

## St. Thomas Aquinas

# The Summa Theologica

(Benziger Bros. edition, 1947)

Translated by

Fathers of the English Dominican Province

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### OF IDOLATRY (FOUR ARTICLES)

We must now consider idolatry: under which head there are four points of inquiry:

(1) Whether idolatry is a species of superstition?

(2) Whether it is a sin?

(3) Whether it is the gravest sin?

(4) Of the cause of this sin.

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### Whether idolatry is rightly reckoned a species of superstition?

**Objection 1:** It would seem that idolatry is not rightly reckoned a species of superstition. Just as heretics are unbelievers, so are idolaters. But heresy is a species of unbelief, as stated above ([Question \[11\]](#), [Article \[1\]](#)). Therefore idolatry is also a species of unbelief and not of superstition.

**Objection 2:** Further, latria pertains to the virtue of religion to which superstition is opposed. But latria, apparently, is univocally applied to idolatry and to that which belongs to the true religion. For just as we speak univocally of the desire of false happiness, and of the desire of true happiness, so too, seemingly, we speak univocally of the worship of false gods, which is called idolatry, and of the worship of the true God, which is the latria of true religion. Therefore idolatry is not a species of superstition.

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[Donate bitcoin](#). St. Isidore [e-book library/forum](#) » [aquinas](#) » [english](#) » [summa](#) » [SS](#) » [SS094.html](#), apparently, is nothing: for the Apostle says ([1 Cor. 8:4](#)): "We know that an idol is nothing in the world," and further on (1 Cor. 10:19): "What then? Do I say that what is offered in sacrifice to idols is anything? Or that the idol is anything?" implying an answer in the negative. Now offering things to idols belongs properly to idolatry. Therefore since idolatry is like to nothing, it cannot be a species of superstition.

**Objection 4:** Further, it belongs to superstition to give divine honor to whom that honor is not due. Now divine honor is undue to idols, just as it is undue to other creatures, wherefore certain people are reproached ([Rm. 1:25](#)) for that they "worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator." Therefore this species of superstition is unfittingly called idolatry, and should rather be named "worship of creatures."

**On the contrary,** It is related ([Acts 17:16](#)) that when Paul awaited Silas and Timothy at Athens, "his spirit was stirred within him seeing the whole city given to idolatry," and further on ([Acts 17:22](#)) he says: "Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are too superstitious." Therefore idolatry belongs to superstition.

**I answer that,** As stated above ([Question \[92\]](#), [Article \[2\]](#)), it belongs to superstition to exceed the due mode of divine worship, and this is done chiefly when divine worship is given to whom it should not be given. Now it should be given to the most high uncreated God alone, as stated above ([Question \[81\]](#), [Article \[1\]](#)) when we were treating of religion. Therefore it is superstition to give worship to any creature whatsoever.

Now just as this divine worship was given to sensible creatures by means of sensible signs, such as sacrifices, games, and the like, so too was it given to a creature represented by some sensible form or shape, which is called an "idol." Yet divine worship was given to idols in various ways. For some, by means of a nefarious art, constructed images which produced certain effects by the power of the demons: wherefore they deemed that the images themselves contained something God-like, and consequently that divine worship was due to them. This was the opinion of Hermes Trismegistus [\*De Natura Deorum, ad Asclep], as Augustine states (*De Civ. Dei* viii, 23): while others gave divine worship not to the images, but to the creatures represented thereby. The Apostle alludes to both of these ([Rm. 1:23,25](#)). For, as regards the former, he says: "They changed the glory of the incorruptible God into the likeness of the image of a corruptible man, and of birds, and of four-footed beasts, and of creeping things," and of the latter he says: "Who worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator."

These latter were of three ways of thinking. For some deemed certain men to have been gods, whom they worshipped in the images of those men: for instance, Jupiter, Mercury, and so forth. Others again deemed the whole world to be one god, not by reason of its material substance, but by reason of its soul, which they believed to be God, for they held God to be nothing else than a soul governing the world by movement and reason: even as a man is said to be wise in respect not of his body but of his soul. Hence they thought that divine worship ought to be given to the whole world and to all its parts, heaven, air, water, and to all such things: and to these they referred the names of their gods, as Varro asserted, and Augustine relates (*De Civ. Dei* vii, 5). Lastly, others, namely, the Platonists, said that there is one supreme god, the cause of all things. After him they placed certain spiritual substances created by the supreme god. These they called "gods," on account of their having a share of the godhead; but we call them "angels." After these they placed the souls of the heavenly bodies, and beneath these the demons which they stated to be certain animal denizens of the air, and beneath these again they placed human souls, which they believed to be taken up into the fellowship of the

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The last two opinions were held to belong to "natural theology" which the philosophers gathered from their study of the world and taught in the schools: while the other, relating to the worship of men, was said to belong to "mythical theology" which was wont to be represented on the stage according to the fancies of poets. The remaining opinion relating to images was held to belong to "civil theology," which was celebrated by the pontiffs in the temples [\*De Civ. Dei vi, 5].

Now all these come under the head of the superstition of idolatry. Wherefore Augustine says (De Doctr. Christ. ii, 20): "Anything invented by man for making and worshipping idols, or for giving Divine worship to a creature or any part of a creature, is superstitious."

**Reply to Objection 1:** Just as religion is not faith, but a confession of faith by outward signs, so superstition is a confession of unbelief by external worship. Such a confession is signified by the term idolatry, but not by the term heresy, which only means a false opinion. Therefore heresy is a species of unbelief, but idolatry is a species of superstition.

**Reply to Objection 2:** The term latria may be taken in two senses. In one sense it may denote a human act pertaining to the worship of God: and then its signification remains the same, to whomsoever it be shown, because, in this sense, the thing to which it is shown is not included in its definition. Taken thus latria is applied univocally, whether to true religion or to idolatry, just as the payment of a tax is univocally the same, whether it is paid to the true or to a false king. In another sense latria denotes the same as religion, and then, since it is a virtue, it is essential thereto that divine worship be given to whom it ought to be given; and in this way latria is applied equivocally to the latria of true religion, and to idolatry: just as prudence is applied equivocally to the prudence that is a virtue, and to that which is carnal.

**Reply to Objection 3:** The saying of the Apostle that "an idol is nothing in the world" means that those images which were called idols, were not animated, or possessed of a divine power, as Hermes maintained, as though they were composed of spirit and body. In the same sense we must understand the saying that "what is offered in sacrifice to idols is not anything," because by being thus sacrificed the sacrificial flesh acquired neither sanctification, as the Gentiles thought, nor uncleanness, as the Jews held.

**Reply to Objection 4:** It was owing to the general custom among the Gentiles of worshipping any kind of creature under the form of images that the term "idolatry" was used to signify any worship of a creature, even without the use of images.

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## Whether idolatry is a sin?

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employs in worshipping God. Now the true faith employs images for the divine worship: since both in the Tabernacle were there images of the cherubim, as related in Ex. 25, and in the Church are images set up which the faithful worship. Therefore idolatry, whereby idols are worshipped, is not a sin.

**Objection 2:** Further, reverence should be paid to every superior. But the angels and the souls of the blessed are our superiors. Therefore it will be no sin to pay them reverence by worship, of sacrifices or the like.

**Objection 3:** Further, the most high God should be honored with an inward worship, according to Jn. 4:24, "God... they must adore... in spirit and in truth": and Augustine says (Enchiridion iii), that "God is worshipped by faith, hope and charity." Now a man may happen to worship idols outwardly, and yet not wander from the true faith inwardly. Therefore it seems that we may worship idols outwardly without prejudice to the divine worship.

**On the contrary,** It is written ([Ex. 20:5](#)): "Thou shalt not adore them," i.e. outwardly, "nor serve them," i.e. inwardly, as a gloss explains it: and it is a question of graven things and images. Therefore it is a sin to worship idols whether outwardly or inwardly.

**I answer that,** There has been a twofold error in this matter. For some [\*The School of Plato] have thought that to offer sacrifices and other things pertaining to latria, not only to God but also to the others aforesaid, is due and good in itself, since they held that divine honor should be paid to every superior nature, as being nearer to God. But this is unreasonable. For though we ought to revere all superiors, yet the same reverence is not due to them all: and something special is due to the most high God Who excels all in a singular manner: and this is the worship of latria.

Nor can it be said, as some have maintained, that "these visible sacrifices are fitting with regard to other gods, and that to the most high God, as being better than those others, better sacrifices, namely, the service of a pure mind, should be offered" [\*Augustine, as quoted below]. The reason is that, as Augustine says (De Civ. Dei x, 19), "external sacrifices are signs of internal, just as audible words are signs of things. Wherefore, just as by prayer and praise we utter significant words to Him, and offer to Him in our hearts the things they signify, so too in our sacrifices we ought to realize that we should offer a visible sacrifice to no other than to Him Whose invisible sacrifice we ourselves should be in our hearts."

Others held that the outward worship of latria should be given to idols, not as though it were something good or fitting in itself, but as being in harmony with the general custom. Thus Augustine (De Civ. Dei vi, 10) quotes Seneca as saying: "We shall adore," says he, "in such a way as to remember that our worship is in accordance with custom rather than with the reality": and (De Vera Relig. v) Augustine says that "we must not seek religion from the philosophers, who accepted the same things for sacred, as did the people; and gave utterance in the schools to various and contrary opinions about the nature of their gods, and the sovereign good." This error was embraced also by certain heretics [\*The Helcesaitae], who affirmed that it is not wrong for one who is seized in time of persecution to worship idols outwardly so long as he keeps the faith in his heart.

But this is evidently false. For since outward worship is a sign of the inward worship, just as it is a wicked lie to affirm the contrary of what one holds inwardly of the true faith so too is it a wicked falsehood to pay outward worship to anything counter to the sentiments of one's heart. Wherefore Augustine condemns Seneca (De Civ. Dei vi, 10) in that "his worship of idols was so

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**Reply to Objection 1:** Neither in the Tabernacle or Temple of the Old Law, nor again now in the Church are images set up that the worship of latria may be paid to them, but for the purpose of signification, in order that belief in the excellence of angels and saints may be impressed and confirmed in the mind of man. It is different with the image of Christ, to which latria is due on account of His Divinity, as we shall state in the TP, Question [25], Article [3].

The Replies to the Second and Third Objections are evident from what has been said above.

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## Whether idolatry is the gravest of sins?

**Objection 1:** It would seem that idolatry is not the gravest of sins. The worst is opposed to the best (Ethic. viii, 10). But interior worship, which consists of faith, hope and charity, is better than external worship. Therefore unbelief, despair and hatred of God, which are opposed to internal worship, are graver sins than idolatry, which is opposed to external worship.

**Objection 2:** Further, the more a sin is against God the more grievous it is. Now, seemingly, a man acts more directly against God by blaspheming, or denying the faith, than by giving God's worship to another, which pertains to idolatry. Therefore blasphemy and denial of the faith are more grievous sins than idolatry.

**Objection 3:** Further, it seems that lesser evils are punished with greater evils. But the sin of idolatry was punished with the sin against nature, as stated in Rm. 1:26. Therefore the sin against nature is a graver sin than idolatry.

**Objection 4:** Further, Augustine says (Contra Faust. xx, 5): "Neither do we say that you," viz. the Manichees, "are pagans, or a sect of pagans, but that you bear a certain likeness to them since you worship many gods: and yet you are much worse than they are, for they worship things that exist, but should not be worshiped as gods, whereas you worship things that exist not at all." Therefore the vice of heretical depravity is more grievous than idolatry.

**Objection 5:** Further, a gloss of Jerome on Gal. 4:9, "How turn you again to the weak and needy elements?" says: "The observance of the Law, to which they were then addicted, was a sin almost equal to the worship of idols, to which they had been given before their conversion." Therefore idolatry is not the most grievous sin.

**On the contrary,** A gloss on the saying of Lev. 15:25, about the uncleanness of a woman suffering from an issue of blood, says: "Every sin is an uncleanness of the soul, but especially idolatry."

**I answer that,** The gravity of a sin may be considered in two ways. First, on the part of the sin itself, and thus idolatry is the most grievous sin. For just as the most heinous crime in an

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true king, since, so far as he is concerned, he disturbs the whole order of the commonwealth, so, in sins that are committed against God, which indeed are the greater sins, the greatest of all seems to be for a man to give God's honor to a creature, since, so far as he is concerned, he sets up another God in the world, and lessens the divine sovereignty. Secondly, the gravity of a sin may be considered on the part of the sinner. Thus the sin of one that sins knowingly is said to be graver than the sin of one that sins through ignorance: and in this way nothing hinders heretics, if they knowingly corrupt the faith which they have received, from sinning more grievously than idolaters who sin through ignorance. Furthermore other sins may be more grievous on account of greater contempt on the part of the sinner.

**Reply to Objection 1:** Idolatry presupposes internal unbelief, and to this it adds undue worship. But in a case of external idolatry without internal unbelief, there is an additional sin of falsehood, as stated above ([Article \[2\]](#)).

**Reply to Objection 2:** Idolatry includes a grievous blasphemy, inasmuch as it deprives God of the singleness of His dominion and denies the faith by deeds.

**Reply to Objection 3:** Since it is essential to punishment that it be against the will, a sin whereby another sin is punished needs to be more manifest, in order that it may make the man more hateful to himself and to others; but it need not be a more grievous sin: and in this way the sin against nature is less grievous than the sin of idolatry. But since it is more manifest, it is assigned as a fitting punishment of the sin of idolatry, in order that, as by idolatry man abuses the order of the divine honor, so by the sin against nature he may suffer confusion from the abuse of his own nature.

**Reply to Objection 4:** Even as to the genus of the sin, the Manichean heresy is more grievous than the sin of other idolaters, because it is more derogatory to the divine honor, since they set up two gods in opposition to one another, and hold many vain and fabulous fancies about God. It is different with other heretics, who confess their belief in one God and worship Him alone.

**Reply to Objection 5:** The observance of the Law during the time of grace is not quite equal to idolatry as to the genus of the sin, but almost equal, because both are species of pestiferous superstition.

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## Whether the cause of idolatry was on the part of man?

**Objection 1:** It would seem that the cause of idolatry was not on the part of man. In man there is nothing but either nature, virtue, or guilt. But the cause of idolatry could not be on the part of man's nature, since rather does man's natural reason dictate that there is one God, and that divine worship should not be paid to the dead or to inanimate beings. Likewise, neither could idolatry have its cause in man on the part of virtue, since "a good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit," according to Mt. 7:18: nor again could it be on the part of guilt, because, according to

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evil." Therefore idolatry has no cause on the part of man.

**Objection 2:** Further, those things which have a cause in man are found among men at all times. Now idolatry was not always, but is stated [\*Peter Comestor, Hist. Genes. xxxvii, xl] to have been originated either by Nimrod, who is related to have forced men to worship fire, or by Ninus, who caused the statue of his father Bel to be worshiped. Among the Greeks, as related by Isidore (Etym. viii, 11), Prometheus was the first to set up statues of men: and the Jews say that Ismael was the first to make idols of clay. Moreover, idolatry ceased to a great extent in the sixth age. Therefore idolatry had no cause on the part of man.

**Objection 3:** Further, Augustine says (De Civ. Dei xxi, 6): "It was not possible to learn, for the first time, except from their" (i.e. the demons') "teaching, what each of them desired or disliked, and by what name to invite or compel him: so as to give birth to the magic arts and their professors": and the same observation seems to apply to idolatry. Therefore idolatry had no cause on the part of man.

**On the contrary,** It is written (Wis. 14:14): "By the vanity of men they," i.e. idols, "came into the world."

**I answer that,** Idolatry had a twofold cause. One was a dispositive cause; this was on the part of man, and in three ways. First, on account of his inordinate affections, forasmuch as he gave other men divine honor, through either loving or revering them too much. This cause is assigned (Wis. 14:15): "A father being afflicted with bitter grief, made to himself the image of his son, who was quickly taken away: and him who then had died as a man he began to worship as a god." The same passage goes on to say (Wis. 14:21) that "men serving either their affection, or their kings, gave the incommunicable name [Vulg.: 'names']," i.e. of the Godhead, "to stones and wood." Secondly, because man takes a natural pleasure in representations, as the Philosopher observes (Poet. iv), wherefore as soon as the uncultured man saw human images skillfully fashioned by the diligence of the craftsman, he gave them divine worship; hence it is written (Wis. 13:11-17): "If an artist, a carpenter, hath cut down a tree, proper for his use, in the wood... and by the skill of his art fashioneth it, and maketh it like the image of a man... and then maketh prayer to it, inquiring concerning his substance, and his children, or his marriage." Thirdly, on account of their ignorance of the true God, inasmuch as through failing to consider His excellence men gave divine worship to certain creatures, on account of their beauty or power, wherefore it is written (Wis. 13:1,2): "All men... 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 the moon, to be the gods that rule the world."

The other cause of idolatry was completive, and this was on the part of the demons, who offered themselves to be worshipped by men, by giving answers in the idols, and doing things which to men seemed marvelous. Hence it is written ([Ps. 95:5](#)): "All the gods of the Gentiles are devils."

**Reply to Objection 1:** The dispositive cause of idolatry was, on the part of man, a defect of nature, either through ignorance in his intellect, or disorder in his affections, as stated above; and this pertains to guilt. Again, idolatry is stated to be the cause, beginning and end of all sin, because there is no kind of sin that idolatry does not produce at some time, either through leading expressly to that sin by causing it, or through being an occasion thereof, either as a beginning or as an end, in so far as certain sins were employed in the worship of idols; such as

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dispose man thereto.

***Reply to Objection 2:*** There was no idolatry in the first age, owing to the recent remembrance of the creation of the world, so that man still retained in his mind the knowledge of one God. In the sixth age idolatry was banished by the doctrine and power of Christ, who triumphed over the devil.

***Reply to Objection 3:*** This argument considers the consummative cause of idolatry.