Superstition and the Wisdom of Old [1]

Submitted by Wessel on Monday, 2 February 2026 - 22:39



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A friend of mine was on holiday in Austria. He saw an acquaintance there on the day before his birthday. Because my friend would not see this person again before returning home, he wished the acquaintance happy birthday for the following day. This upset the acquaintance: it is not the thing to do to wish people happy birthday before the actual day. This wasn't a matter of mere decorum: this was something rooted in superstition, seen as inviting bad luck: *"you don't congratulate before you've survived the day"*.

Another friend told me years ago that he considered himself fortunate finding employment with a (seemingly) Christian employer. One day, he was sweeping the shop floor, and accidentally swept dust over his employer's feet. She immediately flew off the handle, chiding him for bringing bad luck on her. My friend was disappointed by this reaction: not only because it was an honest mistake, but because he expected better from someone professing to be Christian.

When I heard these stories, it was the first time that I learned of these specific superstitions. Although superstitions aren't unheard of in my country, culture, and family, I haven't been exposed much to people actually taking superstitions seriously. I believe that is, in part, thanks to my maternal grandfather, whose wisdom I'd like to honour in this article.

In my native language—Afrikaans—the word for "superstition" is "bygeloof", which (directly translated) means "side belief". The word for "faith" or "religion" is simply "geloof". My grandfather, like many Afrikaners of the time, grew up devoutly reformed Calvinist. They lived on a farm and far away from church, they would have "huiskerk" (home church), where the patriarch would teach the family, and the children would learn the Bible.

My grandfather had a saying:

> Bygeloof is geen geloof.

This translates as "a side belief (superstition) is no belief (i.e. being without faith)". I don't know if this pun originated with him or someone else1. The meaning is that, if one holds to superstition, it nullifies one's profession of Christian faith. How can we believe in "bad luck" if we have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus? How can habits, words, and ordinary things of the earth, bring about changes in one's fate, and God's provision? Either the superstition is a force which confounds God's will, or God is a malicious imp which will do bad (or good) at the intentional or unintentional goings of everyday life.

Instead, as we read in the creation story [2] (and the rest of the Bible) God is sovereign; He is in absolute control (Jeremiah 32:17, Proverbs 19:21, Psalm 115:3, Job 38–39). He is not manipulated or

coerced by what people do. He is not locked in a battle with an equally powerful evil force (as in Zoroastrianism). He acts methodically, having planned our redemption from before the founding of the world. He cares for us, and does not react impulsively.

Breaking superstitious habits can be difficulty. They usually have been enforced by fear: either that something bad will happen, or that something good will not happen. To break such habits, one needs to be consciously focussed on God's sovereignty and redemptive work. One way of thinking needs to be replaced (through practice) with another.

Find peace in God's sovereignty. Do not let other people's actions, and superstitions invented by previous generations, rob you of that peace.

- 1. From searching online I found scant references to "bijgeloof is geen geloof" (Dutch) and "aberglaube ist nicht glaube" (German). These may be translations of J. N. Darby's "Superstition is not Faith; or, The True Character of Romanism [3]", which is an anti-Roman Catholic polemic, rather than arguing against folk superstition. I'm not sure if and how Darby's work (or at least this phrase) would have reached my grandfather. I therefore can't say whether the phrase originally comes from Darby, whether Darby borrowed it from someone else, or whether my grandfather coined it independently (he wrote a bit of poetry, and the phrase works as a pun in Afrikaans, Dutch, and German, but not in English). If the phrase comes from translating Darby's book title, then the pun is incidental, while my grandfather used it intentionally.

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