

7 THE ROAD DOWN SUPERSTITION

How to keep your faith authentic?

Many people find meaning in religions. It is through religion that the relationship between God and man is expressed, and the ultimate problems of life and death are addressed. Religions liberate them from the shackles of single-minded pursuit of material well-being and uplift their moral life. Religions uphold moral values that bring about peace and harmony among people. However, when people obscure the true spirit and value of religion, the resultant behaviours may contradict true religiosity, and religious activities may well turn out to be self-infatuation, even superstition.

Wishful Expectations

We experience ups and downs in life, sometimes with misfortunes striking one after another. People who wish for everything to be smooth sailing in life would find such challenges difficult to handle. Obviously, we cannot control many things in life, yet there are those who still want to dictate life and eliminate all misfortunes instantaneously. Consequently, they invent superstitious ideas and actions to entice themselves to meet their expectations.

For example, there are those who believe in “an auspicious hour and a lucky day”, claiming that a marriage held on a specific date and at a specific time will bring conjugal happiness. Besides that, babies born in a certain month or year are believed to be healthier, happier, and more prosperous in the years to come. As

such, some people insist on getting married in a certain month although the date chosen coincides with the peak season for marriages, and they incur a higher cost despite their limited financial resources. Some expectant mothers request for caesarean birth for the baby to be born on a chosen auspicious day, which may cause unnecessary harm to the mother.

The dates of 9 September and 1 January are numbers that are not only easier to remember but also have symbolic significance because the Chinese pronunciation of “nine-nine” and “one-one” are homophones of Chinese words that mean “permanence” and “single-heartedness” respectively. These are meant to convey good wishes and are not the same as believing that certain dates and hours in themselves will bring good fortune and avoid disaster, which is irrational!

Controlling my Destiny

Generally, we wish to be healthy, to have a happy family, and to achieve successes. We hope to recover from an illness, to resolve difficulties with ease, and to pick up the pieces after encountering a failure. Becoming rich is the aspiration of many people, with striking a lottery being the simplest and easiest way. Those who are employed look forward to promotion and an increase in salary. Businessmen hope to reap huge profits.

Having such wishes is natural but it is precisely because of this that some people fall easy prey to the sweet words of swindlers or are misled by “kind-hearted people” into doing superstitious things. For example, people who have been ill for a long time hope to get well soon with the help

of divine power. When they hear that drinking water with ashes of burned talisman can be effective, they are willing to give it a try albeit with suspicion. It is naivety when one places a Chinese mythical animal called *pixiu* in the living room with the hope of lifting the family out of financial straits.

For a few, if it so happens that health has improved after drinking water with ashes of burned talismans, or the business has turned around after refurbishing one's office according to *fengshui* (geomancy) instruction, or an anticipated disaster has not occurred after wearing a spiritual pendent, they attribute these outcomes to the superstitious actions taken. Objectively, we realise they are mere coincidence. However, there are those who are susceptible to these irrational beliefs and actions as they are eager to seek good fortune and avoid disaster the easy way, and they think it is worth taking the chance.

When facing difficulties, suffering setbacks, and encountering dangers, people look for the fastest and simplest way to solve their problems. They do not hesitate to spend some money to get their problems fixed. Such superstitious practices have given them comfort and a sense of security, and thus become something for them to attach themselves to. It only shows their ignorance!

***Fengshui* and Fortune-Telling**

Historically, *fengshui* was not a product of any system of belief either theoretically or in practice. The effectiveness of *fengshui* does not draw on the support of ghosts and gods. It is a cognitive system established on the

foundation of environmental knowledge and insights on how nature works. A *fengshui* master studies the inter-relationship of an event with timeliness, topographical advantages, and the harmony with human situations. For example, even though there is nothing wrong with the location of a building, to some people, certain adjustments must be made to suit the owner's personal needs and aspirations. At times, when there is an imbalance between environment and lifestyle, sooner or later one's health or job or interpersonal relationships would be affected. In general, people do not notice it and they do not name the contributing factors as "*fengshui*". However, they do feel some sort of disequilibrium in their life without knowing the reason. *Fengshui* is an attempt to articulate these experiences with a set of explanations and terminology.

The *fengshui* master will examine a client's environment, the orientation of the building he stays or works in, his background, and his needs at that time to derive solutions to his problems. It may be to improve the client's health, interpersonal relationships, or financial state. An experienced and discerning *fengshui* master with moral integrity may truly help his client to achieve balance and harmony in his day-to-day life, including his integration with the physical environment and society. Therefore, as a tool for assisting someone to establish better harmony in life, the effectiveness of *fengshui* depends on the wisdom and integrity of the *fengshui* master. His knowledge in architecture, ecology, and psychology certainly helps in his practice, and these are the result of a combination of experience, education, wisdom, and virtue.

As for the various methods of fortune-telling, a practitioner depends mostly on his assessment of the needs and psychological state of his clients, makes “intelligent guesses” about the causes of problems, and attempts to offer some workable solutions. Is this superstition? We must examine the words, the attitudes, and the actions of the practitioner and his clients to make an assessment. In general, the continuous existence of the fortune-telling “trade” shows that some people who feel insecure need help. For some reasons, they avoid professional counsellors and resort to fortune-telling to seek solutions to their problems.

Shortcuts to Problem Solving

When problems arise from interpersonal relationships, financial matters, business, health, and housing, we must face the causes honestly in order to respond appropriately. The solutions may include correcting one’s bad habits, seeking reconciliation with others, restructuring one’s business, adjusting one’s diet, changing the job, and finding time to rest and exercise. In short, great efforts must be made before a problem can be thoroughly resolved.

When people seek an easy way to resolve a problem, they might fall prey to hear-says and believe in certain *fengshui* or fortune-telling practitioner with the hope of settling their problems quickly. As such, if a fortune-teller or *fengshui* master can present a seemingly reliable and reasonable exposition, a client may feel satisfied and convinced. He will accept whatever suggestions put forward to him.

When someone fail to examine the root of his problem rationally and refuse to acknowledge how his own attitudes and behaviours have contributed to the problem, he may just want to blame it on someone or something outside of himself, or he may even attribute it to the work of the spirits. He will then feel the need for the services of a “ghost buster” to get rid of the evil. Charlatans will grab the opportunity to manipulate their mental weaknesses and superstitious beliefs to confuse them with spurious arguments. To create an atmosphere of mystery, the practitioner may suggest the use of objects such as amulets, compass, mirror, and flute to appease the clients as well as ask them to offer sacrifices and chant sutras for those with religiosity-87

Such practices are obviously irrelevant because difficult problems and mysterious illnesses cannot be attributed to haunting spirits and ghosts. Even if the claim of evil influence was true, those with authentic faith know how to trust in the omnipotent God and would not be afraid of any harm that may come from ghosts, spirits, and demons. The occasional success of the charlatan’s way of solving a problem is nothing more than coincidence and the result will not last. We should seek wisdom to know the true cause and solution to our problem and have the courage to face them earnestly with appropriate actions. When necessary, we should seek council from the wise.

There are certain practices that are not to be considered superstitious. For example, it is normal for people to long for happiness, good health, and a long life. Consequently, the Chinese have created three figurines to represent

happiness (*fu*), wealth (*lu*) and longevity (*shou*). These are often presented to elders as a birthday gift. Besides this, the gift of a painting of fishes signifies surplus (*you yu*) while that of a galloping horse means swift success (*ma dao cheng gong*). These gifts are meant to express good will and blessings without any superstitious connotations.

Life-giving Faith

A true believer should face the various problems in life squarely and positively. Like most people, we desire easy solutions to challenges but we must admit that things often do not happen the way we hope. We should never dodge when confronted with a knotty problem. Neither should we deal with it in a superstitious way.

Faith helps us to face personal, interpersonal, and social problems earnestly. It enables us to live our life with all its challenges. With the light of faith, we learn to discern and tackle our problems holistically. Not hoping to find easy solutions, we put in concrete effort and strive for lasting solutions that ensure an abundant life that is meaningful and life-giving.

The Catholic faith invites us to face up to the difficulties and adversities in life and deal with them courageously. At the same time, faith enables us to recognise and accept our human weaknesses and limitations. Therefore, on the one hand, we make sincere effort to overcome difficulties; on the other, we trust in the grace of God to help overcome them. As the saying goes, "Work as if everything depends on you, pray as if everything depends on God!"