Superstition, Dissimulation, and Identity:

Discerning False Religion in the Fifteenth Century

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Most religions claim special access to the truth and often depict those who do not accept their revelation or doctrine as living in error.¹ As Christianity emerged in the late ancient world and certainly as it developed an increasingly centralized clerical hierarchy in medieval Europe, it became particularly exercised by issues of dissimulation and deceit.² What interests the historian is how this concern shifted over time. From antiquity onwards, fear of false religion and religious falsity (which are not necessarily the same thing) had lurked in charges of paganism, heresy, apostasy, Judaizing, sorcery, and superstition. Many of these trends culminated in the early modern period, when the ruptures of the Protestant Reformation caused Christians of different creeds to hurl charges of false religion at one another with an intensity rarely felt before, and when individuals living under the domination of another religious confession frequently had to resort to pretense and dissimulation for survival.³

This chapter, however, focuses on the period just prior to the Reformation. In particular it situates concern over superstition flourishing in the fourteenth and especially the fifteenth centuries within the larger framework of Christian thought about falsity, deception, and erroneous religion.⁴ It argues that determining exactly what was ‘false’ about superstitious practices proved quite confusing for clerical authorities. And in conclusion it suggests that the dilemmas these authorities faced represent a culmination of certain particularly ‘medieval’ trends regarding the discernment of religious error and dissimulation, which subsequently informed
early modern developments even as they were in some ways profoundly transformed by the advent of the Reformation.

Christian Falsity Over Time

Christian writers began to grapple with issues of falsehood and deceit almost as soon as the new faith emerged, so, before we turn to forms of superstition confronted by fifteenth-century authorities, we must first establish the general trajectory of Christian concerns about false religion throughout the patristic and medieval eras. While hardly the first to address this topic, Augustine imposed his indelible mark on the discourse through such enormously influential tracts as De mendacio in 395 and Contra mendacium in 420. Some have argued that on the issue of lying he is the most important thinker of the entire Western tradition. Not only did he establish powerful and subsequently pervasive arguments against deceit and dissimulation in all forms, but he also developed categories of lying and degrees of falsity that were taken up by many later writers, albeit often reworked in either subtle or substantial ways. Augustine uncompromisingly condemned all lies as sinful, but by establishing categories of deceit he seemed to allow that some lies were more odious than others. Worst of all was any lie about religious doctrine or any falsity pertaining to faith. Lying per se was, for Augustine, exclusively a verbal act, but he was also concerned with dissimulation of other sorts, expanding his consideration in later works from speech alone to other forms of deceptive thought and action.

Aside from mendacium, Augustine and other Latin church fathers also thought about falsity in terms of hypocrisis or ironia (both Greek loan-words), or simulatio. In classical
Greek, hypocrisy originally meant the interpretation of dreams of oracles, but the most common meaning of ‘hypocrite’ (hypokritēs) came to be ‘actor’. From there it gradually shifted to become a more general and pejorative term for any kind of dissembler. Hypocrisy also became increasingly associated with false religion or godlessness, especially after hypokrisis was used to translate the Hebrew hanef, meaning one who deviates from the faith, in the Septuagint. The archetypical hypocrites in the Gospels were the Pharisees, while the arch-hypocrite for Christianity in general was Antichrist, whose advent would be heralded by ‘false prophets’ (Matt. 24:24) and ‘lying wonders’ (2 Thess. 2:9).

Despite the seriousness of the issue, there were continual disagreements within Christian thought about the nature of lies and other falsities, and what degree of condemnation they should elicit. While the stringent position adopted by Augustine became a touchstone for the entire Western tradition, his arguments were far from universally accepted in his own day. Later, as his authority mounted, other thinkers still found ways to nuance and adapt his positions to varied ends. The most significant early dispute found Augustine clashing with Jerome in a series of letters concerning the apostle Paul’s apparent reprimand to Peter for the latter’s hypocrisy, found in Paul’s letter to the Galatians (Gal. 2:11-14). The sharp disagreement between the two church fathers, and the basic issues it raised, would reverberate through Christian writing on religious falsity for the next millennium. Briefly, while preaching in Antioch Peter had foregone Jewish dietary customs and eaten with Gentiles. However, when some Jewish converts to Christianity arrived he stopped doing so, out of fear that they would find it improper, although Peter himself maintained, as did Paul, that the need to adhere to Jewish law had been displaced by faith in Christ. Thus Paul accused Peter of hypocrisy (simulatio in the Vulgate). Jerome, following the interpretation of Origen, argued that Peter’s dissimulation was entirely appropriate
because his intent had been to avoid immediate discord. Further, he maintained that Paul understood this, and his own rebuke to Peter was itself a ‘simulation’ intended not for his fellow apostle but for those converts to Christianity who thought that adherence to Jewish law was still necessary. Both apostles, therefore, acted falsely, but each did so with good intent, seeking to promote the unity of the true faith.\textsuperscript{15}

Augustine excoriated the idea of the ‘useful lie’ (\textit{mendacium officiosum}) and sternly maintained that falsity should never be deployed in the service of truth, even to spread or protect the faith. Most later debate, however, focused on exactly this issue: whether the degree of condemnation a falsehood elicited should vary according to the ends it achieved and the motivation of the deceiver. Augustine himself could be read as supporting this approach to some extent, as he at least allowed that well-intended and essentially harmless lies were less sinful than intentionally harmful ones. Most later Christian authorities propounded various moral scales of falsity.\textsuperscript{16} Among them, the most important figure was Thomas Aquinas, who followed Augustine in differentiating harmless from harmful lies.\textsuperscript{17} Likewise when discussing hypocrisy, and specifically religious hypocrisy, he determined that even feigned piety might not entail mortal sin if it caused no real harm and was done for innocuous reasons, such as ‘when someone simply finds delight in deceiving’, rather than for nefarious ones such as accruing undeserved honors or leading others into error.\textsuperscript{18}

Beyond debate about whether the intention behind a dissimulation or its outcome should factor into its condemnation was the notion, relatively constant over the course of Christian history, that what mattered most in any moral judgment about falsehood was the understanding of the person telling a lie or performing a hypocritical action that they were, in fact, engaging in some kind of falsity. Augustine argued, and Aquinas agreed, that the essence of a lie was a
person saying one thing while thinking another.\textsuperscript{19} That is, if I say something false while believing it to be true, I have not lied, nor am I guilty of any moral failing. Conversely, if I say something that happens to be true while believing it to be false, I am morally culpable. My own understanding that what I say or do is false is more important, in terms of the condemnation I accrue, than either the outcome of my act or even my intent when acting. These general points about understanding and intent in falsity, and especially in religious falsity, will frame my argument about superstition as a religious error.

True and False Religion

To engage in a superstitious practice or to hold a superstitious belief is not the same as telling a lie or engaging in some overt hypocrisy. Medieval texts discussing superstition do not generally address this topic in terms of \textit{mendacio} or \textit{hypocrisis}, but the root of superstition was falsity: either a false understanding or deliberate misconstruing of religious truths. In his aptly titled \textit{De vera religione}, Augustine presented superstition as the antithesis of true faith, noting that Christians must reject all superstition in order to bind themselves to God.\textsuperscript{20} Similarly in his \textit{De doctrina Christiana}, he described how the church ‘cuts off from all superstitions those who come to her’, particularly insofar as new converts should come to imitate those who are of ‘good faith and true servants of God’.\textsuperscript{21} Centuries later, Aquinas declared that ‘superstition is a vice opposed to the virtue of religion by means of excess’. This did not mean that a superstitious act involved excessive worship of God, but rather that it involved offering worship ‘to something not deserving it, or…in some manner which is unfitting’.\textsuperscript{22}
Among the more well-known developments in medieval religious history is how the perceived locus of ‘true religion’ shifted over time from external behavior to interior affect and an increasingly interiorized sense of self. To cite just a few scattered examples, Augustine’s and Jerome’s contemporary Ambrose of Milan went so far as to critique how clerics walked in his *De officiis*, and he once refused to admit a young man to the clergy because ‘he carried himself physically in a way that was totally unseemly’.23 Two centuries later, Gregory of Tours described a false clergyman from Spain who was recognized as a charlatan when he appeared in Tours and then Paris based entirely on exterior signs. His behavior was rude and uncouth, his speech when preaching was ‘indecent and obscene’ (*turpis atque obscoena*), and his clothing was ‘strange’ (*inusitato*). When the supposed relics he carried here scrutinized, they turned out to be nothing more than ‘the roots of various herbs, and moles’ teeth, the bones of mice, bears’ claws, and bear’s fat’. Recognizing these as implements of sorcery, the bishop of Paris had the clergyman imprisoned.24 Gregory also described another charlatan sorcerer named Desiderius who claimed to be able to work miracles and heal the sick. In public he always wore a hood and tunic of goat’s hair and was ‘very temperate in food and drink’, but in private he would gorge himself.25 The stereotype of religious hypocrisy in which public displays of asceticism masked private debauchery was a standard component in Christian moralists’ rhetorical tool-kit. In the high medieval period, such allegations would regularly be leveled at suspected heretics and other supposed religious frauds.

Also in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, however, we find evidence of religious falsity becoming internalized, less a matter of external deportment and more about internal identity. In the 1130s, Heloise famously declared herself to be a hypocrite because, although physically chaste since she entered the monastic life, she still yearned for Abelard in her heart. In fact, she
derided what she judged to be the excessive focus on the external comportment of clergy in her
day as itself highly hypocritical, noting that those who merely acted their parts well received
great praise, no matter their internal condition. ‘I am judged religious’, she wrote, ‘at a time
when there is little in religion which is not hypocrisy, when whoever does not offend the
opinions of men receives the highest praise’.

Without going into more detail about the rise of internal, affective religion in the high
medieval period (a process that was far more complex than I can sketch here), we can note how
this larger trend was reflected in discourse about superstition. In the early medieval period,
concern about superstition seems to have focused mainly on pagan practices supposedly
enduring within Christian society. These practices reflected erroneous beliefs, but many of the
actions themselves, at least as described by clerical writers, were also patently un-Christian.
These might include worshipping at certain trees, rocks, or streams, venerating the sun or moon,
or explicitly honoring pagan deities. By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, however, as even
the imagined remnants of paganism faded from long-Christianized regions of Western Europe,
criticism of superstition began to focus more on the misuse of entirely Christian rites. The
‘falsity’ of these rites now depended on some incorrect understanding of the operation of true
faith on the part of their practitioners, or on some basic failure in a practitioner’s own piety.
From a theological perspective, the essential error inherent in superstition had not changed.
Now, however, authorities needed to plumb more deeply into peoples’ minds and souls, rather
than just catalog their actions, to discern erroneous superstition from true religious devotion.

Dilemmas of Late Medieval Superstition
The difficulties that clerical authorities confronted when attempting to discern and critique superstition in the late fourteenth and especially the fifteenth centuries, when such concerns intensified, provides important insight into how notions of religious falsity developed in a particular and still quite ‘medieval’ context. That is, Western Europe was religiously unified at least in the sense of having a single institutional church (when not in schism). Canon law and theology had also by this time become quite sophisticated and centralized. Within these unifying and authoritative structures, however, there still existed significant diversity of religious practice.

When Christian authorities addressed superstition in the late medieval period, they could choose from a broad range of operations. For basic definitions of what constituted superstition they relied heavily on Augustine and Aquinas, but for a typology of practices they turned mainly to Aquinas’s contemporary William of Auvergne. He had listed ten categories of ‘idolatry’ in his treatise *De legibus*, and in keeping with Aquinas’s idea that the essence of superstition was misdirected worship, these forms of idolatry became a convenient framework for superstitious acts. Several fifteenth-century authors attacking superstition drew directly on William’s template to structure their critiques. Others followed his notion that superstitious practices were essentially idolatrous and addressed them under the rubric of the First Commandment when writing Decalogue commentaries (a popular genre in this period). William’s list began with rites that explicitly involved demonic invocation and then extended to other kinds of practices, such as those employing symbols or images in ritualized ways (#5), or involving written characters (#6) or spoken words (#7), or the observance of various signs or omens (#9-10).

William did not discuss what sort of people might engage in various superstitious acts, nor did most other medieval writers. Historians, however, often analyze practices this way, for example separating elite rites that required some degree of Latin literacy from practices that were
common across medieval society.\textsuperscript{32} The most blatantly superstitious elite practice, according to medieval definitions, would have been complex ritual magic involving explicit invocation of demons known as necromancy.\textsuperscript{33} Such behavior would have been superstitious under William’s first category of idolatry, under Aquinas’s definition of superstition showing worship ‘to something not deserving it’, and under Augustine’s ancient proclamation that ‘all superstitious arts’ were ‘constituted through a certain pestiferous association of human beings and demons’.\textsuperscript{34}

Common practices ranged over a vast spectrum. People read omens and portents in everyday occurrences such as the behavior of animals or even their own involuntary actions, as they appear to have done since time immemorial. In the fifth century Augustine had scoffed at those who took it as a dire portent if mice gnawed their shoes during the night, or if they sneezed while dressing in the morning.\textsuperscript{35} Likewise in the fifteenth century, Jean Gerson criticized people who believed that stubbing their foot on the door when leaving their house in the morning portended ill, as did an owl hooting as it flew over their house, or a rooster crowing before dawn.\textsuperscript{36} There were also numerous methods of active divination and prognostication, rites to ward off harm or confer protection, and rites to ensure success in various endeavors. For example, one fifteenth-century writer condemned a rite in which the shoulder blade of a pig was consecrated on an altar by having verses from the four Gospels read over it. It was then supposed to protect people ‘from perils at sea and from bodily harm, from robbers, and from all misfortunes’.\textsuperscript{37} Other rites were believed to confer wealth or success in business.\textsuperscript{38} By far the most common kinds of rites were intended to heal illness or injury, including fevers, toothaches, back aches, and sore eyes.\textsuperscript{39} These practices could involve verbal formulae, often including bits of prayers or snippets from the liturgy; signs or gestures, the most ubiquitous of which was the sign of the cross; or natural items such as herbs, roots, or stones. They might also incorporate
consecrated items, especially holy water, crosses or crucifixes, or in some cases eucharist wafers, either purloined or acquired with the complicity of a local clergyman.  

What was the religious error in each of these cases? What sort of falsity or dissimulation were they thought to entail? Regarding elite necromancers, the case might appear relatively straightforward. They willfully engaged with demons. Indeed, in the most fearful imaginings of their critics, they blatantly worshiped demons through their elaborate rituals. As Pope John XXII wrote in the decretal *Super illius specula*, one of the most sweeping papal pronouncements against such magicians, ‘they ally themselves with death and make a pact with hell’. Some fifty years later, in 1376, the Dominican inquisitor and theologian Nicolau Eymerich described the practices of learned necromancers as he understood them in his magisterial inquisitors’ manual *Directorium inquisitorum*. He maintained that:

- they manifestly exhibit the honor of worship to the demons they invoke, especially by sacrificing to them, adoring them, offering up execrable prayers, …
- by genuflecting, by prostrating themselves, by observing chastity out of reverence for the demon or by its instruction, by fasting or otherwise afflicting their flesh, …
- by lighting candles, by burning incense or spices or other aromatics, by sacrificing birds or other animals.

He and other critics of necromancy regularly argued that demons only responded to ritual invocations if they contained some explicit or tacit form of worship.  

Offering meek submission and worship to terrible demonic spirits was not what most actual necromancers thought of themselves as doing, however. Literate in Latin, they were necessarily almost always clergy of some rank, and they thought of themselves as imbued with both religious and intellectual authority. They typically maintained that they could control the
demons they summoned, commanding them by divine grace or by the occult power of their rites. Their most basic model was that of exorcism. Repeatedly in the Gospels Christ had affirmed that all faithful Christians could exert power over demons by commanding them in his name.\textsuperscript{45} Within the clerical hierarchy, the office of exorcist was one of the more minor orders, but the power they were thought to wield was considerable. Necromantic texts are replete with formulae that employ the verb \textit{exorcismo} more or less interchangeably with \textit{adjuro} or \textit{conjuro}, all meaning ‘I command’.\textsuperscript{46}

In response to this claim of legitimate religious power, many treatises attacking superstition in the fifteenth century addressed exorcism at considerable length.\textsuperscript{47} The essence of their response always boiled down to an argument derived from Thomas Aquinas; namely, that the power of legitimate exorcism extended only to commanding demons to depart.\textsuperscript{48} Anything else involved entering into fellowship (\textit{societas}) with demons, which was the worst kind of false religion. Critics of superstition contended that no force inherent in any verbal formula, or in any natural item such as an herb or a gem, or emanating from any astral body that a necromancer might claim to employ to coerce a demon into obedience actually exerted power over these malevolent spirits, although demons might feign obedience in order to lead necromancers into further error.\textsuperscript{49} Thus the dissimulation of presenting a necromantic conjuration as a legitimate operation of true Christian faith might not lie with the necromancer himself, but the fault still did.

The notion of the demonic pact had existed in Christianity since antiquity, and Augustine had made it his basis for condemning superstition as the antithesis of true religion.\textsuperscript{50} Aquinas had clarified that a superstitious person could enter into such a pact unwittingly, since certain actions created a ‘tacit pact’ between the human practitioner and demonic spirits.\textsuperscript{51} Subsequent
authorities pressed this idea further, arguing that demonic invocation could be tacit as well.\textsuperscript{52}

Thus, although authorities clearly felt that most necromancers typically lied when they professed the purity of their actions, they could also accept that some honestly believed their own claims and yet were still guilty of grievous religious error. A key point in this line of development occurred in 1320, when Pope John XXII, much agitated by suspected clerical sorcerers at his own court, convened a commission of theologians and canon lawyers to determine whether the invocation of demons was ‘merely’ sinful or whether it constituted manifest heresy.\textsuperscript{53} His experts determined that it was always a heresy, and this provided the basis for John’s blanket excommunication of demonic sorcerers in the decretal \textit{Super illius specula}, which in turn became the basis for much subsequent inquisitorial action against sorcerers of all kinds.\textsuperscript{54}

Seen from the perspective of the history of religious falsity, this ruling marked a major shift. The essence of heretical falsehood, like lying, had always resided in the conscience and the deliberate intent of the supposed heretic. One could espouse a false doctrine, in the same way that one could utter a false statement, but if one did not know the doctrine to be false (and did not continue to adhere to it after being properly instructed) then one was not a heretic, at least in a theological sense. In point of fact, canon lawyers and certain inquisitors had treated heresy in terms of actions rather than intentionally held beliefs well prior to 1320.\textsuperscript{55} Nevertheless, the ruling was a watershed. It allowed and indeed required authorities to judge learned necromancers, or anyone guilty of a superstitious action that could be linked to demons, to be guilty of terrible error completely at odds with true Christian faith, no matter how earnestly these people might assert their honest piety. In the words of Nicolau Eymerich, ‘superstition is a vice opposed to the directive of Christian religion or worship, therefore in a Christian it is a heresy’.\textsuperscript{56}
Turning to more common forms of superstition – rites of divination, protection, and healing diffused broadly across medieval society – we encounter even more convoluted reasoning regarding issues of authenticity and dissimulation. Here we find cases in which neither the belief of the practitioner nor the practice itself need be inherently false in order for authorities to condemn perhaps genuinely pious Christians for engaging in superstition, and hence false religion.

Authorities could parse the actions of elite necromancers in reasonably systematic ways, because theirs was a relatively systematized and structured art, but they faltered when confronting many common practices. As noted already, most of these were infused with elements of religious devotion: passages from prayers, Bible verses, sacramental items, or direct appeals to divine power and mercy. Many of the clergy who wrote against superstition were also engaged in developing a pastoral theology that sought to encourage popular devotions. Much as they wanted to promote vibrant lay religiosity, however, they worried that ordinary Christians, uneducated in Latin and unfamiliar with the finer points of the operation of divine grace and sacramental power, would misuse and corrupt holy things.

A few clergymen took a relatively permissive approach. In the early fifteenth century, Werner of Friedberg, an Augustinian friar in the central Rhineland, advised people in confession that they could use any spell or blessing they wanted, so long as they put it to good ends and did not explicitly invoke any kind of demonic power. He found himself on trial before the theological faculty of the University of Heidelberg. Around mid-century the Zurich canon Felix Hemmerli wrote several tracts about common spells, blessings, and other rites. He maintained that so long as people strove to achieve good ends and acted in good faith, God would not mind if they misspoke a prayer or used a sacramental item in some unsanctioned way.
He even contended that the Heidelberg theologians’ inquest against Werner of Friedberg fifty years earlier had been unjust.59

This approach to judging suspected superstition, focusing on the beneficial or harmful outcome of an action and on the intent and inner piety of the actor, fits easily into the larger framework of Christian thought about falsity in general. This was not, however, how most fifteenth-century critics proceeded against superstition. For the most part, they set aside any judgment of the honest intent of the practitioner. One could, after all, tacitly summon a demon by certain rites and unwittingly enter into a pact with it. It was the falsity of the act that mattered. Likewise their concerns about the corruption of official prayers, blessings, or consecrated items focused on the manner in which words were pronounced or items were used. Ironically, these same men argued that God never responded to the set formula of prayers, but only to the pious intent and interior devotion of the one praying.60 They also maintained that sacramental items like holy water had no inherent power. Any effects associated with them to cure, protect, or bless derived from God, and God would only respond when people employed these items with proper intent.61 Still, what emerges from their writings again and again is the implication or outright assertion that if faithful Christians misused some rite, even with the best intent and firm belief that what they were doing was appropriate, the result would be dangerous corruption, falsity, and superstition.

The Dominican theologian Johannes Nider, for example, noted when discussing various healing rites and blessings for the sick that many of these practices were modeled on the actions of early Christian saints. The practices themselves remained legitimate, and trained clerics could still use them appropriately and effectively. He worried, however, that uneducated people, and old women in particular, would introduce superstitious elements when seeking to employ them.
Thus preachers should warn all people against them.\textsuperscript{62} In one light, this argument is unsurprising – just another example of an educated cleric deriding the incompetence of the untrained laity, and of women in particular. As a statement about the perceived dangers of religious falsity, however, it is remarkable. And what Nider only implied, some other critics of superstition declared outright. The church might legitimately condemn certain actions, even if used by basically pious people to achieve good and beneficial ends, and even if there was nothing inherently improper about the actions themselves, because of the danger that some unintended superstitious element might slip in and corrupt the entire rite.\textsuperscript{63} In such cases, it was then the preemptory condemnation of the church that rendered these actions indisputably superstitious, the crux of the issue being obedience, not true or false religiosity of any kind. As Denys the Carthusian wrote in his treatise \textit{Against the Vices of Superstitions}, ‘however much the aforesaid blessings and adjurations may not be superstitious or illicit in themselves…they must nevertheless be shunned and forbidden due to attendant dangers, because often some superstitions get mingled into them’.\textsuperscript{64}

Conclusion – To the Reformation and Beyond

My analysis here has focused on what might be called the theoretical literature of superstition produced mainly in the fifteenth century, and undoubtedly only in that literature was the position against benevolent and well-intentioned but potentially false practices ever articulated so stringently. In point of fact, the medieval church never developed any kind of definitive catalog of proscribed superstitious practices, either in theology or in canon law, nor did the writers I have cited here ever fully agree about which common rites could be accepted as
valid expressions of true devotion and which needed to be excluded as dangerously false or
deluded. We know from prodigious research on late medieval and early modern witchcraft that,
while in theory it too was an absolute crime and church authorities constantly warned people to
shun supposed witches even if they promised to cure disease or to protect from harm, in fact
sorcerers and cunning-folk whose talents were perceived as beneficial to their communities
tended to fare better than those suspected of doing harm, and often they escaped allegations of
witchcraft altogether.\textsuperscript{65} Likewise people who engaged in potentially superstitious actions but
who displayed obvious piety and good intent probably escaped much opprobrium. In fact, as
stereotypes of diabolical witchcraft developed in the fifteenth century, some theorists appear to
have grown more tolerant of other potentially superstitious practices as means of defense against
witches, since this was at least less reprehensible than a person turning to further witchcraft to
remedy the bewitchment.\textsuperscript{66}

Theoretical tracts and treatises on superstition may not provide a perfect window into
how authorities handled such transgressions in practice, but they do offer insight into the
intellectual dilemmas that Christian thinkers confronted when trying to demarcate certain kinds
of true religious practices from false superstition in the fifteenth century. While the larger
framework of Christian thought on falsity in general indicates that they should have muted their
criticisms at least somewhat in cases where people employed improper actions for beneficial
ends or when people honestly believed that their false actions were true and proper, this was not
typically how they responded. Instead they regularly argued that people’s understanding and
intent in no way mitigated the falsity of their behavior if they stumbled into superstition. At their
most extreme, some authorities even argued that certain true and proper actions needed to be
controlled solely because they might in certain circumstances offer ‘an occasion for scandal and
abuse among simple people’. The reasoning behind such preemptory condemnation, it would seem, was that most medieval authorities saw even simple superstitions as grounded in demonic idolatry, the most grievous possible form of false religion, which was simply too dangerous to risk.

Many of these basic dynamics continued beyond the fifteenth century and into the early modern period. The Reformation, however, significantly altered the religious landscape in which these concerns played out. Initially Christian authorities’ concerns about active demonic power in the world appear to have increased, most brutally evidenced by the rise of major witch hunts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Concern over elite ritual magic as well as common charms, healing rites, and divination also persisted. But the world of the singular medieval church, attempting to enforce a degree of religious uniformity across all of Western Europe while also encompassing innumerable localized particularities, was gone. Now when religious authorities from various camps decried superstition, they often meant not misunderstood rites or unintentional dissimulations but the beliefs and practices of Christians who consciously adhered to different forms of the faith. When such people lived in regions dominated by other religious confessions, they might very well hide their practices and dissemble about their true beliefs, but at heart real religious differences separated them from the authorities who condemned them as superstitious. Discerning their ‘falsity’ was, therefore, rather different from the task that late medieval authorities faced when attempting to ascribe superstitious error to certain practices within a structurally homogenous Christianity.

Of course, medieval authorities had for centuries regarded the religious rites of Jews, Muslims, and even Eastern Christians as superstitious, but these groups never figured significantly in overall discourse about superstition. Even Jews, whom Christian authorities
increasingly vilified with accusations of host-desecration or the ritualistic murder of Christian children in the late-medieval period, are largely absent from general commentaries on superstition in the fifteenth century. Conversely, Reformation-era authorities continued to use charges of superstition to police proper belief and practice within their own churches, as well as hurling charges of superstition at other confessional groups. Still, the atmosphere in which they did so had fundamentally changed.

By examining fifteenth-century efforts to identify and control superstitious error, we can see a long tradition of thought and discourse not just on superstition but on religious falsity more generally arriving at a critical juncture. Christian concerns about spiritual dissimulation had originally developed in the pluralistic religious world of late antiquity. Early efforts to discern true religion from false tended to focus on external praxis. Over the medieval centuries, a single church asserted its dominance over Western Europe, while the essence of true religiosity became increasingly associated with interior affect and personal conviction. The church’s need to identify false religion persisted, and clerical authorities’ concern about superstition escalated in the fourteenth and especially the fifteenth centuries. But the discernment of superstition presented many problems. A de facto template was established that asserted the importance of interior conviction but often focused on external praxis, by means of which authorities could judge honestly pious people performing well-intended and beneficial rites to be guilty of gross religious error and falsity. This template carried forward into the sixteenth century, when the new divisions created by the Reformation promoted ever greater tensions while reshaping once more the possibilities of what true and false religion, and religious deceit and dissimulation, might mean.

2 Bok, *Lying*, p. xxxii, notes how she often turned to medieval writers ‘for a more direct grasp of the questions central to this book’.


6 Bok, *Lying*, pp. 33-34.


Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2.2.111.4. Likewise his discussion of irony in ibid. 2.2.113.2.


28 See Cameron, *Enchanted Europe*, or Bailey, *Fearful Spirits*, as n. 4 above.


30 Johannes of Wünschelberg, *De superstitionibus*, Wroclaw, Biblioteka Uniwersytecka, 239 (I F 212), fols. 228r-258v; Denys the Carthusian, *De vitia superstitionum* (Cologne, 1533); and anonymous, *De superstitionibus*, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 4727, fols. 1r-78v.

On William’s influence, see Bailey, *Fearful Spirits*, p. 63.


Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana* 2.23.36: ‘Omnes igitur ars huiusmodi uel nugatoriae uel noxiae superstitionis ex quadam pestifera societate hominum et daemonum’.

Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, 2.20.31.


Heinrich of Gorkum, *De superstitionis quibusdam casibus* (Blaubeuren, ca. 1477), fol. 3r-v: ‘…virtutem preseruandi homines a periculis maris et ab inimicis corporalibus scilicet raptoribus et ab omnibus infortuniis’.

Nicholas of Dinkelsbühl, *De preceptis decalogi*, fol. 29v; anonymous, *De superstitionibus*, fol. 49r; Nicholas of Jauer, *De superstitionibus*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania, MS Codex 78, fol. 56v.

Denys the Carthusian, *Contra vitia superstitionum*, p. 612 (toothache); Thomas Ebendorfer, *De decem praeceptis*, p. 7 (toothache); Johannes of Wünschelburg, *De superstitionibus*, fols. 232v-233r (fever, toothache, backache); Nicholas of Jauer, *De superstitionibus*, fol. 56v (fever, toothache); anonymous, *De superstitionibus*, Erlangen, Universitätsbibliothek, MS 585, fol. 176r (eyes).


In J. Hansen (ed.) *Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Hexenwahns und der Hexenverfolgung im Mittelalter* (Bonn: Georgi, 1901), p. 5.


46 Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites*, pp. 15, 127.

47 Eymerich, *Contra demonum invocatores*, fols. 156r-159v; Johannes of Frankfurt, *Quaestio*, pp. 71-72; Nicholas of Jauer, *De superstitionibus*, fol. 48r-v; Johannes Nider, *Preceptorium* 1.11.29(kk); anonymous, *De superstitionibus* (as n. 30), fol. 60r; Jean Gerson, *De erroribus circa artem magicam*, in Gerson, *Oeuvres complètes* vol. 10 (as n. 36 above), p. 83; Jacob of Paradise, *De potestate demonum*, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 18378, fols. 259v-260r.

48 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2.2.90.2, 2.2.92.2.


50 Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana* 2.23.36.

51 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2.295.3.


*Super illius specula* was widely publicized in Eymerich, *Directorium inquisitorum* 2.43.9, p. 341.


Eymerich, *Directorium inquisitorum* 2.43.5, p. 339: ‘superstitio est etiam vitium oppositum de directo religionis Christianae seu latriae; ergo in Christiano haeresis est’.


Felix Hemmerli, *De benedictionibus, De exorcismis, and Tractatus exorcismorum*, in Hemmerli, *Varie oblectionis opuscula et tractatus* (Strasbourg, 1497 or later), fols. 100r-110v; reference to Werner at fols. 106v, 110v.

61 Anonymous, De superstitionibus, fol. 42r.

62 Nider, Preceptorium 1.11.27(hh).

63 Johannes of Wünschelberg, De superstitionibus, fol. 235r.

64 Denys, Contra vitia superstitionum, p. 607: ‘Iam dictum est, quod quamuis benedictiones et adiurationes praefatae in seipsis non sint superstitosae neque illicitae…nihilominus sunt vitandae ac prohibendae propter annexa pericula, quia in eis frequenter aliqua superstitiosa miscentur’.


66 Bailey, Fearful Spirits, pp. 195-222.

67 Johannes of Wünschelburg, De superstitionibus, fol. 235r: ‘occasionem scandali simplicibus et abusus’.


69 In addition to works cited above, see E. Saxer (1970) Aberglaube, Heuchelei und Frömmigkeit: Eine Untersuchung zu Calvins reformatorischer Eigenart, Studien zur Dogmengeschichte und Systematischen Theologie 28 (Zurich: Zwingli).
The focus especially of Zagorin, *Ways of Lying*.