does statecraft permit superstition to be destroyed? This is a very thorny question; it is like asking up to what point one should make an incision in a dropsical person, who may die under the operation. It is a matter for the doctor's discretion.

Can there exist a people free from all superstitious prejudices? That is to ask-Can there exist a nation of philosophers? It is said that there is no superstition in the magistrature of China. It is probable that none will remain in the magistrature of a few towns of Europe.

Then the magistrates will stop the superstition of the people from being dangerous. These magistrates' example will not enlighten the mob, but the principal persons of the middle-classes will hold the mob in check. There is not perhaps a single riot, a single religious outrage in which the middle-classes were not formerly imbrued, because these middle-classes were then the mob; but reason and time will have changed them. Their softened manners will soften those of the lowest and most savage populace; it is a thing of which we have striking examples in more than one country. In a word, less superstition, less fanaticism; and less fanaticism, less misery.