

## St. Thomas Aquinas

# The Summa Theologica

(Benziger Bros. edition, 1947)

Translated by

Fathers of the English Dominican Province

---

[Index](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Second Part of the Second Part](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Question: 96](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

### OF SUPERSTITION IN OBSERVANCES (FOUR ARTICLES)

We must now consider superstition in observances, under which head there are four points of inquiry:

- (1) Of observances for acquiring knowledge, which are prescribed by the magic art;
  - (2) Of observances for causing alterations in certain bodies;
  - (3) Of observances practiced in fortune-telling;
  - (4) Of wearing sacred words at the neck.
- 

[Index](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Second Part of the Second Part](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Question: 96](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Article: 1](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

### Whether it be unlawful to practice the observances of the magic art?

**Objection 1:** It would seem that it is not unlawful to practice the observances of the magic art. A thing is said to be unlawful in two ways. First, by reason of the genus of the deed, as murder and theft: secondly, through being directed to an evil end, as when a person gives an alms for the sake of vainglory. Now the observances of the magic art are not evil as to the genus of the deed, for they consist in certain fasts and prayers to God; moreover, they are directed to a good end, namely, the acquisition of science. Therefore it is not unlawful to practice these observances.

**Objection 2:** Further, it is written ([Dan. 1:17](#)) that "to the children" who abstained, "God gave knowledge, and understanding in every book, and wisdom." Now the observances of the magic

---

[Donate bitcoin](#). St. Isidore [e-book library/forum](#) » [aquinas](#) » [english](#) » [summa](#) » [SS](#) » [SS096.html](#) Its through God: and consequently it is not unlawful to practice it.

**Objection 3:** Further, seemingly, as stated above ([Article \[1\]](#)), the reason why it is wrong to inquire of the demons concerning the future is because they have no knowledge of it, this knowledge being proper to God. Yet the demons know scientific truths: because sciences are about things necessary and invariable, and such things are subject to human knowledge, and much more to the knowledge of demons, who are of keener intellect, as Augustine says [*Gen. ad lit. ii, 17; De Divin. Daemon. 3,4*]. Therefore it seems to be no sin to practice the magic art, even though it achieve its result through the demons.

**On the contrary,** It is written ([Dt. 18:10,11](#)): "Neither let there be found among you... anyone... that seeketh the truth from the dead": which search relies on the demons' help. Now through the observances of the magic art, knowledge of the truth is sought "by means of certain signs agreed upon by compact with the demons" [*\*Augustine, De Doctr. Christ. ii, 20; see above Question [92], Article [2]*]. Therefore it is unlawful to practice the notary art.

**I answer that,** The magic art is both unlawful and futile. It is unlawful, because the means it employs for acquiring knowledge have not in themselves the power to cause science, consisting as they do in gazing certain shapes, and muttering certain strange words, and so forth. Wherefore this art does not make use of these things as causes, but as signs; not however as signs instituted by God, as are the sacramental signs. It follows, therefore, that they are empty signs, and consequently a kind of "agreement or covenant made with the demons for the purpose of consultation and of compact by tokens" [*\*Augustine, De Doctr. Christ. ii, 20; see above Question [92], Article [2]*]. Wherefore the magic art is to be absolutely repudiated and avoided by Christian, even as other arts of vain and noxious superstition, as Augustine declares (*De Doctr. Christ. ii, 23*). This art is also useless for the acquisition of science. For since it is not intended by means of this art to acquire science in a manner connatural to man, namely, by discovery and instruction, the consequence is that this effect is expected either from God or from the demons. Now it is certain that some have received wisdom and science infused into them by God, as related of Solomon ([3 Kgs. 3 and 2 Paralip 1](#)). Moreover, our Lord said to His disciples ([Lk. 21:15](#)): "I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to resist and gainsay." However, this gift is not granted to all, or in connection with any particular observance, but according to the will of the Holy Ghost, as stated in *1 Cor. 12:8*, "To one indeed by the Spirit is given the word of wisdom, to another the word of knowledge, according to the same Spirit," and afterwards it is said ([1 Cor. 12:11](#)): "All these things one and the same Spirit worketh, dividing to everyone according as He will." On the other hand it does not belong to the demons to enlighten the intellect, as stated in the FP, Question [109], Article [3]. Now the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom is effected by the enlightening of the intellect, wherefore never did anyone acquire knowledge by means of the demons. Hence Augustine says (*De Civ. Dei x, 9*): "Porphyry confesses that the intellectual soul is in no way cleansed by theurgic inventions," i.e. the operations "of the demons, so as to be fitted to see its God, and discern what is true," such as are all scientific conclusions. The demons may, however, be able by speaking to men to express in words certain teachings of the sciences, but this is not what is sought by means of magic.

**Reply to Objection 1:** It is a good thing to acquire knowledge, but it is not good to acquire it by undue means, and it is to this end that the magic art tends.

**Reply to Objection 2:** The abstinence of these children was not in accordance with a vain observance of the notary art, but according to the authority of the divine law, for they refused to be defiled by the meat of Gentiles. Hence as a reward for their obedience they received

---

**Reply to Objection 3:** To seek knowledge of the future from the demons is a sin not only because they are ignorant of the future, but also on account of the fellowship entered into with them, which also applies to the case in point.

---

[Index](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Second Part of the Second Part](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Question: 96](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Article: 2](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

## **Whether observances directed to the alteration of bodies, as for the purpose of acquiring health or the like, are unlawful?**

**Objection 1:** It would seem that observances directed to the alteration of bodies, as for the purpose of acquiring health, or the like, are lawful. It is lawful to make use of the natural forces of bodies in order to produce their proper effects. Now in the physical order things have certain occult forces, the reason of which man is unable to assign; for instance that the magnet attracts iron, and many like instances, all of which Augustine enumerates (De Civ. Dei xxi, 5,7). Therefore it would seem lawful to employ such like forces for the alteration of bodies.

**Objection 2:** Further, artificial bodies are subject to the heavenly bodies, just as natural bodies are. Now natural bodies acquire certain occult forces resulting from their species through the influence of the heavenly bodies. Therefore artificial bodies, e.g. images, also acquire from the heavenly bodies a certain occult force for the production of certain effects. Therefore it is not unlawful to make use of them and of such like things.

**Objection 3:** Further, the demons too are able to alter bodies in many ways, as Augustine states (De Trin. iii, 8,9). But their power is from God. Therefore it is lawful to make use of their power for the purpose of producing these alterations.

**On the contrary,** Augustine says (De Doctr. Christ. ii, 20) that "to superstition belong the experiments of magic arts, amulets and nostrums condemned by the medical faculty, consisting either of incantations or of certain cyphers which they call characters, or of any kind of thing worn or fastened on."

**I answer that,** In things done for the purpose of producing some bodily effect we must consider whether they seem able to produce that effect naturally: for if so it will not be unlawful to do so, since it is lawful to employ natural causes in order to produce their proper effects. But, if they seem unable to produce those effects naturally, it follows that they are employed for the purpose of producing those effects, not as causes but only as signs, so that they come under the head of "compact by tokens entered into with the demons" [\*Augustine, De Doctr. Christ.; see above Question [92], Article [2]]. Wherefore Augustine says (De Civ. Dei xxi, 6): "The demons are allured by means of creatures, which were made, not by them, but by God. They are enticed by various objects differing according to the various things in which they delight, not as animals by meat, but as spirits by signs, such as are to each one's liking, by means of various kinds of stones, herbs, trees, animals, songs and rites."

---

[Donate bitcoin](#). St. Isidore [e-book library/forum](#) » [aquinas](#) » [english](#) » [summa](#) » [SS](#) » [SS096.html](#)gs simply for the purpose of causing certain effects such as they are thought to have the natural power of producing. But if in addition there be employed certain characters, words, or any other vain observances which clearly have no efficacy by nature, it will be superstitious and unlawful.

**Reply to Objection 2:** The natural forces of natural bodies result from their substantial forms which they acquire through the influence of heavenly bodies; wherefore through this same influence they acquire certain active forces. On the other hand the forms of artificial bodies result from the conception of the craftsman; and since they are nothing else but composition, order and shape, as stated in Phys. i, 5, they cannot have a natural active force. Consequently, no force accrues to them from the influence of heavenly bodies, in so far as they are artificial, but only in respect of their natural matter. Hence it is false, what Porphyry held, according to Augustine (De Civ. Dei x, 11), that "by herbs, stones, animals, certain particular sounds, words, shapes and devices, or again by certain movements of the stars observed in the course of the heavens it is possible for men to fashion on earth forces capable of carrying into effect the various dispositions of the stars," as though the results of the magic arts were to be ascribed to the power of the heavenly bodies. In fact as Augustine adds (De Civ. Dei x, 11), "all these things are to be ascribed to the demons, who delude the souls that are subject to them."

Wherefore those images called astronomical also derive their efficacy from the actions of the demons: a sign of this is that it is requisite to inscribe certain characters on them which do not conduce to any effect naturally, since shape is not a principle of natural action. Yet astronomical images differ from necromantic images in this, that the latter include certain explicit invocations and trickery, wherefore they come under the head of explicit agreements made with the demons: whereas in the other images there are tacit agreements by means of tokens in certain shapes or characters.

**Reply to Objection 3:** It belongs to the domain of the divine majesty, to Whom the demons are subject, that God should employ them to whatever purpose He will. But man has not been entrusted with power over the demons, to employ them to whatsoever purpose he will; on the contrary, it is appointed that he should wage war against the demons. Hence in no way is it lawful for man to make use of the demons' help by compacts either tacit or express.

---

[Index](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Second Part of the Second Part](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

[Question: 96](#) [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

Article: 3 [[<<](#) | [>>](#)]

## Whether observances directed to the purpose of fortune-telling are unlawful?

**Objection 1:** It would seem that observances directed to the purpose of fortune-telling are not unlawful. Sickness is one of the misfortunes that occur to man. Now sickness in man is preceded by certain symptoms, which the physician observes. Therefore it seems not unlawful to observe such like signs.

---

Now nearly everyone experiences that certain times, or places, hearing of certain words meetings of men or animals, uncanny or ungainly actions, are presages of good or evil to come. Therefore it seems not unlawful to observe these things.

**Objection 3:** Further, human actions and occurrences are disposed by divine providence in a certain order: and this order seems to require that precedent events should be signs of subsequent occurrences: wherefore, according to the Apostle ([1 Cor. 10:6](#)), the things that happened to the fathers of old are signs of those that take place in our time. Now it is not unlawful to observe the order that proceeds from divine providence. Therefore it is seemingly not unlawful to observe these presages.

**On the contrary,** Augustine says (De Doctr. Christ. ii, 20) that "a thousand vain observances are comprised under the head of compacts entered into with the demons: for instance, the twitching of a limb; a stone, a dog, or a boy coming between friends walking together; kicking the door-post when anyone passes in front of one's house; to go back to bed if you happen to sneeze while putting on your shoes; to return home if you trip when going forth; when the rats have gnawed a hole in your clothes, to fear superstitiously a future evil rather than to regret the actual damage."

**I answer that,** Men attend to all these observances, not as causes but as signs of future events, good or evil. Nor do they observe them as signs given by God, since these signs are brought forward, not on divine authority, but rather by human vanity with the cooperation of the malice of the demons, who strive to entangle men's minds with such like trifles. Accordingly it is evident that all these observances are superstitious and unlawful: they are apparently remains of idolatry, which authorized the observance of auguries, of lucky and unlucky days which is allied to divination by the stars, in respect of which one day differentiated from another: except that these observances are devoid of reason and art, wherefore they are yet more vain and superstitious.

**Reply to Objection 1:** The causes of sickness are seated in us, and they produce certain signs of sickness to come, which physicians lawfully observe. Wherefore it is not unlawful to consider a presage of future events as proceeding from its cause; as when a slave fears a flogging when he sees his master's anger. Possibly the same might be said if one were to fear for child lest it take harm from the evil eye, of which we have spoken in the FP, Question [117], Article [3], ad 2. But this does not apply to this kind of observances.

**Reply to Objection 2:** That men have at first experienced a certain degree of truth in these observances is due to chance. But afterwards when a man begins to entangle his mind with observances of this kind, many things occur in connection with them through the trickery of the demons, "so that men, through being entangled in these observances, become yet more curious, and more and more embroiled in the manifold snares of a pernicious error," as Augustine says (De Doctr. Christ. ii, 23).

**Reply to Objection 3:** Among the Jewish people of whom Christ was to be born, not only words but also deeds were prophetic, as Augustine states (Contra Faust. iv, 2; xxii, 24). Wherefore it is lawful to apply those deeds to our instruction, as signs given by God. Not all things, however, that occur through divine providence are ordered so as to be signs of the future. Hence the argument does not prove.

---

---

## Whether it is unlawful to wear divine words at the neck?

**Objection 1:** It would seem that it is not unlawful to wear divine words at the neck. Divine words are no less efficacious when written than when uttered. But it is lawful to utter sacred words for the purpose of producing certain effects; (for instance, in order to heal the sick), such as the "Our Father" or the "Hail Mary," or in any way whatever to call on the Lord's name, according to Mk. 16:17,18, "In My name they shall cast out devils, they shall speak with new tongues, they shall take up serpents." Therefore it seems to be lawful to wear sacred words at one's neck, as a remedy for sickness or for any kind of distress.

**Objection 2:** Further, sacred words are no less efficacious on the human body than on the bodies of serpents and other animals. Now certain incantations are efficacious in checking serpents, or in healing certain other animals: wherefore it is written ([Ps. 57:5](#)): "Their madness is according to the likeness of a serpent, like the deaf asp that stoppeth her ears, which will not hear the voice of the charmers, nor of the wizard that charmeth wisely." Therefore it is lawful to wear sacred words as a remedy for men.

**Objection 3:** Further, God's word is no less holy than the relics of the saints; wherefore Augustine says (Lib. L. Hom. xxvi) that "God's word is of no less account than the Body of Christ." Now it is lawful for one to wear the relics of the saints at one's neck, or to carry them about one in any way for the purpose of self-protection. Therefore it is equally lawful to have recourse to the words of Holy Writ, whether uttered or written, for one's protection.

**Objection 4:** On the other hand, Chrysostom says (Hom. xliii in Matth.) [\*Cf. the Opus Imperfectum in Matthaëum, among St. Chrysostom's works, and falsely ascribed to him]: "Some wear round their necks a passage in writing from the Gospel. Yet is not the Gospel read in church and heard by all every day? How then, if it does a man no good to have the Gospels in his ears, will he find salvation by wearing them round his neck? Moreover, where is the power of the Gospel? In the shapes of the letters or in the understanding of the sense? If in the shapes, you do well to wear them round your neck; if in the understanding, you will then do better to bear them in your heart than to wear them round your neck."

**I answer that,** In every incantation or wearing of written words, two points seem to demand caution. The first is the thing said or written, because if it is connected with invocation of the demons it is clearly superstitious and unlawful. In like manner it seems that one should beware lest it contain strange words, for fear that they conceal something unlawful. Hence Chrysostom says [\*Cf. the Opus Imperfectum in Matthaëum, among St. Chrysostom's works, falsely ascribed to him] that "many now after the example of the Pharisees who enlarged their fringes, invent and write Hebrew names of angels, and fasten them to their persons. Such things seem fearsome to those who do not understand them." Again, one should take care lest it contain anything false, because in that case also the effect could not be ascribed to God, Who does not bear witness to a falsehood.

---

vain, for instance certain written characters, except the sign of the Cross; or if hope be placed in the manner of writing or fastening, or in any like vanity, having no connection with reverence for God, because this would be pronounced superstitious: otherwise, however, it is lawful. Hence it is written in the Decretals (XXVI, qu. v, cap. Non liceat Christianis): "In blending together medicinal herbs, it is not lawful to make use of observances or incantations, other than the divine symbol, or the Lord's Prayer, so as to give honor to none but God the Creator of all."

**Reply to Objection 1:** It is indeed lawful to pronounce divine words, or to invoke the divine name, if one do so with a mind to honor God alone, from Whom the result is expected: but it is unlawful if it be done in connection with any vain observance.

**Reply to Objection 2:** Even in the case of incantations of serpents or any animals whatever, if the mind attend exclusively to the sacred words and to the divine power, it will not be unlawful. Such like incantations, however, often include unlawful observances, and rely on the demons for their result, especially in the case of serpents, because the serpent was the first instrument employed by the devil in order to deceive man. Hence a gloss on the passage quoted says: "Note that Scripture does not commend everything whence it draws its comparisons, as in the case of the unjust judge who scarcely heard the widow's request."

**Reply to Objection 3:** The same applies to the wearing of relics, for if they be worn out of confidence in God, and in the saints whose relics they are, it will not be unlawful. But if account were taken in this matter of some vain circumstance (for instance that the casket be three-cornered, or the like, having no bearing on the reverence due to God and the saints), it would be superstitious and unlawful.

**Reply to Objection 4:** Chrysostom is speaking the case in which more attention is paid the written characters than to the understanding of the words.