Superstition is to religion as rashness is to courage or as buffoonery is to wittiness. It is a vice corresponding to a virtue, a corruption of religion rather than the real thing. Aquinas maintains that it is a vice of excess, though not because of the amount of devotion involved but rather because of its manner or its object (Summa Theologiae II-II.92.1). He also distinguishes four species of superstition: improper worship of the true God; idolatry; divination or consulting with demons; and vain observances, such as the use of amulets or other purportedly magical practices (Summa Theologiae II-II.92.2). (See Wilhelm 1912 and McHugh and Callan 1958 for some useful elaborations of this traditional classification.)

Contemporary atheist readers – and perhaps some religious readers too – are likely to think that Aquinas’s distinction between religion and superstition dissolves if there is no God. For if Aquinas’s God does not exist in the first place, are not all forms of worship of Him equally improper? Wouldn’t the worship of Aquinas’s God be as inappropriate as the worship of the non-existent objects of idolatry? Wouldn’t the religious practices Aquinas approves of be as vain as divination and magic?

But in fact a principled distinction can be made between religion and superstition whether or not one thinks Aquinas’s God or any other god exists. The distinction should therefore be of philosophical interest to atheists no less than to theists. Aquinas’s classification will serve as a useful template for the discussion to follow, though it will be best to treat the species of superstition in an order different from his. We will look first at idolatry, and see why the God of classical theism would, if He exists, be an appropriate object of worship in a way other gods would not be, even if they existed. Next we will examine magic, and it will be argued that what is objectionable about at least much that goes by that name is not merely that it does not work, but that it is the sort of thing that could not work even in principle. Third, we will consider divination and see that the main problem with it is not that it does not work, but that even if it does work, it is an improper means of achieving the ends for which it is deployed. Fourth, we will consider how certain forms of worship even of the God of classical theism are improper. Finally, we will consider some illegitimate extensions of the concept of ‘superstition’.

**Idolatry**

Some might suppose that the main objection to idolatry is that the gods to which it is directed – pagan deities of the sort that occupy the Greek and Roman pantheons, for example – do not
exist. That is not the whole story should be obvious enough from the fact that the worship of
Roman emperors, animals, or the sun is also commonly condemned as idolatrous despite the fact
that these things do exist. Of course, these things do not really have the powers sometimes
attributed to them, but that cannot be the only reason why worshipping them is condemned
as idolatrous. Money is real and really can give one great power, but excessive concern with it is
often condemned as idolatrous. It is evident, then, that to condemn something as idolatry is to
claim that its object is in some way inappropriate whether or not it exists. When a writer like
Aquinas approve of worship of the ‘true’ God, then, he surely does not mean to refer merely to
the God who happens to exist. He evidently means as well that the God of which he speaks is in
some way an appropriate object of worship in a way other possible objects of worship are not, for
reasons having to do with more than just questions of existence or non-existence.

To understand these reasons we need to understand classical theism, the conception of God that
has prevailed historically within Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Western philosophical theism
generally. Its religious roots are biblical, and its philosophical roots are to be found in the
Neoplatonic and Aristotelian traditions. Among philosophers it is represented by the likes of
Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Maimonides, and Avicenna. (See Davies (2004: Chapter 1) for a useful
overview.)

How God is conceived of within classical theism is perhaps best understood via the arguments
traditionally given by classical theists for His existence. For the Aristotelian tradition, the
things of our experience undergo change because they are composites of potentiality and
actuality, for change is the actualization of a potentiality. But the ultimate explanation of how
any potential is actualized can only lie in an ‘unactualized actualizer’ or Unmoved Mover, who
is not actualized by anything else precisely because He is pure actuality and thus devoid of any
potentiality in need of actualizing. For the Neoplatonic tradition, anything that is in any way
composite must have a cause in something which combines its parts (whether these are physical
or metaphysical parts). But then the ultimate cause of things must be something which has no
parts of any sort to be combined, but is absolutely One or non-composite. For the Thomistic
tradition, anything whose essence or nature (what it is) is distinct from its existence (that it is)
must have a cause which conjoins its essence to an ‘act of existing’. But then the ultimate cause
of things must be something whose essence and existence are one and thus not in need of being
conjoined, something which just is Subsistent Being Itself. For Anselm, God is not merely the
greatest reality there happens to be, but the greatest conceivable reality. That is the core of his
famous ontological argument, to the effect that a non-existent God would be less than the
greatest conceivable being.

This is merely to summarize rather than to state or defend such arguments. (I have defended
some of them at length in Feser 2009, 2011.) The point for present purposes is to emphasize the
ultimacy in principle of God as conceived within classical theism. The God of classical theism is
not a cause alongside other causes; rather, as pure actuality itself, that which imparts the capacity
to actualize to all created causes, He is the precondition of there being any causal power at all.
He is not ‘a being’ alongside other beings, nor does He merely have being; rather, He just is
Subsistent Being Itself. Since He is absolutely one, simple, or non-composite, He is not com-
posed even of genus and difference; and thus He is not an instance of a kind, not even a unique
instance. This is the deep reason why, for the classical theist, there cannot even in principle
be more than one God. Distinction between two or more instances of a kind requires that
there be some potentiality one instance has actualized and the others have not, some essence
that they share distinct from their acts of existence, some composition of genus and difference.
None of that applies to that which is pure actuality, Subsistent Being Itself, and absolutely one or
non-composite.
It is for this reason a deep mistake to suppose, as some contemporary atheists do, that to reject the God of classical theism is merely to cross one further name off of a list of gods the rest of whom everyone else also already rejects – Zeus, Mercury, Thor, Quetzalcoatl, et al. (See e.g. McGinn 2012 and my response in Feser 2012.) That is to suppose that the God of classical theism is an instance of a kind or a member of a class, ‘a being’ or ‘a cause’ more or less like other beings and causes except for having a higher degree of power, intelligence, or moral virtue. And that is precisely what He is not, according to classical theism. God is no more one instance among others of the kind ‘gods’ than Plato’s Form of the Good is one instance among others (good books, good food, etc.) of the kind ‘good things’ or than the property being a triangle is one instance among others (dinner bells, traffic signs, etc.) of the kind ‘triangles’. (That is not to say that God is a Form or a property, but only to indicate that to think of Him as an instance of a kind is to commit a category mistake.)

None of this presupposes that the God of classical theism actually exists; that is a separate question. It should be clear, however, why affirming His existence is not essential to making a principled distinction between the worship of the God of classical theism on the one hand, and the worship of anything else on the other. Zeus, Mercury, Thor, Quetzalcoatl, et al. are essentially creaturely. They are finite and contingent in the way anything must be that is composite, or a mixture of actuality and potentiality, or comprised of an essence and a separate act of existing. They differ from human beings in longevity and in the degree of their power and knowledge, but only in the way the extraterrestrials and superheroes of science fiction and comic books do. (Indeed, some of these gods have in fact been turned into contemporary comic book characters.) That is why these gods are philosophically uninteresting in a way the God of classical theism is not, or should not be, even for the atheist.

God, by contrast, radically transcends the categories that apply to stones, plants, animals, human beings, and the pagan gods alike. For some classical theists, such as Aquinas, we cannot apply language to God and to created things in a univocal way, but only analogically. Hence when we say that God has power or knowledge, we are not saying that He has the same sort of thing we have, only more of it (as we could say of Zeus or Thor). Rather, we are saying that there is in God something analogous to what we call power and knowledge in us, though it cannot be the same thing since our power and knowledge involve the actualization of potentials whereas God is pure actuality, etc. For other classical theists, such as Maimonides, we cannot make positive claims about God at all, but must confine ourselves to negative theology. We can say only what God is not: He is not material, He is without beginning, and so forth.

The God of classical theism is creator, then, not in the sense in which created things themselves are ‘creators’ or makers of things. He does not use pre-existing materials, but creates ex nihilo. He does not merely generate things but sustains them in being, at every moment keeping them from lapsing into nothingness. He is the source of the existence of things in the ultimate sense of being that to which all possible causality and existence trace, a First Cause which does not merely happen not to have a cause of its own, but which could not intelligibly be said to require one.

If anything is worthy of worship, then, God is worthy of worship in a way nothing else could be even in principle. Hence, for the classical theist, if it turned out that God did not exist but Mercury or Thor did, that would not entail that we should turn our devotion to the latter instead. Rather, it would mean that there just isn’t anything that is worthy of the sort of absolute devotion that God alone could merit. Anything less than God, being essentially creaturely, is necessarily unworthy of that sort of devotion. Anselm, after all, would presumably not say that if the greatest conceivable being turned out not to exist, we might consider worshipping the second, fifth, or fifty-seventh greatest being instead. (That is not to say that other beings might
not be owed a lesser degree of honour. The supreme worship owed God, or *latria*, is traditionally distinguished from the lesser sort of reverence or *dulia* owed to angels and saints, or the honour we ought to show to parents and other earthly authorities.)

The notion of idolatry, then, as the giving of the absolute devotion properly directed at God alone to something less than God, to something essentially creaturely, is intelligible apart from the question of whether God exists. Even if God did not exist and the gods of the pagan pantheons did, there is a clear sense in which the worship of the latter would still count as idolatrous.

Of course, there are a great many religious people who ostensibly worship the same God as Anselm, Aquinas, Maimonides, Avicenna, et al. but who are unfamiliar with the philosophical concepts and arguments referred to above, and who would not understand them even if they were made acquainted with them. They may even conceive of God in ways incompatible with what has been said. (For example, they may think of Him as an old man with a long white beard.) Are they guilty of idolatry? That does not follow. Lack of theological sophistication is not the same thing as the intentional worship of something other than the true God.

For that reason, though, the classical theist should exercise caution before judging those outside the classical theist tradition as culpably idolatrous. As *The Catholic Encyclopedia* says:

> The guilt of idolatry, however, is not to be estimated by its abstract nature alone; the concrete form it assumes in the conscience of the sinner is the all-important element. No sin is mortal—i.e. debar[s] man from attaining the end for which he was created—that is not committed with clear knowledge and free determination. But how many, or how few, of the countless millions of idolaters are, or have been, able to distinguish between the one Creator of all things and His creatures? and, having made the distinction, how many have been perverse enough to worship the creature in preference to the Creator?—It is reasonable, Christian, and charitable to suppose that the ‘false gods’ of the heathen were, in their conscience, the only true God they knew, and that their worship being right in its intention, went up to the one true God with that of Jews and Christians to whom He had revealed Himself. (Wilhelm 1910: 636)

By the same token, contemporary classical theists critical of the alternative, non-classical conceptions of God defended by some philosophers of religion are not necessarily accusing the latter of idolatry, as opposed to mere philosophical or theological error. (Cf. Brian Davies’ (2004) contrast of classical theism with the more anthropomorphic ‘theistic personalism’ he finds in writers like Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, and Charles Hartshorne.)

**Magic**

Some atheists might suppose that the religious practices a thinker like Aquinas would approve of do not differ essentially from the magical practices of which he would disapprove. To approve of prayer and sacraments but to disapprove of amulets, incantations, and the like would (so the atheist might claim) merely be to suppose that supernatural or preternatural forces of the sort presupposed by the former actually exist, while those presupposed by the latter do not. But the two sorts of practices are (again, so the argument might go) essentially of the same sort, both essentially ‘magical’.

But that is not the case. To be sure, those who object to so-called ‘magic’ do typically hold that the powers it purportedly involves are bogus. And theists like Aquinas would indeed claim that there are supernatural and preternatural powers. (For example, such theists would typically
hold that God sometimes causes miracles, and that angels of both the righteous and the fallen sort sometimes cause unusual events to occur.) But it does not follow that all such unusual powers are to be assimilated to magic. God, angels, and disembodied souls are taken by thinkers like Aquinas to be at least partially intelligible to us via metaphysical analysis, and fully intelligible in themselves. Magic, by contrast, at least sometimes seems to be regarded as something inherently unintelligible, something inconsistent with the supposition that everything in the world possesses an order that might at least in principle be rationally ascertainable.

In his book *Renewing Philosophy*, Hilary Putnam makes some interesting remarks on the subject:

> If a witch must have magical powers, then it is far from clear that the concept of a witch is a coherent one, because it is far from clear that the concept of a magical power is a coherent one. We can certainly imagine possible worlds in which things regularly happen that superstitious people would regard as magic; but the very fact that they regularly happen in those possible worlds is strong reason for saying that in those possible worlds those things are not really magic — it is just that those worlds have different laws than the actual world. The notion of a world in which things happen that are ‘truly magical’ is, I think, an incoherent one; and that means, I think, that the notion of a witch is an incoherent one. One might try to meet this difficulty by defining a witch not as someone who has magical powers but as someone who has supernatural powers, where the supernatural is understood not in terms of the notion of magic, but in terms of not falling within the categories of substance, space, and time. It is extremely doubtful that the pagan witches, or the witches of present-day African tribes, are supposed to derive their powers from something which is supernatural in that sense. It is a feature, in fact, of pagan thought that the gods, demons, and so on, are not supernatural in the sense which came into existence with the rise of Greek philosophy and the incorporation into the Jerusalem-based religions of a certain amount of Greek philosophy. The notion that what is magical must derive from the supernatural, in the philosophical/theological sense of ‘supernatural’, is not part of the original meaning of the term.

*(Putnam 1992: 44)*

Putnam surely captures one important sense of the term ‘magical’, and in particular the sense of ‘magical’ in which the notion of magic must be regarded as objectionable by anyone of a broadly rationalistic or scientific mindset. ‘Magical’ powers, as Putnam here describes them, are powers which are *intrinsically unintelligible*. It’s not just that we happen not to know how they operate, or even that we are somehow too cognitively limited ever to find out how they operate; it’s that there is, objectively, no rhyme or reason whatsoever to how they operate. They are incomprehensible *in principle* and not merely in practice.

Appeals to magic in this sense can, of necessity, explain nothing. They are rightly dismissed as pseudo-explanations or worse — Putnam suggests that they are actually *incoherent*. (He does not elaborate, but perhaps his point is that it is incoherent to suppose that an appeal to ‘magic’ is any kind of explanation given (a) that an explanation necessarily makes the *explanandum* intelligible, and (b) that the notion of magic is the notion of that which is inherently unintelligible.)

The classical theist, however, is clearly not appealing to ‘magic’ in this sense, either when he appeals to God as the explanation of why anything exists, or when he appeals either to God, or to angels or disembodied souls, as an explanation of some particular miraculous or otherwise unusual phenomenon. On the contrary, the traditional arguments for the existence of the God

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of classical theism entail that reality is ultimately *intelligible through and through*. There are no ‘brute facts’ for a thinker like Aquinas. Again, that God does not have a cause is not because He is an arbitrary exception to the explanatory demands we make on other things. Rather, other things demand a cause because they go from potential to actual, are in various ways composite, and comprise an essence together with a distinct act of existing. God requires no cause because He is none of these things; He is instead pure actuality and absolutely simple or non-composite, and His essence just is existence. He is *intrinsically intelligible* in a way nothing else is or could be.

So, there is a kind of *irrationalism* to the notion of magic that is foreign to the classical theist tradition, deeply influenced as it has been by Greek philosophy. Indeed, ironic as it may seem, there is a sense in which *atheism*, if not carefully formulated, might be more justly accused of tending toward a belief in ‘magic’ than classical theism is. The atheist J.L. Mackie writes:

> The sort of intelligibility that is achieved by successful causal inquiry and scientific explanation is not undermined by its inability to make things intelligible through and through. Any particular explanation starts with premises which state ‘brute facts’, and although the brutally factual starting-points of one explanation may themselves be further explained by another, the latter in turn will have to start with something that it does not explain, *and so on however far we go* …

> [I]t may be intellectually satisfying to believe that there is, objectively, an explanation for everything together, even if we can only guess at what the explanation might be. But we have no right to assume that the universe will comply with our intellectual preferences. (Mackie 1982: 85–87, emphasis in the original)

The classical theist, as we have seen, disagrees with the claim that all explanations will have to proceed from ‘brutally factual starting-points … however far we go’; God is not a brute fact, but something fully intelligible in Himself (even if not to us) and whose intelligibility is, again, intrinsic rather than derived. Reality is, for that reason, ‘intelligible through and through’. By contrast, Mackie seems committed to the view that while some of the laws uncovered by science can be explained by reference to the operation of deeper laws, the operation of the *fundamental* laws constitutes an inherently unintelligible brute fact. Yet to operate in a way that is ultimately unintelligible in principle just is to be ‘magical’ in the objectionable sense identified by Putnam. And an appeal to what operates in this unintelligible way is no more a true explanation than an appeal to magic counts as a true explanation. A non-magical atheism, then, would arguably have to be one which affirms that reality is intelligible through and through without thereby committing itself to God as the ultimate explanation of things.

Classical theists like Aquinas do, as I have said, affirm the existence of unusual powers that are not ‘magical’ in the irrationalist sense just described, but which may be described as ‘magical’ in the looser sense of being intelligible in themselves, but beyond the abilities and/or understanding of human beings. Demonic interventions in the ordinary course of things would be an example. Magic in this sense is objectionable not because the sources of such magical powers do not exist, but because they do exist (at least in the view of many religions, and in the view of many classical theists in particular), yet are inappropriate means by which to generate the effects sought by those who make use of them (cf. Arendzen 1911). This brings us to divination.

**Divination**

Whereas magic in this latter sense involves appeal to demonic forces for the sake of achieving certain practical results, divination is the appeal to demons, astrology, the spirits of the dead, or
the like for the purpose of attaining knowledge of future events or matters otherwise hidden to
us. If superstition in general is a corruption of religion and magic is a corrupt analogue of practices
like prayer and the sacraments, divination might be thought of as a corrupt analogue of the
practice of consulting divine revelation. Once again to quote The Catholic Encyclopedia: ‘As
prophecy is the lawful knowledge of the future divination, its superstitious counterpart, is the
unlawful. As magic aims to do, divination aims to know’ (Graham 1909).

Naturally, the atheist will reject the practice of consulting evil spirits on the grounds that such
spirits do not (he maintains) exist in the first place, but it is not hard to see why the practice
would be objectionable even given the supposition that they do exist. For if a demon, qua fallen
angel, wishes ill upon the human beings who consult it, the demon will hardly be a reliable
source of information about future and hidden matters, even if it has such information.

Similarly, while the atheist is bound to reject practices like astrology, spiritualism, etc., on the
grounds that their ontological presuppositions are bogus, these practices too would be objec-
tionable even on the assumption that there is something to them. For even those who think
such practices have some value would have to acknowledge that they are at best erratic in their
results. They have nothing remotely like the kind of reliability possessed by everyday inductive
reasoning, inference from known natural laws, etc. Hence, even if, in the rare cases where they
seem to provide accurate information, this information were supposed to have a source beyond
the normal course of things, there is nothing in the nature of the practices themselves that could
guarantee that this source was not in fact some evil spirit (again, assuming the existence of such)
acting with nefarious intent.

Furthermore, for the classical theist, strict knowledge of the future is the prerogative of God
alone. The regularities in the natural order He has established, together with any special reve-
lution He has made available (as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all claim he has), tell us
everything about the future or about otherwise hidden matters that we would need to know.
Thus, to seek such knowledge in spiritual sources other than God is (so a traditional line of
argument goes) impiously to try to usurp what can only belong to God, and shows a lack of
trust in divine providence.

Improper worship

Unlike idolatry, magic, and divination, improper worship is directed at a worthy object, but it is
nevertheless defective in its manner. Obviously, a form of worship of the true God would be
improper if it involved grave immorality (e.g., human sacrifice). But it might also be defective in
less dramatic ways. For instance, it might be morally defective in that it introduces deceptive or
unnecessary elements, as when a fraudster spreads false miracle stories (perhaps for what he takes
to be pious motives) or a fanatic exaggerates the significance of some favoured devotion or the
plausibility of some purported revelation, apparition, or the like. Or it might be epistemically
defective in that it involves a credulous tendency to find religious significance in objects and
events that have none, or in some particular manner of carrying out religious activities. Examples
would be thinking that one can see the image of Christ or the Virgin Mary in a piece of burnt toast, or
supposing that carrying a certain religious medal in one’s pocket or saying a certain prayer a certain
number of times a day will guarantee safety or good health. But while such practices are super-
stitious and therefore instances of a vice, the moral defect involved is probably often minor and the
culpability low, to the extent that the practices rest on ignorance or simple-mindedness rather
than malice.

While such practices differ from magic and divination in that their objects are directed at
what classical theists would regard as the true God, they are sometimes similar to magic and
divination insofar as their aim is to know or influence the course of events. This may be the sort of thing Wittgenstein had in mind when he wrote:

Religious faith and superstition are quite different. One of them results from fear and is a sort of false science. The other is a trusting.

(Wittgenstein 1980: 72)

As with magic and divination, the believer who supposes that a certain manner of worshipping the true God will guarantee good health or prosperity (say) is practising a kind of ‘false science’, his inordinate concern with mundane matters leading him to see patterns or causes where there are none. The truly religious attitude, of which this sort of superstition is a corruption, is one of trusting in divine providence and the knowledge of things that it has made possible through study of the natural order and (so Judaism, Christianity, and Islam claim) via special revelation.

What superstition isn’t

Lack of sophistication often underlies these improper forms of worship. But there are additional consequences of lack of sophistication. We noted above that unsophisticated religious believers are typically unfamiliar with the ideas and arguments deployed by religious philosophers, and would not understand them even if they were made acquainted with them. The justifications they would offer for their beliefs and practices are, accordingly, not the sort of thing that would impress the educated sceptic. Does that entail that all of the religious beliefs and practices of such unsophisticated people, and not merely those that fall under the ‘improper worship’ category, count as a kind of superstition or are otherwise irrational? Is it only the professional philosopher or theologian who counts as a non-superstitious religious believer?

That does not follow. After all, the man on the street who has some very general knowledge of scientific ideas like quantum mechanics or natural selection might have a difficult time justifying his belief in such ideas, or even explaining them very clearly. But no one thinks him irrational or superstitious for that reason. It is allowed that he is reasonable in believing these theories on the basis of the authority of scientists who have established them and could explain and justify them to sceptics if the need arose. (The reader will recall that an appeal to authority is fallacious only when the authority in question does not have expertise on the specific subject at hand, or where there is special reason to doubt his objectivity.) There is no reason to rule out of hand the suggestion that the unsophisticated religious believer can be justified in his beliefs as long as there are more sophisticated believers (such as professional philosophers and theologians) who could give the requisite arguments. There can plausibly be a ‘division of intellectual labour’ in religion no less than in science.

More controversially, it is arguable that certain beliefs and practices are reasonable even if intellectually inclined believers do not have airtight rational justifications ready to hand. F.A. Hayek writes:

The rationalistic attitude to … problems [of morality] is best seen in its views on what it calls ‘superstition’. I do not wish to underestimate the merit of the persistent and relentless fight of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries against beliefs which are demonstrably false. But we must remember that the extension of the concept of superstition to all beliefs which are not demonstrably true lacks the same justification and may often be harmful. That we ought not to believe anything which has been shown to be false does not mean that we ought to believe only what has been
demonstrated to be true. There are good reasons why any person who wants to live and act successfully in society must accept many common beliefs, though the value of these reasons may have little to do with their demonstrable truth. Such beliefs will also be based on some past experience but not on experience for which anyone can produce the evidence … We would destroy the foundations of much successful action if we disdained to rely on ways of doing things evolved by the process of trial and error simply because the reason for their adoption has not been handed down to us. The appropriateness of our conduct is not necessarily dependent on our knowing why it is so … While this applies to all our values, it is most important in the case of moral rules of conduct. Next to language, they are perhaps the most important instance of an undesigned growth, of a set of rules which govern our lives but of which we can say neither why they are what they are nor what they do to us: we do not know what the consequences of observing them are for us as individuals and as a group. And it is against the demand for submission to such rules that the rationalistic spirit is in constant revolt. (Hayek 1960: 64–65)

Here Hayek, though not a conservative, was deploying a broadly conservative line of argument in defence of tradition that goes back at least to Edmund Burke. The basic idea is that given the complexity of human life, the large-scale consequences of either following or rejecting certain rules and practices is not always evident even to the most intelligent inquirer. Certain rules and practices may have benefits that we cannot see; and if it happens that they have already persisted for a long period of time, that gives us at least some reason to think that they do in fact have such benefits. For having survived the trial and error process of cultural evolution, they have a claim to fitness. We ought therefore to presume them innocent until proven guilty, to be cautious before abandoning or modifying them, and to minimize our alterations when we do modify them. (See Feser 2003 for a detailed exposition and defence of this sort of argument.)

Of course, if successful, this sort of argument still provides at least an indirect rational justification of the traditional rules and practices in question. It is really only a certain kind of rational justification that the Burkean–Hayekian conservative plausibly thinks these practices need not have; he is not claiming (or at least need not claim) that they should have no rational justification whatsoever. What he is arguing, then, is that it is a mistake to dismiss something as ‘superstition’ merely because it does not meet a certain specific criterion of rational justification, namely a direct demonstration of its truth or utility. For it may still meet more nuanced criteria of rationality; in particular, we may have good indirect reason to think that it is true or useful even if we can neither directly show that it is true nor identify the specific ways in which it is useful.

Given these considerations together with the points made above about classical theism and ‘magical’ explanations, the atheist or sceptic is well advised to exercise caution before too quickly assimilating religion to superstition. It is also far from clear that religious people are uniquely prone to what is objectionable in superstition in the first place. Sensationalistic claims about extraterrestrials, conspiracies, cryptozoology, the curative powers of various substances, paranormal phenomena, etc. are often put forward, and accepted, on the basis of what is alleged to be ‘scientific evidence’. (Cf. Disch 1998 for an entertaining account of some of the oddities modern people have associated with science, or at least science fiction.) Nor, popular caricatures aside, have more religious eras of history necessarily been more superstitious than our secular age. As Peter Dendle, writing on medieval superstition, sums things up:

There are often deep-seated psychological motives for beliefs that are, on the face of things, irrational: for instance, the perpetuation and enactment of ritual lore can give
people a psychological sense of comfort and group identity and link them with their heritage, and can relieve anxiety by providing a sense of control over circumstances that are in fact beyond all control. This facet of human behaviour does not show any signs of having arisen in any one historical time or place, nor does it show signs of abating or being eventually supplanted by reason or science. There is little sense in singling out the Middle Ages, then, as a time of especially pronounced or absurd superstition.

(Dendle 2008: 121)