

CHAPTER 3

Superstition and the Supernatural

NOTICE

This material may be
protected by copyright
law (Title 17, U.S. Code)

Introduction

Not everything that involves divine, transcendent, or otherworldly forces properly falls into the category of religion. However, sociologists and other scholars often study these groups, beliefs, and movements as part of the study of religion. Indeed, it depends greatly on how we define the material.

In Chapter 1, we considered a conceptualization of religion as compared to spirituality. As mentioned, sociologists often do not make this distinction unless there is substantive reason to do so. Since we are interested in social relationships, whether in the form of large and international organizations or small and local friendship groups, the doctrine matters less than observable behavior or measured attitudes. One finds social relations within spiritual movements as well as in religious institutions. Even in the case of Neopaganism, which has the least centralized organizational structure and no particular scripture, and other religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, which have no formal organizational structure and various scriptural texts that vary by sect, all nevertheless are part of or relate to an identifiable institutional and cultural tradition. Although spirituality posits the individual at the center compared to religion, which posits the institution, both connect the individual to a larger community and sense of purpose. In both cases, the system of belief and practice legitimates one's sense of self and one's life. Religion and spirituality are thus both social phenomena, although in different ways.

Even an almost purely spiritual movement like Neopaganism, for example, exists through local, regional, and national organizations, even if they have no formal connection to each other, or don't even know that particular organizations exist. Solitary practitioners peruse the Internet for a sense of social solidarity (Beall 2005)

and discover a larger community through festivals, niche retail stores, and friendship networks (Pike 2001, 2004). From a sociological perspective, such connections unite otherwise independent individuals and groups as part of a larger movement, culture, or institution. Remember, sociology does not just study social phenomena; it also organizes them conceptually and actively draws conclusions. These conclusions create an order to our understanding of reality, and in this way, sociologists are not neutral observers. We seek to create order using scientific research methods and conceptualization. A lack of formal organization does not automatically diminish a movement's vitality or authenticity. Through concepts, sociologists often see the world differently from the people they study.

Therefore, some beliefs and practices that the enthusiasts themselves may regard as religious (or spiritual), we as sociologists should more accurately regard as something else, and that something else is the subject of this chapter. For those things that do not fit conceptually into religion as an institution or spirituality as a popularly constructed culture, we will use the more general concept of the supernatural, or as some would say, superstition. Since the latter usually conveys negative connotations, let us clearly conceptualize it.

Some people would simply say that religion and superstition are the same thing. A closely related view would be that the one true religion is ordained by the divine, while all others are false claims, that is, superstition (see Table 3.1). The first view contrasts religion/superstition with reason and rationality. Superstition and religion rely on sentiment and irrationality to create explanations for observable occurrences and therefore constitute a form of ignorance—see, for example, Hitchens (2007) for biting wit and Dawkins (2008) for bitter venom on the subject. Some people who take this perspective are, by necessity, atheists (from *a*, meaning without, and *theos*, meaning God); they reject the notion of God. Some others are instead agnostic (without *gnosis*—higher knowledge); they have no knowledge or

Table 3.1 Religion and Superstition: Conceptual Clarification

<i>Religion</i>	<i>Superstition</i>
Shared Beliefs and Values —Social recognition validates faith and morality	Idiosyncratic Beliefs and Values —Meaningful only to the individual; does not connect the individual to a larger community
Shared Way of Life —Socially shared values (morals) shape behavior	Personal Life Choices —Independent of social standards or expectations
Shared Meaning —Beliefs and lifestyle mitigate existential uncertainty	Personal Meaning —Existential uncertainty remains because beliefs and lifestyle change according to personal vicissitude and perspective; lacks social consistency and stability
Social Identity —Individual as part of social reality	Solitary Identity —Individual stands alone
Life Validation —Legitimizes engagement with the world	Life Negation —Legitimizes hiding from the world

belief about the divine. As we have seen thus far, religion involves far more than just a set of beliefs about God, which by themselves may be in fact very complex and extremely erudite. Like nearly anything, religion can also take a simplistic and ignorant form, but this is not inherent nor is it typical, as the vast amount of religious scholarship and theology from around the world attests. The implication that superstition as a form of ignorance equates with religion is misleading and does not really make sense conceptually. The second view, that superstition refers to anything that is not the believer's one true and correct faith, is an argument beyond sociology. Science cannot discern the ultimate truth about the divine, but we can discern the observable social truths of religion.

It should be readily apparent to the serious student of religion, whether a believer in a god(s) or not, that religion and superstition are really two very different phenomena. In simplest sociological terms, both seek to address the existential questions that Peter Berger identified in Chapter 1. The difference is that religion creates community and connects the individual to that community; superstition does not. Its beliefs and way of life, no matter how sophisticated, are entirely personal. The debate over religion versus superstition is far from new—it goes back to ancient times.

Superstition

Let us go back to ancient times and explore a conceptualization of superstition that offers both conceptual clarity and scholarly utility. For this, we go back centuries to one of the greatest scholars of the ancient world, and indeed one of the greatest of all time—Plutarch (Mestrius Plutarchus, 46–127 CE).

Born in Chaeronea in the Greek province of Boetia in central Greece, Plutarch inherited considerable wealth (his full name means “Mestrius the rich”), which enabled him to travel much of the ancient Greco-Roman world. Plutarch studied at the greatest libraries throughout the Mediterranean, and he wrote extensively on a variety of topics. His work shows considerable literary quality, and his histories provide a detailed narrative of events as well as keenly analytical portraits of famous ancient personages. In addition to his fully researched and referenced histories, Plutarch wrote a number of essays on topics as wide-ranging as friendship, politics, love (of various types), travel, and of course, religion. His biographers, both in his time and later, portray him as a very intelligent, careful scholar, but also as a very engaging person of friendly disposition. Using his money to full benefit, he studied with the greatest minds of his time, and he also cultivated a very noble and sophisticated but never arrogant disposition.

Moreover, he was a very devoutly religious person, and was initiated into the secret mysteries of the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, one of the greatest religious centers of the ancient Mediterranean. As the senior of two priests, he was responsible for facilitating the auguries made by the Pythia (or High Python Priestess) of the Oracle. This position conferred great social status and influence. Correspondingly, he maintained a very active social life and produced a vast body of written work. His *Parallel Lives* pairs one famous Greek and one famous Roman, in order to examine the similarities and strengths of Greek and Roman culture as well as the

fallings of both. In other words, his works are not pure histories and definitely not simply praises for famous people, but rather, they are critically insightful and analytical works that use a comparative method.

In his essay "On Superstition," Plutarch provides us with a very useful and meaningful differentiation of religion compared to superstition, one which resonates with contemporary scholars. As Durkheim argues, religion celebrates community and shared meaning. Not only does religion maintain order, but it also inspires people to a higher order, both in terms of understanding and in actual living. Important things like truth and justice are never perfect, but they can be better tomorrow than they are today. Religion reassures us that such higher purposes are in fact important; whether it be the polytheism of Plutarch or the monotheisms that dominate today, the divine inspires us to improvement.

For Plutarch, superstition is not religion at all, but its negation. Citing Heraclitus, Plutarch ([c. 100 CE] 2002) argues that

people awake enjoy a world in common . . . but the superstitious man enjoys no world in common with the rest of mankind; for neither when awake does he use his intelligence, nor when asleep is he freed from his agitation, but his reasoning power is sunk in dreams, his fears ever wakeful, and there is no escape or removal. (p. 463)

Plutarch mentions several despots, all of whom inflicted harsh judgment and severe restrictions on life, but none of whom enjoyed the absolute control over people as does superstition. With superstition, compared to the human despot, "there is no escape, no running away, no chance to revolt (Plutarch [c. 100 CE] 2002:465). With religion, the gods provide knowledge and the intelligence to discern truth from falsehood, virtue from depravity. As Plutarch states, the religious person "looks to find reason in himself and in his surroundings." Religion thus enables a person to live actively and meaningfully. It connects the individual to other people and to the larger world. In contrast, superstition disables a person. Social conditions and events that we might understand through observation and insight become unfathomable. As Plutarch writes, "in the estimation of the superstitious man, every indisposition of his body, loss of property, deaths of children, or mishaps and failures in public are classed as afflictions of God or attacks of an evil spirit" (p. 475) rather than the outcome of one's own actions or forces in society. We will see examples of both misclassifications, that people who embrace superstition embrace a kind of magic and mysticism. It reduces people to the haphazard whims of unknowable forces.

As a result, superstitious people fear every moment and every event, no matter how apparently momentary and trivial. They interpret everything as a sign, as a portent of changing fortunes, usually negative. Whereas the religious person understands the gods as powerful yet nurturing, firm yet forgiving, the superstitious person sees them as "rash, vengeful, cruel, and easily offended; as a result, the superstitious man is bound to hate and fear the gods . . . and yet, though he dreads them, he worships them" (Plutarch [c. 100 CE] 2002:489). Fear forces the superstitious person to comply: "The atheist thinks there are no gods; the superstitious man

wishes there were none, but believes in them against his will” (p. 491). In sociological terms, religion inspires a person to understand, to strive toward improvement in all parts of life in which a person can have an impact. Superstition isolates the individual and causes a person to tremble in fear of the gods and of the world, all of which appear as overwhelmingly mysterious and threatening.

Plutarch’s point is imperative for understanding the power of superstition compared to religion. The religious person loves God; the superstitious person fears God. The superstitious person hates the uncertainty of signs and portents, and all the meaningless rituals, magic charms (like a rabbit’s foot), spells, gestures (such as knocking on wood), and the petty beliefs (that, for example, breaking a mirror brings 7 years of bad luck). They are annoying and petty and endless, and of little effect, but necessary for the superstitious person. Driven by fear, the superstitious person believes in God (or the gods) not for active improvement, “but because he is afraid not to believe” (Plutarch [c. 100 CE] 2002:491). Consequently, the fearful superstitious person runs amok, always on guard against transgressions large and small, but always uncertain as to outcome. Without the social integration that religion provides, the superstitious person never faces the vicissitudes of life, but constantly runs away from problems, large and small, real and imagined. The superstitious individual stands alone, powerless, ignorant, and afraid.

In contrast, the religious person knows that, whatever may happen in life, there is divine purpose involved and further, that faith connects people and provides the hope that we can know, we can understand, and we can work toward something better. The devout stand together. Plutarch’s stance is strongly sociological—that religion and superstition are issues of the degree and type of social integration, not primarily of the content of beliefs.

In the sections that follow, we will see how this conceptualization applies to events in different times and places, and how superstition contrasts with religion. As always, we will not judge the value of one belief compared to others, but rather attempt to assess the outcome of different types of belief—both religious and superstitious—in social circumstances.

Sparta and Athens

Among the ancient Greek city-states, Sparta stood alone, with a social order and way of life that differed starkly from the others. Although we may think fondly of the Spartans for their valiant stand against the Persians at the battle of Thermopylae in 380 BCE, the full story of the Spartans is considerably less honorable. At Thermopylae, 300 Spartans, and other Greek allies, namely, 700 Thebans and 400 Thebans, stood against the Persian army, some 180,000–250,000 strong. The Greeks were cut down to the last man. However, they held out for 3 days, and this allowed the Athenian navy to move into position and obliterate the Persian fleet at sea. Dispossessed of supplies, the Persian army could not fight effectively against the Greek land army, which forced the Persian King Xerxes to withdraw from Greece.

Other than this shining moment of unity among the Greek city-states, Sparta otherwise was most incompatible with Thebes, Corinth, Athens, and the others. In

Spartans: Reality Versus Hollywood

The recent movie *300*, based on the battle of Thermopylae, is factually wrong at nearly every point. Indeed, the only historical accuracy seems to be the number of Spartans present.

As discussed in the main text, the Spartans were basically Greek-speaking hoplites. While true that the other Greek soldiers, generally known as *hoplites*, were usually not full-time warriors, they were nevertheless well-trained and often experienced in battle. Unlike the Spartans, who relied on the brutal oppression of the *helots* (collective term for local non-Spartans stripped of all rights) to produce food and perform manual labor, soldiers from the other Greek city-states lived as farmers or skilled workers who performed their own labor and provided their own support. In peacetime, they farmed the land, but skilled workers also quarried stone, built roads and aqueducts, and sometimes wrote literature and philosophy. Socrates, for example, served as a hoplite in three major campaigns, and the famous Athenian general and politician Alcibiades (450–404 BCE) writes in his *Symposium* that Socrates exhibited great bravery and saved his life at the battle of Potidaea.

The movie depicts the Persians as horrible savages. It portrays King Xerxes as a bizarre, apparently hermaphroditic pervert with an insatiable lust to dominate and destroy. His entourage and army include mutants and other depraved maniacs like himself. In reality, Xerxes, like all Eastern despots, maintained control through a complex arrangement of patronage and alliances—necessary preconditions to raise such a massive army. His personal manner would be cool and composed, his appearance traditional and dignified. This would include close-cropped hair and a long but highly stylized beard, which symbolized his authority and civilized sense of law and justice.

Athens, where democracy flourished, as well as art, sculpture, architecture, engineering, literature, commerce, and philosophy, Sparta was little more than an armed camp. It consisted mostly of tents and primitive wooden buildings—large huts that exhibited no style, engineering expertise, or artistic renderings. Far from a democracy, Sparta was a despotic kingdom that ruled over and ruthlessly exploited its conquered neighbors, Laconia and Messenia. These areas provided slave labor and free food for the Spartan military elite. Collectively, these enslaved people were known as *helots*.

At birth, the ruling Spartan elders examined every child. Anyone found to have obvious defects, or who appeared weak in any way, was immediately cast off the cliff known as the *Apothetae*. Male children grew up with constant physical exercises until the age of 13, when they were sent naked without possessions into the countryside, to survive on their own using any means possible. This included theft and murder. If caught, they would be severely flogged, not for committing theft or murder, but because they were caught. This coming-of-age ritual for males also required that they kill one *helot* male, and violently rape one *helot* female. This would harden them for battle and teach them to show no mercy toward their enemies.

Furthermore, about 8,000 Spartan elites oppressed about 250,000 *helot* slaves. The Spartans maintained control by terrorizing the *helots*, both in Spartan coming-of-age rituals and in the yearly ritual murder of random *helots*, perpetrated by the highly secretive *krypteia*, an elite fraternity based on ritualistic murder. All warrior males learned to live without comfort or luxury, and to engage tirelessly in physical training and skill of arms. Except on special occasions, their food consisted of gruel, made from some sort of grain, and roasted meat, but only from religious sacrifices.

As for females, they were judged solely on the basis of their sexual attractiveness. Spartan warrior males shared everything in common and renounced all private possessions, including women as wives. Instead, any woman must have sex with any male warrior who desired her.

The Spartans were also devout, as Plutarch conceptualizes it—devoutly superstitious. Illiterate, violent, brutal, and cruel, hostile to the arts and philosophy, the Spartans did not seek to understand the gods; they feared them. They adhered rigidly to their sacred rituals, of which there were many, and which must be performed at particular sacred sites in Sparta at the exact appointed time. Any mistake of place or delay of time would anger the gods and invite their wrath. In part due to the ongoing possibility of a helot uprising, the Spartans never ventured outside their homeland in the southern corner of Greece. Strict adherence to sacred ritual dictated events for the Spartans, which left very few days available for fighting or other activities. Consequently, they could not travel far, nor engage in protracted wars. They performed the sacred rituals as tradition dictated. Just as their hierarchical society maintained itself through fear, so the Spartan elite submitted to superstitious tradition out of fear.

In Athens, life was very different. With a vibrant philosophical tradition and democratic government, Athens thrived on public discourse, art, theater, and commerce. Athenian and other merchants from as far as China traded throughout Europe and Asia, and they filled the streets of Athens with all manner of goods and exotica. Silk and other fabrics, rare spices, animals, fruits, pottery, jewelry, and anything else that could be bought and sold passed through the *Agora*, or marketplace. The people of Athens indulged in culinary delights, and they passionately embraced the mysteries of excellent wine, music, and poetry. Philosophers conferred in the streets and in the schools, and artists and playwrights sold their skills to numerous patrons and public venues. Life in Athens was prosperous, diverse, and democratic. The other city-states were similar, but smaller.

Likewise, religion in Athens reflected the structure and values of the society. Priests tended to the rites of the various gods, and all citizens worshipped a patron deity at home. Working within the highly advanced philosophical tradition, Athenians sought ever higher and more sophisticated understanding of the gods and the nature of existence. Socrates (470–399 BCE), whom Plato (427–347 BCE) represented in writing, argued that only one true god existed, and Aristotle (384–322 BCE), Plato's student, developed an early scientific perspective. Although sometimes empirically inaccurate, he reasoned that thought and observable phenomenon must be brought in accordance. In other words, theory must fit the data. This included knowledge of the gods. Whether through Plato's idealism or Aristotle's materialism, the Athenians strived for higher understanding and a morally superior way of life.

The beliefs and practices of Athenians fulfill Plutarch's criteria for religion, compared to Spartans, whose practices constitute superstition. The Athenians devoted time and energy not only to worshipping the gods, but just as importantly, to understanding the gods and in the process, understanding human potential as well. The Spartans only feared their gods, and surrendered utterly to their power, especially their whims. Since the Spartans had no clear understanding of the gods, the gods thus could only appear as whimsical—sometimes beneficent, sometimes cruel, but never intelligible. Where the Spartans could feel only fear, the Athenians found inspiration for ever-greater achievement. As their understanding grew, so their society improved, and their gods became greater to reflect the advance of society. In contrast, fear imprisoned the Spartans and stagnated their culture.

The Virgin Mary in a Small German Village

In 1876, three young girls from a small Prussian village named Marpingen were out picking berries, when a woman dressed in all white approached and identified her-

self as "The Immaculately Conceived." By itself, this was not unusual. Over the centuries, many people in central Europe had reported contact from Mary and less frequently from Jesus. More generally, many people believed that ghosts walked the earth, clad in all white, and mostly female. Furthermore, many people in Germany and France believed that supernatural powers inhabited certain places, rocks, rivers, trees, and other natural elements. For example, Lourdes, France, was already a well-established site of miracles and Catholic pilgrimage. In 1858, the Virgin Mary appeared to a 14-year-old girl named Bernadette Soubirous (now St. Bernadette) in the remote Grotto of Massabielle. A statue of Mary was erected at the site in 1864. Soon, the previous chapel structure was replaced with a pilgrimage basilica. Bernadette Soubirous entered the Monastery of Nevers in 1866, and she died in 1879. She was canonized and became Saint Bernadette in 1933. Since that time, Lourdes has remained both a popular religious pilgrimage destination, not only for Catholics but people of many religions, as well as a secular tourist attraction.

Before Lourdes, the less famous Rocamadour, a commune in southwestern France, became an official Catholic holy site in 1005 CE, recognized in a bull (document of the Catholic Church) by Pope Pascal II. The preserved body of a male was found buried on the site, whom the Church later dubbed Saint Amadour. Like other such sites, Rocamadour is

known for appearances of the Virgin Mary and healing miracles for the faithful, who have pilgrimaged to Rocamadour even before 1105 (Weibel 2005). For both Rocamadour and Lourdes, local belief and common pilgrimage established the sites as holy before and independently of official recognition.

Yet from the start, Marpingen was quite different. Following our usual sociological perspective, we should note the date. In 1876, the leading politicians in Prussia and the other German states fought for control of the emerging German national state. The aristocratic Otto von Bismarck had recently unified Germany, in 1871, under a combination of monarchy and socialism, but the exact power relations were far from settled. This fairly unusual political alliance allowed the old noble class to retain considerable power with support from the urban working class and

Rocamadour: The Virgin Mary Versus the Monkeys

(Daena Weibel, 2005)

In addition to visions of the Virgin Mary and miraculous healing, Rocamadour, France, also harbors a large troop of Barbary Macaques, an endangered monkey from northern Africa. Introduced in 1974, the monkeys are now a major tourist attraction. Alongside the monkeys, tourists can also visit the mechanical toy museum, and a large community of honeybees who supply honey for sale or prepared in cakes, cookies, and confectionary. Interestingly, the tourists and pilgrims remain mostly separate groups. Sometimes, people invent their own connections, and imagine, for example, that the bees are holy and the honey, rather than the sacred shrine, performs the healing miracles. Most of the 1.5 million visitors come to Rocamadour for the medieval atmosphere and to feed the monkeys, whom many imagine are somehow sacred. Most learn that the site is also a sacred shrine to the Virgin Mary after they arrive. This free association between the secular and religious approach now attracts mostly New Age pilgrims, not traditional Catholics.

the industrialists, over and against the parliamentarians and the Catholic parties, many of whom favored unification with Catholic Austria rather than Protestant Prussia. As a strict pragmatist, Bismarck regarded religion only as a tool, not as an important end in itself. Similarly, his socialist allies favored a secular state. Consequently, modern Germany emerged as a secular nation, yet with long and strong religious traditions in both Catholicism and Protestantism.

The economic and political success of the capitalists and the working class meant the demise of the landed gentry and the peasants, both economic decline and drastic changes in lifestyle. A process common throughout Europe, in the case of Germany the transition to modernism occurred as a top-down revolution. The ruling landed *Junkers* managed to assimilate the emerging capitalist class to produce a combination of parliamentary and imperial government that preserved hereditary noble privilege yet also promoted modern industrialization. Basically, two elite groups, the feudal nobility and the modern capitalists, united. In contrast, Britain and especially France entered the modern era through violent revolution as middle-class merchants and other small businesses overthrew the nobility (Moore [1966] 1993; Skocpol 1979). Either way, the rural villages that most people had inhabited for generations were no longer viable. As agriculture consolidated, the peasants became increasingly impoverished and forced into the cities. This process of urbanization has occurred and occurs today wherever modern capitalism develops. As we have seen elsewhere, social disruption produces religious disruption. The more desperate social disruption becomes, the more radical religious disruption will be. Marpingen follows the sociological prediction.

Regarding Marpingen, David Blackbourn (1993) concludes, “the movement of itinerant workers . . . brought contact with a much larger world, even if that contact was not always happy. If we interrogate the cliché of the remote apparition site, we find that they were not so remote after all, but had been at least partially penetrated by the forces of change” (p. 363). Thus, the cliché that apparitions (whether the Virgin Mary or Elvis) occur in remote places to illiterate rubes is degrading and overly simplistic. These places are in fact not remote, as in isolated, but rather recently drawn into contact with a much larger, more complex, and often very different world.

Blackbourn (1993) draws an important distinction that we should add to Plutarch, that “their problem was not that they were isolated, but that they were marginal. That is what fuelled the sense of being overshadowed by neighbors who were richer or more powerful” (p. 363). The world was changing, and life no longer seemed centered in the close-knit village. Even worse, the village seemed to lack any importance whatsoever. Poor, uneducated, ignored by a rapidly advancing nation and economy, the outside world penetrated places like Marpingen just enough to wreck the traditional economy and expropriate and exploit its land and people, but had not penetrated enough to offer social mobility. Blackbourn documents many such cases, demonstrating that apparitions of the Marpingen sort, where unremarkable people receive remarkable supernatural visitations, occurred overwhelmingly in small villages undergoing rapid transition from traditional to modern ways of life and livelihood. This transition destroyed the village’s social networks.

Peasants sought work in far-off and often dangerous settings, such as coal mines and factories, which dispersed once close-knit populations around the country.

Those who remained, typically women of poor health or other attributes considered unattractive for marriage, faced the bleakest prospects. In the case of Soubirous in Lourdes, she suffered from what was likely tuberculosis, was the daughter of a bankrupt miller imprisoned for theft, and was regularly mistreated by a vicious foster mother. Similarly, Margaretha Kunz, Katharina Hubertus, and Susanna Leist, the Marpingen visionaries, were all from families with absent fathers and brothers, and mothers and sisters reduced to demeaning labor. Whether through death or far-off jobs, the men were often gone for long periods, and the women, once proud matrons of the household, were forced into maid services or in many cases, prostitution.

Blackbourn (1993) thus discerns another extremely important conceptual point. The problem is not primarily a decline in monetary fortunes, because visionaries almost always come from poor backgrounds, or in the case of nineteenth-century Europe, from peasant villages where livelihood depended on harvests and community production of clothes, tools, and so on. The standard of living was low, but stable and reliable. The peasants never had expectations of advanced education or manufactured luxuries, but they did expect a traditional level of status and respect in the community, and the stability of the often harsh and limited but certain way of life tradition provided.

Thus, Blackbourn (1993)—and Moore ([1966] 1993) and Skocpol (1979)—contend that material decline is only significant if it produces changes in lifestyle and especially, status decline. Material prosperity comes and goes but is always relatively marginal. Status is all-important, the living embodiment of tradition. This change disrupts established social relations, including religion, and thus provokes a superstitious rather than religious response. When material changes also produce changes in status and life expectations, especially the annihilation of the accustomed life course—when the observable world has failed—people are much more likely to rely on superstitious solutions.

As the community of Marpingen and then broader Germany came to accept the visions as valid, the girls and their families enjoyed a dramatic status elevation, since God and the Virgin Mary had apparently chosen them for a very special purpose. However, the status success could only occur with social recognition. As we have seen, status depends on how others see you, not on how you see yourself. It is likely that family members and others in the village assisted the girls in clarifying their experience, given that they were only 8 years old when it occurred. They could not have sustained such a vision without adult assistance. Similarly, the family could not enjoy status elevation without recognition from the village, nor the village without broader Germany.

Unfortunately, this broader status elevation and the potential for political influence it represents marked Marpingen as a target for the ruling monarchy-socialist alliance still in the process of power consolidation. Rural Catholic visionaries, whether intentionally or not, lent support to the opposing parties—especially in Bavaria, the single most populous state, which favored unification with Catholic Austria. Blackbourn (1993) records that the vast majority of pilgrims who accepted the vision as legitimate were tradespeople and former rural peasants. Pilgrims

almost never included the professional classes and urban wage workers (p. 368). With Bismarck and his allies intent on creating a strong centralized government, fully committed to modernism, Marpingen represented everything they opposed, both politically and culturally—"backwardness, superstition, disorder, the power of the priest, and the rule of the ignorant mob" (p. 371). Whereas the Catholic Church officially recognized Lourdes as a place of legitimate visions, it never recognized Marpingen, even at the height of its popularity. The central government had no choice but to suppress the Marpingen visionaries and the movement they inspired, a movement that called for a return to small-town ways, strong controls on industry, and the repartition of Germany into the numerous small states, each with its own independent noble family and loyal peasant villages. The government suppressed the movement on the grounds that it disturbed the peace and threatened the stability of the nation. By the 1960s, Marpingen had once again become an unremarkable little town of marginal interest and little opportunity.

For a while at least, in the village of Marpingen, we can say that a religious movement formed. Soon after, however, the movement devolved into superstition as a result of interference and suppression from the central German government, and the fact that the increasingly urban population related less and less to the visions of rural girls promoting rural values. Their vision became local and eventually, personal and superstitious—the beliefs of local girls (and their parents) and an expression of their personal fear of the future.

Such visions confer status only to the extent other people accept the claim that God has chosen a person or group for some special recognition or mission. Such selection confers the highest status of all (among the believers). Empirical cases testify that public recognition is essential, that without the sense of legitimacy that public acknowledgment confers, the vision even becomes a liability and further lowers the visionaries' status. They are not recognized as visionaries, but rather, as ignorant simpletons or even mentally disturbed lunatics.

Witches and the Devil in Salem

As we saw in the previous chapter, witches in various forms such as goddess-worshippers, wise women, herbalists, seers, and midwives, as well as modern (neo)pagans, have been and are real. They existed over the centuries, and many claim today that the old traditions never totally died, although we may never know exactly what they were like in premodern times. In this section, we will consider an example of superstitious witchcraft, or more exactly, the transformation of superstition from imagination into action. The people of Salem, Massachusetts, like their counterparts in Europe, did not see witches as nature-based healers and wise women, but rather, as evil hags, as vile creatures in league with Satan who devour infants, spoil crops, and fornicate with animals and demons. Such evildoers, the *maleficarii*, did not actually exist, and therein lies the interest in Salem and the larger witchcraze in Europe.

That people could torture and execute other people for purely imaginary transgressions fascinates us still. The events in Salem (1692–1694) occurred at the end of

Witches and the Supernatural in the Bible

Exodus 22 covers various laws. Among them are (line 18) Do not allow a sorceress to live.

Also see Deuteronomy 18:

(lines 10–14) Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord, and because of these detestable practices the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you. You must be blameless before the Lord your God.

The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination. But as for you, the Lord your God has not permitted you to do so. (New International Version)

However, in 1 Samuel 28, King Saul, in great distress at the sight of the massive Philistine army, decides to break his own law that does not permit a sorceress to live. Desperate, he consults with one, the Sorceress of Endor:

(lines 4–15) The Philistines assembled and came and set up camp at Shunem, while Saul gathered all the Israelites and set up camp at Gilboa. When Saul saw the Philistine army, he was afraid; terror filled his heart. He inquired of the Lord, but the Lord did not answer him by dreams or Urim or prophets. Saul then said to his attendants, "Find me a woman who is a medium, so I may go and inquire of her."

"There is one in Endor," they said.

So Saul disguised himself, putting on other clothes, and at night he and two men went to the woman. "Consult a spirit for me," he said, "and bring up for me the one I name."

But the woman said to him, "Surely you know what Saul has done. He has cut off the mediums and spiritists from the land. Why have you set a trap for my life to bring about my death?"

Saul swore to her by the Lord, "As surely as the Lord lives, you will not be punished for this."

(Continued)

the witch-burning period, and slightly outside the time frame in Europe (1450–1650). Prior to the 1400s, witch persecutions were rare and scattered. Sustained witch hunts did not occur at any particular time or place. Although King Saul in the Bible, for example, bans all contact with those who do magic, he nevertheless consults with the Sorceress of Endor when the need for information becomes desperate (see sidebar). Yet the Sorceress of Endor and her ilk in ancient times occupied a very different social status from the witches of the burning times. In Europe between 1450 and 1650, and Salem in 1692, the witch became a superstitious vision of pure evil, and thus became a supernatural monster far removed from the wise women and seers of ancient times.

Although the learned men of Salem (and in Europe) used the Bible as justification for their persecution and often execution of witches, the Bible never actually mentions witches. Rather, it refers to *mekhashshepneh*, best translated as sorceress (Exodus 22:18 and 1 Samuel 28:4–15). The masculine equivalent, mentioned in Deuteronomy 18:10, is *mekhashshepheth*, or sorcerer (both are Persian words). Such people practiced various forms of magic, which from a modern perspective blended folk medicine, mysticism, traditional knowledge, and experimental methods in animal husbandry, herbology, astronomy, and astrology. Their practices resemble the functions of the priestess at the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, and other temples throughout the Mediterranean in ancient times. The term witch actually derives from the Anglo-Saxon *wicca* (masculine) and *wicce* (feminine), which according to both Julius Caesar and Tacitus, refer to some sort of seer or prophet (see Caesar [c. 50 BCE] 2006 and Tacitus [c. 98 CE] 1999).

With an uncertain basis in scripture, no basis in history, and no factual evidence, the witch trials and executions in Salem (and Europe) proceeded on the basis of invented superstition. Just as the sense of special divine selection can empower people to deliver God-given prophesy to inspire a

declining community as we saw in Marpingen, it can also work negatively. In Salem, the visions of evil that a few girls claimed to have had involving other members of the community were just as superstitious. However, in the case of Marpingen, the visions became a rallying cry to preserve a dying community and its traditional way of life. In the case of Salem, active imaginations worked not to preserve traditional society, but to escape oppressive social customs. As the persecutions progressed, acts committed in the name of God and Christianity were actually negations of Christianity—an abandonment of established social relations in favor of the personal pronouncements of a group of girls. It negated their faith, heightened their fear, and ultimately brought ruin to the community.

Salem, Massachusetts, was really two communities. The larger was Salem Town, a prosperous seaport on the coast. Salem Village (now the town of Danvers) was an inland community that depended on farming in the generally poor and rocky New England soil. The settlers here had never achieved much beyond subsistence, and in some years suffered from scarcity. Although both the town and the village were Puritan, Salem Town was far more open and relaxed. In contrast, Salem Village adhered strictly to Calvinist-Puritan doctrine, which produced a very suspicious population constantly on guard against evil influences and moral violations. In strict Puritan doctrine, much as Weber described in an earlier chapter, people worked hard with few moments of respite, avoided all pleasures, and struggled for salvation in a religion that allowed no degree of certainty or forgiveness. In short, people worked very hard and without much joy for a most uncertain outcome. From here on in this book, “Salem” shall refer to Salem Village unless otherwise indicated. This discussion also applies only to the initial accusations in Salem Village that arose from popular fears and superstitions. It does not apply generally to later accusations that clearly became increasingly political calculations.

Of all the places where witch hunts occurred in New England, Salem ranks among the most famous. The events in Salem occurred after Europe had mostly abandoned witch hunting and embraced the Enlightenment. In 1692, eight young women—teenagers—complained that a witch inflicted torments on them, which included nightmares, convulsions, horrific images, pinching, and other tortures. These accusations, directed initially at three women—a house slave named Tituba whom the Reverend Samuel Parris owned, Sarah Good, and Sarah Osborne—would later spread throughout New England. Good was impoverished and survived as a beggar, and Osborne was elderly and frail, apparently disfigured by some

(Continued)

Then the woman asked, “Whom shall I bring up for you?”

“Bring up Samuel,” he said.

When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out at the top of her voice and said to Saul, “Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!”

The king said to her, “Don’t be afraid. What do you see?”

The woman said, “I see a spirit coming up out of the ground.”

“What does he look like?” he asked.

“An old man wearing a robe is coming up,” she said.

Then Saul knew it was Samuel, and he bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground.

Samuel said to Saul, “Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?”

“I am in great distress,” Saul said. “The Philistines are fighting against me, and God has turned away from me. He no longer answers me, either by prophets or by dreams. So I have called on you to tell me what to do.” (New International Version)

previous disease as well. Tituba was of Carib descent, a tribe native to the island of Barbados.

Several sociologists and social historians have examined Salem closely. Of course, each has his or her own particular theory and consequently emphasizes certain detailed aspects over others. Yet collectively, they all highlight certain social factors in common, and the points of concurrence most concern us here.

John Demos (1982) finds that social disparities existed between the accusers and the accused. The accusers were young women—teenage girls, really—from families that possessed either wealth or high status. The accused, the alleged witches, were all women in midlife, with the eventual exception of one man, John Proctor, and one 4-year-old girl, Dorothy Good, the daughter of Sarah Good. The initial accusers—Elizabeth Parris, Ann Putnam, Elizabeth Howell, Elizabeth Knapp, Sarah Churchill, Mary Walcott, and Abigail Williams—were young friends who lived a life of boredom and leisure, until such time as their families would choose husbands for them and compel them to marry. The girls had few liberties in life, as they were expected to uphold the family honor at all times as daughters of leading citizens. In contrast, the accused were women overwhelmingly in the range of 41–60 years old, as John Demos (p. 65) shows, and at the margins of Salem society. As middle-aged women living either alone or with female children, they occupied a place of mystery in village life.

The girls often socialized at the Parris house, where the slave Tituba was herself an exotic artifact for the New England Puritans who owned her. She often entertained the girls with tales of legend and magic from her native Barbados, and taught the girls how to divinate the future and use magic themselves. As far as the people of Salem were concerned, her association with the occult and her obviously non-Christian ways openly displayed her guilt. The other women in the first group of accused, as well as the many women and a few men accused later as the girls pressed their accusations throughout New England, followed the same pattern: middle-aged women who were on the margins of society, and who were involved in certain trades or practices or of low status.

Certain trades were long associated with women since ancient times, and until the 1600s, viewed as sacred trusts essential to the community—especially midwifery and healing. In Salem, childbirth was entirely within the female domain (Demos 1982), and healing involved diverse knowledge, both practical and arcane. Herbology, cooling and sweating, as well as spells and chants constituted the healer's ensemble. The women likely gained this knowledge across centuries of time, as it was handed down through the women in their families as secret and sacred knowledge (Barstow 1994). They would have sought to protect this knowledge in any case, but the fact that they were now accused of witchcraft was a stunner, given the traditional importance of their services. Like many people with secret and powerful knowledge, these women lived their middle and later years on the edge of the village in secluded houses. In Europe, the women who possessed this knowledge were known as wise women, and men who possessed the secret knowledge of animal husbandry—the breeding and care of livestock—were known as cunning men. The latter practice could also improve crop yield and was therefore highly valued. Like the women, their knowledge was mysterious and sacred, not just

a collection of trade secrets accumulated over centuries of time, but special and powerful knowledge that they believed could prove dangerous in the wrong hands. Both the wise women and cunning men viewed their knowledge as a sacred trust (Barstow 1994).

For the Salem accused, their status as outsiders increased suspicions, and the fact that some of the women ultimately accused were somehow financially stable, even prosperous, further increased suspicion. To people in strongly patriarchal New England, how could women possibly survive, and even prosper, without a man? This question arose in Europe as well (recall the discussion in Chapter 2), and we will consider the answer in the Salem context shortly. Suffice it to say for now that the women, whether wise women or lone women of other backgrounds such as a common widow, lived on the fringe of Salem Village (Boyer and Nissenbaum 1974:190–191).

In Salem, as in Europe, an accused witch must be physically examined, and then tested, if the physical exam results confirmed her status as a witch. The physical examination required that she be stripped naked, and her body examined for strange moles that might be a devil's teat, on which imps and other types of demons would suckle. In order to verify the growth as an evil teat, a man, trained as a witch pricker, would stick the woman's growth with a sharp object. If this produced no pain or blood, or produced what the pricker considered inadequate pain or blood, it was concluded to be a devil's teat. In Europe, witch pricking became so widespread that the practice terrorized women in general (Barstow 1994:130). However, it appears that Salem had no professional witch prickers, so a local clergyman, Cotton Mather (mentioned in the previous chapter), advised the two magistrates appointed to investigate, John Hathorne and Jonathan Corwin. It is not known if they followed the European tradition of naked exams and pricking, but at least they spared the women the humiliation of a naked exam in public (Reis 1997). In both Europe and America, the witch persecutions quickly became a persecution of not only women, but of the feminine, since the accused men shared the same supposed womanly failings as their female counterparts. In essence, women were thought to have inherently evil natures, whereas men succumb to evil desires.

Carol Karlsen (1987) delivers another foundational work. She develops a gender focus, following the Puritan gender-dichotomous worldview: If the soul of man is inherently good, since men are made in the image of God, then the soul of a woman is inherently inferior and evil. As we have seen with the *Malleus Maleficarum*, women's souls produce an insatiable sexual desire, and in general an insatiable desire for physical pleasure. Yet the problem according to New England clergy was not that women would commit sins of the flesh, as men could do this as well, but that women threatened to undermine all of creation (p. 119).

Building on Karlsen's specifically gender perspective, Elizabeth Reis (1997) further elaborates that "a woman's feminine soul, jeopardized in a woman's feminine body, was frail, submissive, and passive—qualities that most New Englanders thought would allow her to become either a wife to Christ or a drudge to Satan." However, unlike common sinners, the witch "took a further damning step. Their feminine souls made an explicit and aggressive choice to conjoin with the devil" (p. 94). Their evil souls threatened the entire order that God had created.

Examined sociologically, this belief means that women threatened the male social order, or more specifically, the social order that men dominated. In this regard, some men, like women, could be allies of the devil if they, like women, also threatened the established social order. Common brigands (robbers or bandits), for example, who steal property only violate earthly law, but women who fornicate with the devil break God's entire moral order of existence. Men can also commit sins of the flesh, but such is only a temptation, not an inherent evilness as with women.

Prosecution of the alleged witches, like the accusation, relied entirely on the word of the accuser, at first. Surely—it was believed—these young, innocent girls of good families would never invent something as drastic as accusations of witchcraft, and certainly, they could not fake the obvious symptoms that arose whenever they were in the presence of the accused. These strange, sometimes cantankerous older women lived suspicious lives on the fringe of village life; the accusers and the accused both from the outset seemingly fit naturally into their roles. In order to prosecute and render a verdict, however, authorities required more than accusation. Cotton Mather supplied the requisite examination, after which followed the most important evidence of all—the confession. Tituba, accustomed to following her owner's orders, confessed quickly to everything, and possibly did not understand the gravity of the charges against her. Spells, divination, and other arcane magical practices were not evil in her culture, and thus confessing to them carried no special significance for Tituba. For the authorities, it proved her guilt. She was imprisoned and later exiled.

As the trials continued, the girls broadened their accusations and named many more people, about 80 altogether. Following Tituba's confession, the witch hunts expanded with great zeal, just as in Europe, and many more women faced pricking and torture in order to extract the all-important confession. Without the confession, no evidence existed, and there could be none—the women did not actually commit any of the crimes they were charged with. There were no nocturnal Sabbaths with Satan, no fornication with the devil or eating of human flesh. Reis views the process of interrogation and confession as one of social negotiation between those in power and those accused of witchcraft, or in other words, those supposedly trying to undermine that power. The process of torture applies the power of society so as to break the will of the accused and force her to submit to society's power. She not only confesses her guilt, but also declares, in effect, that society was right all along. Through the confession, the woman legitimates established power relations, its methods of control, and the subservience of women to men. The confession also serves to warn all women that they should not expect to survive and prosper without the guidance and protection of men (see Reis 1997:136–163).

This also explains the power the teenage girls enjoyed for a year or so. It would seem at first that if Reis is correct, the entire process of accusation, interrogation, confession, and trial is a process of social control through which men perpetuate their dominance over women, just as male authority figures imposed control over the teenage girls in Salem. Perhaps the process is also more subtle. That is, the girls in effect become willing servants of established power, and lend even greater legitimization by accusing other, older, and marginal women. As firm insiders from

families of quality, they are in fact part of the established order, a kind of informant against other women who would flaunt the system, so to speak. What we might call an alternative lifestyle of the healers and midwives could not be tolerated, especially given the already economically precarious position of Salem Village. The village was not economically or socially secure enough to incorporate diversity. Power will not tolerate the presence of its own undoing.

For a while, the girls enjoyed tremendous power, which would never come to them again. Once married, they became the virtual property of their husbands. Their sudden elevated status as witch victims and accusers brought them much positive attention, and invested them with great power. In effect, they commanded the powerful men of the community—clergy, judges, constables, and jailers.

As for the accused women, what of their marginal existence? Living alone, how did they survive? A few inherited some measure of wealth. Others, namely midwives and healers, received compensation for their services (Karlsen 1987). And some simply performed the same domestic labor that women had performed for centuries. They baked bread, brewed beer, and weaved and sewed fabric. By itself, this was entirely customary. Yet how did they prosper from age-old traditional domestic labor? The answer is capitalism. Always controversial, capitalism played a distinctly progressive role in this time period. As discussed in Chapter 2, its emergence as the dominant economic system during and after the late 1400s coincided with the return of the bubonic plague (mid-1500s), as well as the emergence of Protestantism, the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), and general social chaos, all of which wreaked havoc with traditions and created social pandemonium.

As it emerged, capitalism replaced feudalism, and in so doing, changed the way people made a living and related to each other. In feudalism, goods changed hands according to relations established by tradition. In capitalism, goods trade hands according to negotiated market relations. These relations change according to the needs of the buyer and seller, and thus may change often. The individuals do not matter; they are simply buyer and seller. Exchange in capitalism takes place through an anonymous market. Women living alone, with no man to support them, took advantage of these markets by offering their bread, beer, fabrics, and services for sale. They received money as payment, which they used to buy other things, anything they desired. Feudalism, which typically involved the exchange of goods through barter, allowed no such flexibility or opportunity for individual improvement.

These features of capitalism seem commonplace to us today. Since we are all born and raised within a long-established capitalist system, we all understand the logic of its basic principles. Money is invested in materials and labor to produce a product or service, which is then sold in the market and turned into money. The business reinvests this money in order to make more money. The process repeats as often as desired. In Salem Village in 1692, where life was still centered on agriculture and village self-sufficiency, few people understood the logic or process of capitalism. Most people saw their lives changing, often for the worse, and all the familiar traditions, religious and otherwise, seemed useless, even counterproductive. While most people struggled to earn a living in a society that appeared increasingly chaotic and unintelligible, a few people prospered, including some women living alone.

With no concept of capitalism, such a thing seemed unimaginable. Certainly, some evil force must be at work, for how else could a lone woman survive, let alone prosper? Today, with the advantage of hindsight and sociology, the answer seems comprehensible.

The people of Salem Village and other rural locations at the time of the persecutions eked out a marginal existence close to the prosperous seaport of Salem Town. Decidedly less religiously devout than Salem Village, the town followed the logic of capitalism—merchant capitalism, specifically. In contrast, Salem Village struggled on the edge of the wilderness and followed the traditional farming system of feudal Europe. Although Salem Village was not feudal economically, most people lived on independent and mostly self-sufficient farms that conducted trade locally through barter. In contrast, Salem Town traded globally—the seaport opened Salem Town to Europe and the Caribbean. Thus, there was a decisive contrast: Salem Village, strictly devout yet struggling, and Salem Town, increasingly liberalized and prospering. How could Salem Village be so religiously devout yet still only be scraping by?

At that time, the social forces at work were unfamiliar and frightening, complicated by wars, plagues, and famines. Science and the Age of Enlightenment had not yet arrived, but the social forces of emerging capitalism, rational inquiry, and individual liberty were already transforming the social landscape omnipresently but behind the scenes. Science, capitalism, and personal freedom constituted a new worldview that simply didn't make sense according to the values and standards of feudal Europe. (See the discussion in Chapter 2 for more details on the transition from premodern to modern society.)

Furthermore, the girls who became the Salem accusers found their traditional roles increasingly unappealing. Their families would have few choices of men for arranged marriages, and certainly, there must be better places than Salem Village to live. Yet as members of leading families, they must uphold obligations to the village.

Once the persecutions began, with trials and executions, the fear of superstition intensified as people began to see evil everywhere. Neighbor turned against neighbor. Rather than embrace the faith and community of their Christian religion, they embraced the fear and isolation of superstition.

Right-Wing Nativism and White Supremacy

It may seem that this topic belongs in the chapter on intolerance and violence, or perhaps is not part of religion at all. While nativism and white supremacy are certainly intolerant views and often violent, they are at the same time laden with religious imagery and they weave religious references into their rhetoric. Yet without hesitation, it can be stated sociologically that nativism and white supremacy are not religious, but in fact superstitious.

Historically related and often interwoven, the past with the present, nativists believe that the only true and legitimate Americans are certain types of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. White supremacy, often indistinguishable from nativism in practice, approaches religion and race from a larger, global perspective, in that

the issues here are found elsewhere as well. As we will see, the white supremacist movement in recent years has reached out to similar-minded people in Britain and Germany, as well as other countries. Other variations include the militia movements, Christian Identity (a specifically racist sect; see previous chapter for more on this movement), and Christian Reconstructionism, also known as Dominionism. Most of the time, though, we will discuss all of these as variations of the same movement, a view that I will justify through sociological commonalities, even though the particular ideologies differ on some points.

Nativism does not include Native Americans or Native American movements such as AIM (American Indian Movement), because they are not white or Anglo-Saxon, and they are only sometimes Protestant. Most important, they did not build the United States, according to nativist leaders, and neither did black people or any other people of color, the movement contends. True, they may have performed the tough, manual labor, but they provided none of the intellectual and technical know-how, nor could they; they are supposedly inferior in the higher functions that produce civilization. This attitude appeared shortly after the original thirteen colonies were settled, but mostly in a paternal form. That is, Native Americans and others may be inferior, but the white man should nurture them, help them develop their full potential. The so-called "White Man's Burden," taken from the title of a poem by Rudyard Kipling, captures the notion of the powerful yet benevolent white man who, through imperialist conquest, brings civilization to the backward and ignorant "half-devil and half-child" races around the world.

Without summarizing the different interpretations of this poem, what do you think? Suppose a person who was part of your study passed you this and said, "This is what I believe." What do you make of it? In actual research, this scenario commonly occurs. When sociologist James Aho (1990) studied the Christian Nativist Patriot movement in Hayden Lake, Idaho, one of the local members passed him a copy of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The *Protocols* are supposedly a manual smuggled out of a

"The White Man's Burden"

Rudyard Kipling (1899)

Take up the White Man's burden—
Send forth the best ye breed—
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild—
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.

Take up the White Man's burden—
In patience to abide,
To veil the threat of terror
And check the show of pride;
By open speech and simple,
An hundred times made plain
To seek another's profit,
And work another's gain.

Take up the White Man's burden—
The savage wars of peace—
Fill full the mouth of Famine
And bid the sickness cease;
And when your goal is nearest
The end for others sought,
Watch sloth and heathen Folly
Bring all your hopes to nought.

Take up the White Man's burden—
No tawdry rule of kings,
But toil of serf and sweeper—
The tale of common things.
The ports ye shall not enter,
The roads ye shall not tread,
Go mark them with your living,
And mark them with your dead.

Take up the White Man's burden—
And reap his old reward:
The blame of those ye better,
The hate of those ye guard—
The cry of hosts ye humour
(Ah, slowly!) toward the light: —
"Why brought he us from bondage,
Our loved Egyptian night?"

Take up the White Man's burden—
Ye dare not stoop to less—

(Continued)

(Continued)

Nor call for Freedom
 To do your hairiness;
 By all ye ever whisper,
 By all ye ever do,
 The stark, alien peoples
 Shall weigh your gods and you.

Take up the White Man's burden—
 Have done with childish days—
 The lightly proffered laurel,
 The easy, ungrudged praise.
 Comes now, to search your manhood
 Through all the thankless years
 Cold, edged with dear-bought wisdom,
 The judgment of your peers!

secret meeting, of which there have been many, during which Jews conspired to achieve world domination. By using capitalism, communism, religion, and atheism, they will manipulate world politics and economics. If successful, they will annihilate most Christians, and enslave the rest. The person confided to Aho that this book depicts factual knowledge and is a source of great inspiration to fight the evil Jewish global conspiracy. Like Aho (and myself, while studying the Promise Keepers), people will give you all kinds of things. You will need to interpret them.

Suffice it to say that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most white people in Europe and the United States applauded imperialism. Not everyone benefited equally, of course. The working class and working poor suffered the casualties in combat to which the poem refers, and the

capitalist class accumulated most of the profits. Yet rich and middle- and working-class white people in the industrialized countries all increasingly enjoyed access to cheap resources from other parts of the world and the rapidly expanding economy and quality of life they afforded. Whether one benefited directly or not, this did not change the widely accepted notion that nonwhites were primitive and inferior. This was about 150 years after the original colonies were founded. What began as paternalistic superiority had advanced through systematic enslavement of black people into ruthless exploitation by the end of the nineteenth century.

Here enters nativism and white supremacy as populist movements just prior to the twentieth century. Intertwined with religion, it would rise and fall rapidly from time to time and place to place. As with the earlier examples of ancient Greece and nineteenth-century Germany, the social conditions of time and place are decisive. In the United States, the very notion of a conservative or far-right populism seemed oxymoronic. As Michael Kazin (1995) observes, "conservatism had always supported unregulated capitalism and private riches, honestly obtained. For Americans who cherished property rights and the maintenance of public order, rebellions from below were to be feared, discouraged, and if necessary, put down by force" (pp. 165–166). Although some groups such as the Ku Klux Klan achieved national notoriety and influence in the 1920s, it was short lived, and by the early 1930s, the group had devolved into local infighting and national ridicule. Although racism still existed, once society in general sees a particular group as once part of the mainstream but now part of the lunatic fringe, the group almost never recovers mainstream credibility. As we will see, however, the story is different for groups that begin on the fringe, then move to the center.

In the 1860s, a self-educated son of an Irish weaver named John Wilson seized on an idea from the 1660s—that the British are the direct descendants of the lost Thirteenth Tribe of Israel. Wilson also entertained the idea that certain Germans, namely the Saxons of northern Germany, were also related. He concluded that the true descendants of the covenant are, and can only be, white Anglo-Saxon

Christians (Barkun 1997:8). Disillusioned with the loss of his father's small business, which he could no longer inherit, Wilson wrote mainly for himself. Edward Hine picked up Wilson's work and turned it into a British-Israelism movement.

Edward Hine believed that both Britain, a longstanding imperial power, and the emerging upstart, Germany, were chosen by God to deliver white civilization from racial corruption. God clearly favored both countries, as He now opened up possibilities for both nations to expand. Although by the 1890s the two nations were clearly moving toward open conflict with each other, Hine explained that Wilson erred in his acclamation of Germany. Not Germany, but the United States was the appropriate brother country. In the United States, the nativist movement gained increasing credibility in the 1880s (Bennett 1995), as Asian immigrants arrived on the West Coast and European immigrants on the East Coast. Whether Chinese on the one side of the country, or Poles, Italians, and Irish on the other, they were either Catholic, which was bad enough, or not Christian at all. They spoke foreign languages, they ate strange foods, and they sometimes looked white but were not really. The apprehension and unease that accompanied the new arrivals, and the concurrent changes after the Civil War and the rise of the great industrial centers, shifted the center of American life from the small town to the ever-larger big cities, especially New York, Chicago, and Detroit, where industry and immigration in collusion seemed to marginalize the native Protestant white man.

Once British-Israelism arrived in the United States, it transformed into Anglo-Israelism. This belief influenced many religious innovators, including Charles Fox Parham, whom we met in the previous chapter; Reuben H. Sawyer, a prominent leader in the Ku Klux Klan; and Henry Ford, founder of the Ford Motor Company. Sawyer is most important sociologically. He led two lives. In one life, he orated as an advocate of Anglo-Israelism; in his other life, he organized for the Ku Klux Klan. Although he did not conceal his Klan affiliation, he usually kept the two movements separate, and never advocated one when representing the other. The Klan enjoyed a widespread revival immediately after World War I, when social conditions in the United States changed drastically as the economy advanced furiously, and like in Germany, rural towns, once the mainstay of American life, became increasingly marginalized outposts of American life. Sawyer attacked not only black people, but also labor unions and big capitalists who rampaged through the countryside, stealing what they wanted and destroying the rest (the so-called robber barons)—a common image at this time that many speakers on both the left and the right used extensively. Yet one more element was so far missing—an enemy that the common person could recognize. Black people were easy to identify by skin color, and when the average white person of modest rural background looked to the centers of sin in financial hubs like New York City and manufacturing centers like Chicago and Detroit, it was clear that only white people were rich and in charge. Moreover, many were devout Christians. There must be some other type of person, someone not so obvious but no less virulent, and it would take William J. Cameron and Henry Ford to identify it—the Jew.

Cameron worked as Henry Ford's personal press secretary from 1925 to 1942 or 1943 (Barkun 1997:31). Ford rarely spoke in public, and his precise views on the Jews remain ambiguous. Not so for Cameron, who argued that the Jews constituted

the enemy race, and that the white race—not a particular nation or state, but the whole race—was true descendants of the Israelites. Cameron, however, a longtime alcoholic, repented late in life and died as a member of the Unity Church, a fairly midline Protestant church, having renounced his earlier anti-Semitism (Barkun 1997:43). With Cameron's renunciation, the decline of the evangelical preachers in the Midwest, and the collapse of the Klan after 1941 (when the United States went to war against Germany, the supposed master white race), the center of Anglo-Israelism shifted to California, where it would transform into the contemporary Christian Identity and white power movements.

Yet one formidable proponent remained in the Midwest. Father Charles Coughlin (a Catholic priest) became the most prominent midcentury political agitator in the white supremacy movement. Prior to this stage, the Anglo-Israel movement had been predominantly a very intellectual movement without a particular center or political orientation (Barkun 1997:47). If anything, the movement lacked any political goals, but mostly sought to develop a religious doctrine that correctly understood the true meaning of scripture and the people to whom it was truly directed (white people). With the exception of the Ku Klux Klan, Anglo-Israelism remained fairly innocuous on the margin of American society. Racism was not marginal, but most racists rarely attempt an intellectual or organized approach. Coughlin brought the movement to the common people—the working class and small farmer and others in small towns. He also solidified a superstitious aspect to the movement, which it retains to the present day.

Coughlin's supporters were overwhelmingly the working-class elite, who had suffered recent wage cutbacks or reduced work opportunities, which threatened their elite status. Demographic analysis reveals his strongest support among "carpenters, electricians, plumbers, postal workers, bricklayers, railroad workers, as well as clerks, and small farmers" (Bennett 1995:258). Coughlin's popularity increased greatly and rapidly during the Depression years, and his radio show from Detroit, Michigan, generated about \$5 million a year in revenue by 1936, a huge amount for that time. Immensely popular, Coughlin became the foremost critic of President Roosevelt, whom he believed had sold the country to foreigners and Jews, and allowed the immigrant factory worker and other unskilled workers to run the country through unions and collusion with big business. Sociologically, we can readily understand Coughlin's appeal among the aforementioned types of people, who regarded themselves as the working-class skilled elite, and nativist Americans who, as self-reliant individuals, lacked the support of unions and ethnic neighborhood enclaves. Although he was a Catholic priest, most of Coughlin's supporters were conservative Protestants (Bennett 1995).

Although his basic rhetoric was not new, Coughlin incorporated an additional aspect, which he borrowed from West Coast activist Gerald L. K. Smith, who until his death in 1976 was the most prominent anti-Semite in the United States. For Smith, the problem was not only that non-Protestant immigrants had inundated the United States, but also that they had masters who, using the banks and big business, controlled the economy and manipulated the government from behind the scenes. Smith and Coughlin did not oppose capitalism or profit per se, only profit which, in their minds, was unjustly gained rather than honestly earned. Coughlin

campaigned against the “nonproducers: bankers, businessmen, and bond traders, parasites who grew nothing and made nothing except money. . . . [I]t was the specter of unearned, unfair profits acquired by guile and deceit, the corruption of the traditional American dream of achievement through hard work” (Bennett 1995:246). Coughlin’s association with Smith and other anti-Semites would prove to be his downfall, however, after 1941 when the United States entered World War II against Hitler’s anti-Semitic Nazism. However, anti-Semitism and the more significant sociological artifact it represents—a superstitious belief in unseen, mysterious, and sinister forces—endured long beyond the fall of Coughlin and Smith.

Superstitious anti-Semitism and its parallel, antiblack racism, continued through far-right literature and social networks, much of the time out of the mainstream spotlight. Only during the civil rights activism of the 1960s did racism starkly surface; as long as the nativist hegemony was apparently maintained, racism need not take an overtly belligerent form. Eventually, superstitious anti-Semitism would fade, as would the hysterical anticommunism of the 1950s, but antiblack racism endured. The specter of unearned wealth and privilege, achieved through conspiratorial domination, and the corruption of the American Dream, shifted from Jews to blacks. Consistently, however, superstition prevailed.

Just as Jews were supposedly the specter behind the scenes, the mysterious “master” manipulators who ruled through deceit and gained wealth through non-productive investment, now the specter became the black who was seen as a welfare cheat, the lazy inner-city slumdweller who accumulated immense welfare checks and rather than work, indulged in all manner of vice and endless procreation. Soon, it was feared, lazy welfare cheats would overrun the honest, hardworking white person whose paycheck the government would appropriate and turn over to these lazy, nonworking, promiscuous blacks. This is not the place to examine the myths about welfare recipients, but suffice it to say that the superstitious perception described here is entirely false, and the truth quite different; for example, most welfare recipients are in fact white and rural, and the majority of people who receive some form of assistance work at least part-time (see DiNitto and Cummins 2006; Gilens 2000; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Quadagno 1996).

After the civil rights movement, politicians and other public figures could not articulate this vision openly. Social circumstances now required greater sophistication, and likely most politicians realized the claim was false and readily disproven. Coded racism garners votes more effectively than open declarations, and it allows constituents to indulge the fantasy without reflection. Wielding superstitious notions of an enemy among us, far-right politicians and activists appealed to an imprecisely defined “silent majority” who cherished traditional American values of hard work, monogamous and heterosexual self-discipline, and moral piety (Kazin 1995:247). This new message emerged in the 1970s, arguably the most liberal decade in U.S. history, and therefore fertile ground for backlash conservative views.

We should note that many conservatives hold well-reasoned, rational, and intelligent views on many issues. They are not the focus here. Rather, our focus is the use of superstition to justify attitudes and policies that discriminate against or preclude social opportunity for certain social groups. As in the 1970s, the strongest supporters for politicians who seek to dismantle welfare, Medicare, social security, and

public education come not from the rich, but from the working class. As sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2005) discovered, 56% of men who earn wages of less than \$30,000 a year strongly support Bush's plan to greatly reduce or eliminate all of these forms of assistance, and give tax breaks to the rich. In comparison, only 35% of those who earn salaries greater than \$75,000 support reducing or eliminating these forms of assistance (Hochschild 2005).

Here is the part that is most important for us. Of those who mostly or strongly support dismantling public assistance, 36% believe the world will end in their lifetime. Moreover, whether millennialist or not, the vast majority belong to non-mainline evangelical churches (Hochschild 2005). The people who benefit the least from tax cuts and benefit the most from public services and assistance most strongly support dismantling them. Hochschild concludes that such people face a powerful dilemma. Suffering job loss or downgrades themselves, they can fight for worker's rights and decent pay, or divert their energy somewhere else. Expressed differently, they can join together with other people in similar situations, which includes people of various religious beliefs, orientations, and races, or retreat into a small and homogeneous community, no larger than the church congregation. As Hochschild argues, "he localizes empathy. . . . Pay for a tax to help a homeless mother in another city? Forget it. Charity begins at home" (p. 23). Thus we see the effect of superstitious racism: It reduces one's capacity for empathy. Remember that Plutarch argued that superstition isolates a person from other people and the real world. The welfare mother doesn't deserve help, and neither does any other supposedly lazy and most likely black welfare cheat, nor do any of the minorities who supposedly receive special grants and privileges from colleges and businesses. No, my money will stay with people like myself—hardworking, wage-earning, and white. Personal piety and donations at church take the place of collective social action.

Sociologically, the new far-right message would only carry weight if a person believed that something threatened such values of hard work, moral piety, and so on. Superstitious acceptance of the welfare cheat and whatever other fictitious stereotypes inhibits empathy by creating perceived inherent differences of superiority and inferiority. Just as in earlier times, the myth relies on feeling, not on fact. Jews no more controlled government and business in Coughlin's day than black people and other ethnic minorities receive special privileges and consume economic surplus today. Yet the Jew of yesterday and the black person of today, in their role of superstitious malefactor, both receive, in the mind of the superstitious believer, illegitimate and unearned gains.

In today's society, there are also people who seem to lack a meaningful community at all. Although they may live and work among other people, they feel no connection. Instead of marginalized communities, we see increasingly more often today the marginalized individual. Without the anchor of family, friends, and other associations, such people more willingly embrace superstition to explain—and as they hope, to overcome—their isolation and their social and emotional problems. As an example, we now turn to one of the fastest growing experiences in the United States—exorcism.

Deliverance in the United States

Once marginal and rarely seen, deliverance, also known as exorcism, finds dramatically increasing popularity today in the United States. What had been a very infrequent practice found only in the Catholic Church, now finds its greatest growth among evangelical Protestants. When Protestantism first emerged, the vast majority of the new sects specifically renounced all magical powers and supernatural occurrences as ignorant vestiges of the medieval church, but whereas exorcism remains marginal in Catholicism, it has spread throughout the United States among Protestant exorcists and faith healers.

Exorcism developed as a specific church practice in the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages (e.g., in Image 3.1). The idea that Satan or a minion could possess a person only became popularly held in the two centuries prior to the Enlightenment, about 1450–1650, the age of the witch persecutions. In the supposedly darkest period of the Middle Ages, long after the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West and long before the rise of the Renaissance, the emperor Charlemagne, crowned in 800 CE, declared that possession was impossible and he would tolerate no talk about witches or demonic possession (Trevor-Roper 1969). Without recounting the long history of Catholic theology and practice, suffice it to say here that exorcism never became widespread in Catholicism, even during the height of the witch hunts.

All through Catholic history, people could choose to associate with the devil, but the Church regarded unwilling possession as extremely rare and would treat cases as such only when all other explanations had been exhausted. In modern times, this meant that all social-psychological, neurological, and other explanations must first be exhausted—a requirement that involves extensive investigation and expertise (Wilkins 2007).

Far from the official and technical approach the Catholic Church employs today, various Protestant denominations, mostly evangelical and without national affiliation, practice exorcism in a manner comparable to their method of founding as a denomination in the first place—informal, non-erudite, and fully attuned to popular culture. Regarding the latter, very few people ever complained of demonic possession prior to the widespread popularity of *The Exorcist*, the book by William Peter Blatty published in 1971, and the subsequent movie by the same name released in 1973. In this book and film, the devil possesses a



Image 3.1 St. Michael Subduing Satan

young girl named Regan. During the course of the possession, among other things her skin turns sickly white and putrid; cuts and slashes appear on her body; she speaks in various languages, known and unknown, and speaks Anglo-Saxon backwards and she hurls profane insults, moves heavy objects telekinetically, and vomits copious amounts of green bile (see Image 3.2).

Although supposedly based on a real-life case, no reliable proof has ever surfaced, and these images remain the expression of Blatty's and film director William Friedkin's creative if somewhat demented imaginations.

Despite the fictional nature of the story, a number of people around the United States suddenly started to complain of possession symptoms. Although no documented cases of physical transformation exist to rival those the film depicts, some people seemed to speak in tongues, and strange, erratic behavior was clearly observable. Unlike Regan in the movie, people today seem to find that the demon they claim possesses them offers no resistance as they calmly attend deliverance services and calmly wait for their turn before the deliverance expert (Cuneo 2001). Only when they are front and center does the demon object.

One of today's foremost deliverance experts is Bob Larson, who expels demons both in person and over the radio. Larson sees his deliverance ministry as part of modern psychological treatments and counseling for emotional and other personal problems. Larson says that "psychotherapy helps people recognize their issues. But what if their issue is traumatized further by a demon?" (*Deliver Us From Evil*, 2003). Although Larson attributes some credibility to traditional psychotherapy, Larson also believes that demons and other supernatural forces are real. He says that "the first time I saw a demon look at me, evil look at me . . . was while I was traveling overseas in Asia, and I saw a Hindu ritual. . . . [T]he look would come into their eyes, a vacancy of the soul. I never anticipated that I would see that look in America" (*Deliver Us From Evil*, 2003). For Larson, Hinduism is not only non-Christian, but foreign and evil. Larson apparently equates America with ultimate good, and foreign countries and religions with something less than good. In his ministry, Larson scans the audience for "the look" of vacancy that betrays the presence of a demon.

Larson follows an American Protestant tradition of deliverance. In the 1960s, a Texas minister named Win Worley began doing exorcisms at his church in Texas. The Southern Baptist Convention soon rescinded Worley's charter, but his ministry enjoyed dramatic growth over the next several decades, until his death in 1991. After losing his Southern Baptist affiliation, Worley's church continued as a nonaffiliated congregation, ordaining its own ministers over the years. Worley also moved the church to Indiana, where one of the pastors he ordained took over his ministry in 1991 following his death. As Worley's successor, Mike Thierer feels that deliverance saved him from drugs and alcohol. Today, Thierer has developed his own method of exorcism. He "calls out" demons at each service, most of which enter people through very common means. Among other evils, Thierer calls out demons from ouija boards, sorcery, witchcraft, paganism, biorhythms, yoga, and many other items and practices from popular culture and alternative religions (*Deliver Us From Evil*, 2003).

Like Bob Larson, Thierer embraces a kind of folk-American outlook, that anything mystical or foreign poses a threat of demonic possession. While not overtly



Image 3.2 A Famous Movie Moment: Father Merrin Looking Up at Regan's Window in *The Exorcist*

Source: Copyright © Bettman/CORBIS.

racist or xenophobic, contemporary exorcism ministries, both in terms of the church itself and the people who attend, are overwhelmingly white, conservative, lower-middle to working class, and less than college-educated.

Another disciple that Worley ordained, Pastor Monty Mulkey, presides over the West Coast Church of Deliverance (WCCD) in Thousand Oaks, California. Worley published Mulkey's various papers and books on deliverance-related topics, such as "Alcoholic Patterns, Arrested Development, Shame, Slothfulness, Abuse, Mental Illness, in His Hosts of Hell series" (WCCD Web site, www.wccd.com). In addition to deliverance, Pastor Mulkey also receives frequent prophecies from God, which are also available on the Web site. These are not just sermons or variations of Pastor Mulkey's expository writings, but are presented as prophecies delivered directly from God.

Believers in demonic possession and deliverance think that the problems people face in terms of emotional disturbances or even more severe mental disorders, derive not from lived experience or psychological trauma, but most importantly from intrusive demons that possess a person and force them to behave aberrantly. In the early days of Pentecostalism, believers viewed demonic possession and sickness as interrelated—that sickness of any kind, whether of the body, the mind, or the soul, was a demonic assault. Sociologist Michael Cuneo (2001) notes, in his 2-year study of exorcism, that as Pentecostals moved from rural

meetings in open fields to urban churches with upwardly mobile congregates, they consigned exorcism and demons to infrequent backroom encounters (pp. 88–89). As we have seen throughout this textbook, religious beliefs relate directly to social position in terms of economic class, culture, status, education, and other sociological variables.

Cuneo (2001) argues that exorcism functions as a psychotherapy for people who, for economic or cultural reasons, cannot or will not consult a trained psychological or medical professional. However, Cuneo's research also confirms the sociological trepidation that exorcism allows people to "avoid responsibility for their own shortcomings by blaming them on demons" (p. 279). Moreover, we see that exorcism resonates with a generally conservative, white, uneducated ethos in which people do not distinguish between an internal and external locus of control, or distinguish empirical fact from belief. That is, people who feel afflicted by demons fail to realize that much of what they imagine as external demons who forcibly possess them are from a social-psychological perspective a manifestation of their own internal insecurities and conflicts. While the feelings of insecurity and conflict are real and can incapacitate a person, they are nevertheless internal, and not impositions from outside demonic forces.

For example, one of Bob Larson's devotees claimed that all her life, she felt like something was holding her back, talking to her, and filling her with feelings of guilt and anguish. Karen Miller realized, after several sessions with Larson, that her problems began when she witnessed the neighbor's house burning down when she was a child. She says that in flames, she clearly saw the face of Satan, and now believes that Satan or another demon entered her at this time (*Deliver Us From Evil*, 2003). In other cases as well, people believe that by whatever means, demons enter them through some traumatic event. Many of these events may be quite real, especially abuse parents inflicted on them as children, or traumatic events during adulthood, such as divorce or hitting rock bottom through drugs or alcohol. Others claim recovered memories, such as that as children, adults forced them to undergo Satanic rituals that involved grotesque sexual exploitation or human sacrifice. To date, no evidence exists to support even one such claim about ritual sexual abuse or murder as part of an underground organization (Frankfurter 2006) or the alleged day-care scares of the 1980s (M. McGrath 2002).

The desire to eradicate evil within a person can sometimes result in permanent injury or death. Cuneo (2001) documents several cases in which exorcism resulted in death. Typical of the process is the case of 17-year-old Charity Miranda, who died in 1998 as the result of an exorcism. Convinced that a demon possessed her child, Charity's mother, Vivian, as court testimony revealed, ordered Charity to blow into her mother's mouth and thereby expel the demon so that her mother could swallow and kill it. When this failed to produce the desired result, her mother and several other adults smothered Charity with a plastic bag (279–280). While the vast majority of exorcisms are not fatal, Cuneo accurately notes that when people substitute exorcism for genuine psychological treatment, or use exorcism to avoid an honest look at their emotional problems or other failings in life, then exorcism can only intensify, not diminish, a person's problems.

Discussion

So now we return to the theoretical points in the beginning of this chapter. As Plutarch argued, the superstitious person does not embrace self-improvement through education, understanding, and accomplishment, but rather, submission through fear and ignorance. Superstitious people believe superstitious falsehoods because they are afraid not to. Without the presence of a cheater and manipulator to blame, the superstitious person would need to face reality—a most frightful place for someone, for example, who is laid off from work, made redundant by machines or outsourcing, or with little education and with feeble or nonexistent family relationships and friendships. With diminished prospects, the comfort of the local congregation, the most welcoming of places, proves far more attractive than the foreboding and hated reality of higher education—the key to greater employment quality and prospects—or the ominous prospect of engaging in new social relationships. It also relieves the person from associating, directly or indirectly, with different and therefore undesirable types of people. It is always easier to associate with people just like oneself. This is not to blame the church congregation; they provide a welcoming community. Rather, the superstitious person hides within the church community, and because it is the church—the house of God—one feels completely justified in commitment to this sanctuary, and therefore justified in abnegating broader social responsibility. The vast majority of churches of whatever denomination do not intentionally promote superstition, but the social effect, regardless of doctrine, allows a person to accept superstition in place of genuine religion. Just as Durkheim argues that religion promotes or restrains suicide, regardless of doctrine, so churches today promote or restrain superstition, regardless of doctrine. It is not the church itself, but the social function of the church within the context of economic, political, and personal forces in which superstition increasingly substitutes for genuine religious commitment. The person need only commit to a stand-alone ritual, not to a new way of life.

We thus see that superstition, using the sociological conceptualization presented here, has the veneer of religious devotion. In practice, however, it occurs outside of established churches and other religious institutions and traditions. It appears as the result of status downturn, which itself occurs as an outcome of material downturn. The sudden shift of life opportunity and expectations, and the corresponding status demotion, inspires a desperation from which supernatural visions and other claims arise. They are, in sociological perspective, an attempt to regain some degree of status and sense of dignity. Superstition grants a false sense of empowerment, because it does not change the social conditions, but allows a person to feel more powerful, more influential. Suddenly, declassed and declining people feel empowered by supernatural forces that, in social context, prove that the little person matters. When articulated as a God-given vision or devil-inflicted torment, superstition reverses social roles. Suddenly, the teenage girl in a society ruled by male elders, and which grants women little respect and minimal autonomy, forces the elders to listen. In places like Marpingen and Salem, the young girls do the talking and the senior men do the listening. The girls, for a time, wield power and influence that would normally be well beyond attainment.

Today in the United States, there are declassed workers with declining wages who invent or accept superstitious notions of the Other, of people who are not worthy of money, attention, or even compassion. They submerge in a community of conformity that requires no thought or action, just an appearance on Sundays. Superstition shelters them from the forces outside, which they see as unknowable and all-powerful, from which they can only hide. Divorced, laid off, and otherwise dejected people of modest education and means find themselves alone and without prospects. With declining self-esteem and few friends, the possibility that demons, and not they themselves, account for their declining fortunes and dejection comforts otherwise forlorn individuals. Like religion in general, the deliverance congregation provides a welcoming haven that immediately and unequivocally accepts a person, and immediately displaces any possible blame and accountability from the individual to nefarious and external demons. This simple and immediate transferal provides instant relief. Also like religion in general, however, the palliative effects must be reaffirmed every so often, and the person must remain a member of the community. As Michael Cuneo observed, this relieves the individual of some apprehension, but simultaneously perpetuates the person's emotional difficulties because it does not address the objective causes. Exorcism only offers a substitute explanation for the individual's psychological discomfort, not a solution for it.

Superstition, to the extent it overcomes both reason and faith, must occur as a social process of claim and acclaim—the charismatic relationship—and in this way it also resembles religion. The significant difference lies not in the supernatural aspect of superstition, which it shares with religion, but in the social process. In religion, people celebrate community, a collective identity. In superstition, people celebrate personal reality that supersedes the community. In other words, people embrace individual differences and individual claims to truth. Though the community grants strength to the superstitious claim, the community dissolves itself in the process, because it elevates individual fear and despair over and against the collective well-being of the community as a whole. As Plutarch argued at the beginning of this chapter, the religious person awakes each day to a reality shared in common, which the individual strives to better understand and improve. The superstitious person shares no world in common with others. As we saw with many contemporary wage-earners, their world is getting smaller, and they deny their common concerns about work and family, separated by the superstitions of race and prejudice.

Devotion to superstition occurs outside established traditions and signifies the decline and dissolution of a community, not the celebration of a rising, or at least stable and viable, community as does devotion to religion. Whereas religious devotion requires the sacrifices of faith and also the development of the intellect in order to solidify collective association, superstition negates both. Religion empowers people to seek truth, justice, and virtue, and it reassures people that life matters. Superstition disempowers people and imposes the tyranny of fear and ignorance.

What about supernatural occurrences? Are they never real, but instead only the outcome of ignorant and fearful beliefs? Sociology cannot address this issue entirely

because it does involve an element of faith, that supernatural occurrences—those which transcend reason and empirical laws—in the form of miracles, for example, really do happen. In addition to miracles, prophecy, divination, omens, communion with the divine, and other supernatural occurrences exist in many of the world's religions. It becomes absurd to conclude that nearly everyone is ignorant and fearful. Rather, perhaps a more useful and insightful conclusion would be to consider the ramifications of the supernatural. Does it replace real-life experiences and become an obstacle to education and progress? The Spartans clearly suffered from this; they constantly awaited omens and other messages from the gods that never arrived, or which arrived in very uncertain ways that effectively steered Spartan society into inaction and a rigid adherence to tradition that inhibited progress.

What of today? Is there room for belief in the supernatural, or is it inherently inimical to modern life? That depends on how far one concludes that modernity alone can explain the world, and to what extent a life without mystery can be fulfilling. The supernatural, like faith, requires a tolerance of mystery.

And what of something like love? Is it simply a conditioned response, as a behaviorist would argue? Is it simply a desire to fulfill incompleteness of the self, as a psychoanalyst might argue? Is it simply the expression of a genetic code that prompts us to become intimate in order to reproduce the species? A survival instinct? Or is it something more, much more? Something that requires expression of feelings and desires that have no other equivalent? For centuries, poets have searched for the words and metaphors to express the profound qualities of love, but the fact that love requires poetry suggests some elements of mystery, that the essence of love and all that it inspires in people lies somewhere beyond empirical thought and the theory built from it, that love can be something so powerful that we would die to protect what we love. If love is both mysterious and transcendent, can we perhaps call it supernatural?