

## **SUPERSTITION & THE GOSPEL**

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## PART I - THE ARTICLE'S MESSAGE

1. Can superstition be -
  - a stepping stone to Jesus?or is it only (as some Christian writings suggest)
  - a slippery slope towards the occult?
  
2. Among nominal Christians and unbelievers superstition may be an attempt to get into focus some vague beliefs.  
But among believing Christians, superstition can cloud and undermine their beliefs.
  
3. Committed Christians, therefore, need to be aware that although superstition
  - can be *negative* in the context of Christian belief
  - it may be a *positive* step into religion for an unbeliever.
  
4. Being able to understand superstition's two opposing roles:
  - allows Christians to be freer from it themselves,
  - leads them to treat it with care in the life of an unbeliever where it may be a first stepping stone to Jesus.

## **PART II - WHAT IS SUPERSTITION ?**

### **1. The Meaning of the Word**

The word '*super-stition*' means **to stand-above** something.

The aerial views and map facilities now available on computer are enabling many to 'stand above' areas - even their own homes - and to see and understand them as never before.

Military leaders use hills or aircraft to 'stand *above*' a battle to try and get a clearer view and understanding of what is happening.

To 'stand-above' things may reveal to you their pattern and purpose.

### **2. Hints at Life's Meaning**

Sloppy thinking about superstition can lead people to dismiss all beliefs contrary to their own as 'just superstition' - but this article is more precise! (When atheists actively promote their disbeliefs they tend to denigrate religious believers by calling them 'superstitious'.)

Resorting to superstition is not silly. If you have not discovered life's meaning it makes good sense to try to find it. It is wiser to try and 'stand-above' life in some way in the hope of finding its meaning and purpose than simply to endure its mystery and muddle.

Life is mysterious and complex, and we cannot but be part of it. This means that -

a) our beliefs about life are important because we derive from them our beliefs about *ourselves*.

Also -

b) our beliefs about life indicate our *own* worth - or lack of it.

- For some, life has no meaning at all, and they must view their own lives accordingly.
- For others, life is full of design, purpose and meaning, and this cannot but be reflected in their understanding of themselves, their worth, and their goals.

To 'stand-above' life, in an attempt to try and discern what it is about, is a basic human impulse.

### **3. The Most Meaningful Questions**

Life throws up many questions, especially when so many individuals find themselves sandwiched between their guilt about the past and their fears about the future.

Here are some of the questions that religions deal with, and to which folk hope to find answered by taking a superstitious view of life.

- Does my life have any meaning ?
- If I exist for a purpose, whose purpose is it ?

- Do I have any real choice in life ?
- Am I just a cog in a machine ?
- Is everything inevitable ? Is it true that - '*Whatever will be will be...*'
- What makes one person's life unfairly bad and another's unfairly good ?
- Is my life at the mercy of impersonal outside forces? Good? Bad? - or both ?
- Are there invisible malevolent forces that I need to pacify - and if so how ?
- If there are evil forces, what can I do to get them 'on my side', rather than against me and my family ?
- What can I do to 'be on the safe side' against life's uncertainties ?
- What can I do about my feelings of past guilt ?
- Can I in any way manipulate life to my advantage, or will I be always at its mercy?
- Can I learn what makes life go well, to help my children to be happy ?
- Does my life here relate in any way to what some call 'eternity' ?
- What can I do about the fear I have for the future ?
- What will happen to me when I die ?

These are *religious* questions - even if the superstitious person denies being 'religious'! (They are certainly not the questions that the sciences are equipped to tackle or to answer. By the way, don't take much heed of the 'answers' given by non-religious people – however famous or clever - to such religious questions as those above. Non-religious people are generally no more qualified to give answers to religious questions than a non-mechanic would be to service your car, or a non-dentist to drill your teeth!)

#### **4. The Least Meaningful Words**

When people who are *not* 'religious' ask what are, in fact, religious questions, they tend to avoid words like 'God' and use vague religious fringe-words instead.

These fringe-words and phrases are useful, and have acquired a hazy religious aura around them.

- destiny
- chance
- fate
- good fortune
- luck
- nemesis
- kismet
- ill-luck
- providence

Such words cannot really be defined or pinned-down. That's why they are useful. They exist to be vague and out-of-focus. They are rather like cavity foam-filler - they appear to fill the greatest holes with the minimum of substance!

(These vague fringe-words are light-years away from the nitty-gritty of the host of great authentic religious words: *adoption, reconciliation, forgiveness, sacrifice, cross, discipleship, service, obedience, calling, liberty, sin, guilt, freedom, fellowship, repentance, communion*, and so on.)

Folk find many uses for fringe-words.

- a) Politicians (Churchill was a past example) can imply that '**Providence**' is on their side, without upsetting anyone - religious or otherwise.
- b) '**Fate**' can be a useful scapegoat to enable individuals - or nations - to wiggle out of the responsibility for their own mistakes.
- c) The pursuit of '**Luck**' fills the coffers of bookmakers, and creates the manufacture of tons of plastic objects, images and charms which claim to have a god-like power for good over our lives.
- d) '**Destiny**' is a useful word. Dictators like Hitler use it to justify doing evil, while the naturally lazy person can use it to justify doing nothing!

More positively, words like 'fate', 'destiny', 'fortune' and 'chance' are used when we begin to recognise the reality of important governing forces in our lives that may be beyond our control, but before we have any clear understanding of what they are, or what our attitude should be to them.

### **'Providential Good Fortune' - Oh dear!**

Let's be clear and let's be fair: leading Christians can misuse such words.

Some years ago I received a most gracious apology from the then-editor of a famous church newspaper. I had complained to him about his use of the God-less phrase '*providential good fortune*'. It was, I told him, the sort of verbal smoke screen that those who do *not* believe in God need to use to fill their gaps!

He was honest enough to acknowledge how inappropriate such language was in his Christian paper. Prior to my writing, it had never before occurred to him. He promised not to slip into such usage again.

## **PART III - THE OFFER OF HOPE**

### **1. The Question of Hope**

Decades ago, a vicar-friend of mine had his London church desecrated by black magicians. Together with some terrible acts of filth, they turned all its Crosses upside-down. I assumed that the perpetrators would be the sort of people to upset my friend most. But it was not so.

He taught me that the people that upset him most were those who were not bothered about anything at all – in other words, the apathetic.

Of the black magicians he said,

'If the Cross had so much meaning that they would bother to turn it upside-down, there could come the day when they might turn it the right way up again!'

They were not without hope.

Apathy, on the other hand, is hope-less.

### **2. God's Offer of Hope**

Since Jesus himself said that he was '*the truth*' [John 14:6], truth matters very greatly to his followers. This can have both good and bad results.

One of the sad results is that Christian leaders and Christian communities can sometimes be less welcoming than Jesus himself to those whose grasp of the Truth is - as yet - only slight. They forget that St. Paul thought it normal that we now only *see through a glass darkly* (or *dimly*, as we translate it nowadays). [1 Corinthians 13:12]

Truth is something into which the Holy Spirit *guides* us [John 16:13]. Folk have to start somewhere - and it is usually at the beginning. We must, like Jesus, glory in the hope of successful starting.

#### **Massive Encouragement**

Jesus was not like the typical speaker at a school's Speech Day, who has a few personal things to say just to the selected winners. He seemed less interested in congratulating winners than in encouraging the shaky starters!

Read again Christ's massive encouragement and promises to those who have not yet got anywhere:

*'Ask, and it will be given to you;  
search, and you will find;  
knock, and the door will be opened for you.  
For everyone who asks receives,*

***and everyone who searches finds,  
and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.'*** [Matthew 7:7]

Christians need to be sensitive to those, whether outside or within their fellowship, whose lives show such signs, for they can indicate that a person –

- is engaged with life,
- has broken free of apathy,
- is willing to move and grow.

The apathetic, in contrast to the superstitious, do not ask, so they cannot receive; they do not search, so they cannot find; they knock on no doors, so none gets opened to them - and by definition they would not bother to enter it if it did!

### **3. The Steps and Stairs of Hope**

#### **A Stepping Stone**

A stepping stone exists to be left behind, and that is why I have written that superstition may be a 'Stepping Stone' to Jesus.

Superstition takes many forms. There are pilots of Jumbo Jets who feel it necessary to spit on the wheels before take-off! At a NASA rocket launch it is said that there are 'more crossed fingers and limbs that at a contortionists' convention'!

Such superstition lies at a tangent to the goal of all religious life - which is God himself. The two actions mentioned above are too ludicrous to be taken very seriously, but they are tolerable if seen as the first steps of a spiritual journey. The trouble is that many people travel no further forward.

#### **Stairs Up, or Stairs Down?**

It is no flight of fancy to liken superstition to a flight of stairs.

Whether the stairs seem to lead downwards or upwards depends, of course, on where you are!

English law courts often have a direct stairway down to the cells.

- If you are free they can lead to prison.
- If you are imprisoned the same stairs can lead to freedom.

Superstition, in a similar way, may begin to lead a person from

- freedom into bondage,
- or can be a first step from
- bondage into freedom.

The use of the word 'bondage' above is not an exaggeration. Pastors know folk whose superstitions make them too fearful to go outdoors.

#### **4. Hoping to Grow**

##### **Father Christmas**

Religious growth - including Christian growth - is not automatic; I wish it was!

Many children believe in Father Christmas. Given their somewhat limited experience and understanding, plus all the data which adults put before them at Christmas-time, their belief is *not* unreasonable. We would, however, be alarmed if a person in their 30's, 50's or 80's still believed in Santa Claus. Belief in him is all right for the young who know no better, but not for an adult. We expect adults to allow their beliefs in Father Christmas to be eclipsed and left behind, as they acquire deeper and truer insights about life.

Adults may take offence if they are regarded as childish in any area of their life. But age does not automatically bring maturity at every level.

The child pianist who gives up piano playing does not become a mature pianist merely by ageing!

My own swimming and foreign languages have remained childish throughout my life because I have never worked to develop either of them properly. Age, far from maturing them, seems - sadly - to have retarded them even more!

Every adult will remain childish in areas in which they have not taken steps to mature. This is true, and very common, in the area of religion.

##### **Ending Childish Ways**

Every Christian pastor encounters elderly folk whose religious beliefs, prayers and practices have not changed since early childhood!

It is to be expected that adults will remain childish in their religion if, for whatever reason, they have taken no steps to mature in their beliefs and practices. It cannot be otherwise.

It is so sad when parents lead a child to believe that their Father God is no more real or relevant than their Father Christmas. As they mature they reject both – and proudly reject all ‘religion’ as ‘too childish’! – thus relegating their own Creator to Disneyland!

Their childish religion should indeed be rejected, but then *transformed* or *replaced* by a real, robust and adult view of life – its meaning and its destiny. This is no new problem, St. Paul knew all about it :

*When I was a child, I spoke like a child,  
I thought like a child,  
I reasoned like a child;  
when I became an adult  
I put an end to childish ways.*[I Corinthians 13:11]

We find the same insistence on growing up occurs in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians -

*We must no longer be children,  
tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine,  
by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.  
But speaking the truth in love,  
we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,...*  
[Ephesians 4:14-15]

## **PART IV - SUPERSTITION AND...**

### **1. The New Car Syndrome**

Isn't it amazing that when you change your car you then see so many others like it on the road!

Their numbers have not actually increased, but our perception of them has sharpened to see more of them because of our new interest.

Superstitious thinking (and much other thinking as well) is prone to exactly the same mental pattern.

The mind can create its own 'run of good or bad luck' merely by its heightened perception of what it expects. The mind may note the slightest hitch on a Friday 13th, but not even notice a far greater one on the day before!

The nature of astrology's daily guidance to its devotees owes much of its success to 'programming' the reader to have sharper perception in certain areas. A person is more likely to experience a 'day of opportunity' if he/she has been programmed to expect one.

### **2. Causes and Effects**

#### **Did A cause B?**

The mental processes mentioned above are just part of living, and apply to everyone, not just the superstitious.

A person who is superstitious, who hopes to make some sense of life, will attach great importance to causes - but sometimes see them where they are not.

Can a black cat shape events?

In the past, both Churchill's and Hitler's attitudes to them are interesting.

It is an historical fact that Hitler feared a black cat far more than an opposing army! Churchill, in contrast, went out of his way in public to stroke them. His reasons can only be guessed at, but they were probably to avoid the public associating him with ill-luck, and the need to make friends with anything viewed as a potential bringer of misfortune.

Suppose someone says -

'A black cat crossed my path yesterday. I had a terrible day.'

Such matter-of-fact linking of the black cat with the 'terrible day' deliberately implies that the animal was the *cause* of it.

Now, just pause a minute! That's a mighty big step of superstitious faith. We do the speaker no good if we appear to accept such a remarkable claim without question, although it is

customary for the superstitious to take such massive mental leaps – and for them to go unchallenged.

It is a classic error to assume that just because action [A] *preceded* event [B], that it was the *cause* of it. Politicians in particular frequently take their party’s past action [A] and make it the direct and only cause of present benefit [B] !

A clear example of this is that the sending of Christmas cards [A], for instance, does not cause Christmas [B]. It is Christmas [B] that causes the earlier action [A].

Considerable restraint needs to be exercised, by those of all beliefs and none, before implying that A caused B simply because it occurred first.

However good their intentions, Christians do not glorify God if they indiscriminately attribute everything they like to God's direct intervention according to the A-must-cause-B formula.

### **Protection**

This cause-and-effect formula is sometimes adopted for alleged protection or prevention. For example: 'Touch wood, I'll not get caught'.

This implies that touching wood now will enable the speaker to escape justice - a very questionable business!

### **A Christian Basis ?**

Although 'touching wood' took place earlier than the Christian era, some relate the practice to the Cross of Christ. The only response is - So what?!

We must be quite clear that a Christian interpretation of a superstitious act does *not*, repeat *not*, thereby make that act compatible with either the Christian Gospel, with Christian discipleship or with a sensible Christian witness.

### **Signs**

If you journey from London to Birmingham, or from New York to Los Angeles, you learn to ignore road signs to irrelevant places along the way. The superstitious are continually looking for 'signs' - but the ones they heed tend to be attractive diversions *away* from life, not the great pointers to life’s purpose and destination.

It is the major signs that we must use.

Just over two thousand years ago, God gave the greatest sign in history. His messengers told the local shepherds –

***'This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.'*** [Luke 2:12]

Christ is life’s greatest sign.

### 3. Scripture

Here are a few relevant topics and their relation to Scripture.

#### (a) Luck

It is significant that the word 'luck' does not occur in Scripture, apart from in one verse of a 1539 translation which was used in the Book of Common Prayer. The Psalmist wrote: '*we wish you good luck...*'

But then he added '*...in the name of the Lord*' which puts a completely different light on it, and places it into a specific context.

Just as '*In the name of the Law*' means strictly according to and within the Law of the land, so '*in the name of the Lord*' means according to and within the will of the Lord. The Psalmist's wish could be expressed -

*We wish you well according to what God has in store for you.*

This verse (Psalm 129:8) has, for the last 450 years, almost always been translated simply as: *We bless you in the name of the Lord.*

#### (b) Casting Lots

In sport, the tossing of a coin to start a match is a sensible attempt to remove any biased human intervention. It is a way of leaving the issue to 'chance'.

But the *context* in which something is said or done may alter its nature considerably. The same act in a completely different context may be done to try and *avoid* chance!

Let me explain.

In Bible times, people included the casting of lots in their efforts to discern God's will. (Exactly how this was done is not known - but it will not have been far removed from our flipping a coin or rolling dice.) Lots could be used in legal proceedings and in appointing leaders, e.g. King Saul. [See I Samuel 10:20-21]

In the Christian era, the Apostles needed to replace the traitor Judas, and initially continued the earlier Jewish custom. We read:

*And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias;  
and he was added to the eleven apostles.* [Acts 1:26]

This is an example where the context alters the meaning of the action taken.

It was *not* a case (as it might appear to us) of leaving everything to chance. They did not stick a pin in their telephone directory for a name! The context reveals that the Apostles did not act casually but thoroughly, and then tried to ensure that God had the last word. It happened like this -

1. After Peter explains the death of Judas to the other apostles and disciples, he quotes the Scriptures in support of replacing Judas: '*Let another take his position of overseer.*' [Acts 1:20, citing Psalms 109:8].

2. He then gives two criteria necessary for the candidates
  - a) They must have accompanied the apostles throughout Jesus's ministry, from the time of his Baptism.
  - b) They must have been a witness to Christ's Resurrection.
3. Two candidates were proposed by the group as suitable.
4. The apostles in prayer affirmed God's knowledge of *everyone's heart*.
5. Then they asked God to show them which of the two he had chosen.
6. They then cast lots to indicate this. They believed that, in that context, God would use the lots to indicate his will.
7. The lots indicated Matthias rather than Joseph.

The casting of lots was in the context of a careful and prayerful decision-making programme. They did not rely on simply being dictated to by chance: they thought-through their decision carefully, trying to discern God's will, and then took steps *to give him the final word*. That was their aim.

### **The Lord's Decision**

Their assumptions and aim were in complete harmony with the understanding given in the Old Testament and expressed in Proverbs 16:33 -

*The lot is cast into the lap,  
but the decision is the Lord's alone.*

Some Biblical commentators like to point out that there is no New Testament example of casting lots after Pentecost and the giving of the Holy Spirit. Their implication is that the Christian experience of the Holy Spirit's guidance eclipsed such practices. Certainly the Acts of the Apostles points in that direction.

Out of faithfulness to Scripture, though, some Christians have, down the years, continued the practice of casting lots within a similar disciplined context to the Apostles' appointment of Matthias.

### **Wesley's Decision**

John Wesley (1703-91) was very impressed by the holiness of Christians in the Moravian Church. They used the casting of lots (within a disciplined spiritual context of prayerful seeking) to discern God's will, and Wesley adopted the practice. Possibly the greatest decision in his life - whether to preach out of doors or not - was settled by his Fetters Lane congregation in 1739, in a manner that included the casting of lots. It is misleading to state - as one popular book on Wesley does - that 'chance dictated that John should go to Bristol'. Wesley would have been outraged at such a Godless mis-interpretation.

If Wesley set out to ensure that his whole life was lived in obedience to God - as his famous Covenant prayer shows - it is an absurd interpretation to imply that he deliberately left so major a decision to mere 'chance'! Back to Proverbs:

*The lot is cast into the lap,  
but the decision is the Lord's alone [16:33].*

### **(c) Sovereignty and Chance**

We might feel uneasy at God's influencing what we think is mere chance, because nowadays, with so much stress on the individual, there is considerably less awareness of God's sovereignty, and of God being *God*.

In the Biblical view, chance - like everything else - can only exist because God has created it! It does not exist by chance!

Chance is not something we own which God is not entitled to use! It is part of God's creation which he is graciously sharing with us.

What we might call the 'Rules' of chance are only theories based on human observations, they have no independent reality or power. Chance is God's, not our's, and it is for him to use as he wishes.

### **(d) The Stars and Jesus**

Matthew's Gospel tells us about those whose study of the stars led them to Jerusalem to pay homage to the new King of the Jews. They are popularly known as the 'three Kings', or, slightly more accurately, 'the wise men'.

The Greek word to describe them (*magi*) is the plural of the word '*magus*', which those familiar with the New Testament will immediately associate with Simon Magus, a magician. [Acts 8:9] Simon had become a Christian believer but was slow to change his beliefs. He wanted to buy from Peter the power of the Holy Spirit so that he also could bestow the Spirit when he laid hands on someone. Peter was not amused! '***To hell with you and your money!***' is a literal translation of Peter's response [Acts 8:20].

The term *magus* is used negatively in the rest of the New Testament. Acts also mentions Elymas Bar-Jesus who was a magician and ***a Jewish false prophet*** [13:6,8]. But the term at that time covered a wide range of folk: a *magus* might be good or bad, a wise astronomer or a wicked magician.

It is not known whereabouts on this spectrum were Matthew's *magi* from the east.

The main point is that they were non-Jews who **worshipped Jesus**, and bowed down before him [Matthew 2:11].

Perhaps they were good and wise men, astronomers who recognised God's sign in the stars that they studied.

On the other hand, they may have been dabblers in black magic and star worship. (Incense and myrrh were both used to accompany incantations.) If they were, in coming to Bethlehem they gave up the tools of their trade - to lay them at the feet of Jesus.

The earliest Christians probably thought that Matthew's *magi* were magicians. As early as A.D. 110, St. Ignatius, in his commentary on Paul's letter to the Ephesians, argued that by means of the star which manifested Jesus to the world "all magic was dissolved". This is an important insight of two thousand years ago which has still not embedded itself deeply into the Christian community.

Just as Moses had vanquished the power of the sorcerers, so the advent of Christ (whom Matthew sees very much in parallel to Moses) breaks the power of astrology.

Justin Martyr (died A.D.165), and later Augustine (died A.D.430), taught that the *magi* at Bethlehem were turning from superstition to the adoration of the true God.

### **(e) Prediction versus Prophecy**

Because our future is uncertain, people have always been attracted to trying to find out what it has in store.

Prediction is usually a person's attempt to foretell the future for his/her own benefit. God taught the Israelites to avoid it because he was training them to trust him. This accounts for the zero tolerance of mediums in the Old Testament and why, later, the mainstream of Christian thinking and practice has been to make no attempt to contact the dead.

Prediction must not be confused with prophecy, which does not lie anywhere near the realm of superstition.

Prophecy is God's specific word to a situation, and is not necessarily about the future. There is a good example in Acts 11:27-30 which shows clearly the difference between human enquiries into the future for our benefit, and God's occasional disclosure about it for the benefit of others.

*At that time prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch.  
One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit  
that there would be a severe famine over all the world;  
and this took place during the reign of Claudius. [A.D. 41-54]  
The disciples determined that according to their ability,  
each would send relief to the believers living in Judea;  
this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.*

This is a very far cry from an individual wanting to know about the future in order to secure his safety, increase his wealth, and/or gain an advantage over others.

## **PART V - THE CHRISTIAN APPROACH**

### **1. Under Ladders!**

The essentials of my own Christian faith were in place when I was nine years old. (It was soon after that that I became aware of my future call to the priesthood).

In my teens I worked hard, therefore, to deepen my Christian faith and to get it in ever sharper focus. It seemed to me obvious that God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ rendered a superstitious attitude obsolete, trivial and inappropriate.

I and my close friend David Dorey - later Dean's Verger at Westminster Abbey - used deliberately to walk under ladders, raise umbrellas indoors and so on, as displays of our faith in God and our rejection of superstition. If anyone said 'Touch wood!' we would each touch the other's head - as a way of 'taking the Mickey' out of such practices!

I later realised that the theological basis for our early instincts was simply the important distinction between God himself and his creation. (The temptation of those who worship is always to blur the distinction between God and his creation, and to worship as idols God's good things: Scripture, sacraments, and so on.)

I viewed any sort of dependence on, or having one's life dictated or directed in some way by,

- cats
- numbers
- stars
- ladders
- salt
- heather
- mirrors
- Friday 13th
- magpies
- horseshoes
- rabbits' feet
- crossed fingers
- touched wood

- as putting oneself at the disposal of some of the most trivial items of God's creation rather than at the disposal of God himself.

### **2. Under God**

I grew up with the reality of God's utter sovereignty singing around my head in the rolling phrases of the Psalter and the Book of Common Prayer. (I will retain the slightly old-fashioned language since the impact of the passages does not depend on it being up-dated.)

*Almighty and everlasting God, who dost govern all things in heaven and in earth... [Second Sunday after Trinity]*

*Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid... [Collect for Purity]*

*O Lord our heavenly Father,  
Almighty and everlasting God,  
who hast safely brought us to the beginning of this day:  
Defend us in the same with thy mighty power,  
and grant that we fall into no sin,  
neither run into any kind of danger. [Morning Prayer]*

*The peace of God,  
which passes all understanding,  
keep your hearts and minds  
in the knowledge and love of God,  
and of his son Jesus Christ,  
and may the blessing of God Almighty...etc. [Holy Communion]*

**Any alleged assistance given by a rabbit's foot, a horseshoe, or white heather to the scope and depth of such divine protection, defence and direction of my life seemed to me then (as now) too trivial to merit any Christian's attention!**

### **3. Christians are Different**

First, Christians are called to be different - to be as *salt* and *light* in society. [Matthew 5:13-14]

Secondly, Christians are different because they differ from one another. We differ as individuals (none of us is the same) and we differ in our areas of growth and in our rates of maturity.

Just as many gardens contain weeds, so critics will find superstition among individual Christians if it is an area out of which they have not yet grown.

Not all aspects of our Christian behaviour and personality grow up at the same rate or time. Here is an example.

A decade after leaving school I met up again with my former housemaster - a fine and well-known Christian. He offered me a lift in his car: I hesitated. When I knew him at school he drove like a maniac. Unable to find an excuse to decline his invitation, I stepped into his car. To my amazement, he drove safely and well! Being aware of my surprise, he said, '*The Lord told me to Christianize my driving!*' - to which the only possible response was - '*Thank God!*'

His living encounter with Jesus Christ, his disciplined life of devotion and his prayer-life and openness to the Holy Spirit had resulted in many great changes in his life which enabled him to have a world-wide ministry - but the change process never stops.

Superstition - like bad driving - can occur among Christians. That does not mean that it is appropriate.

God requires change - whether we are on the first steps of the religious ladder or high up on the Christian one. The major theme of the New Testament epistles is the need for Christians to let go the patterns of their former life to embrace more freely their new life of both service and freedom that the Lord Jesus Christ offers them.

*You foolish Galatians!* complains St. Paul, *Who has bewitched you?* [Galatians 3:1]

He describes their pre-Christian life thus:

*Formerly, when you did not know God,  
you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods...  
how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits?  
How can you want to be enslaved to them again?* [Galatians 4:8,9]

## PART VI – SUPERSTITION ECLIPSED

I have stressed that superstition can be an indication of *standing-above* life in the hope of discerning its patterns and perhaps some of its meaning.

- But suppose life's meaning and patterns were all somehow visible at ground level?
- Supposing life somehow expressed its essence in an ordinary down-to-earth way?
- Suppose super-stition was made obsolete by a far greater concept indicated by the word '*under-standing*' - standing *below* rather than above?
- Suppose humankind did not have to climb up to reach the best vantage point - but to kneel down?
- Suppose such '*under-standing*' was done not by us to become religious, but by God to become human?
- Suppose *the Word became flesh and lived among us?* [John 1:14]
- Suppose that Jesus was given the name *Emmanuel (God is with us)* [Matthew 1:23] because it was true!
- Suppose St. Paul was right when he tells us that Jesus Christ -  
*...though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death -  
even death on a cross.* [Philippians 2:6ff.]

It gets ever easier to see that the partial insights gained by the standing-above of 'super-stition' grow ever more trivial when they are compared to the truths revealed by God when he chose to step down and *stand-below* - and to have his cradle, his cross, and his now-empty tomb with us that we might really meet and *under-stand* him personally.

Paul's hymn goes on further, and I continue to quote it because the Christ he pictures is not the popular little-Man-from-Galilee figure whom we can mentally push to one side. He is the Lord, who is so central and so great that he leaves no need for - or room for - superstition.

*Therefore God also highly exalted him [i.e. Jesus]  
and gave him the name that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.*