

QUESTION 97

Irreligion: Tempting God

Next we have to consider the vices which are opposed to religion through a lack of religion (*per religionis defectum*) and which have a clear contrariety to religion and so are included under *irreligion* (*irreligiositas*) (questions 97-100). Now vices of this sort are those that involve contempt for, or irreverence toward, God and sacred things. Therefore, we have to consider, first, those vices that directly involve irreverence toward God (questions 97-98); and, second, those vices that involve irreverence toward sacred things (questions 99-100). As for the first, we have to consider (a) the sort of tempting by which God is tempted (question 97) and (b) perjury, by which God's name is taken with irreverence (question 98).

On the first of these topics there are four questions: (1) What does tempting God consist in? (2) Is tempting God a sin? (3) Which virtue is tempting God opposed to? (4) How does tempting God compare to other sins?

Article 1

What does tempting God consist in?

It seems not to be the case that tempting God consists in certain deeds in which an effect is expected from God's power alone (*tentatio Dei non consistat in aliquibus factis quibus solius divinae potestatis expectatur effectus*):

Objection 1: Just as God is tempted by man, so, too, man is tempted by God and by man and by demons. But it is not the case that whenever a man is tempted, some effect of his power is expected. Therefore, neither is it the case that by the fact that God is tempted, only an effect of His power is expected.

Objection 2: All those who work miracles by calling upon God's name expect some effect that comes from God's power alone. Therefore, if tempting God consisted in deeds of this sort, then whoever worked a miracle would be tempting God.

Objection 3: It seems to belong to a man's perfection that, leaving all human assistance aside, he places his hope in God alone. Hence, in commenting on Luke 9:3 ("Take nothing for your journey ..."), Ambrose says, "The Gospel precepts show how he who preaches the kingdom of God should be, viz., that he should not require the support of worldly assistance, and that, adhering totally to his Faith, he should reason that the less he seeks such things, the more they can fall to him." And blessed Agatha says, "I have never allowed my body any bodily medicine, but instead I have my Lord Jesus Christ, who restores all things by His mere word." But tempting God does not consist in anything that belongs to perfection. Therefore, tempting God does not consist in deeds in which only God's help is expected.

But contrary to this: In *Contra Faustum* 22 Augustine says, "Christ, who showed God's power by teaching and disputing openly, without allowing the rage of His enemies to prevail against Him, nevertheless, by fleeing and hiding, instructed human weakness not to dare to tempt God when it has the means to escape from what it needs to avoid." From this it seems that tempting God consists in a man's failing to do what he can in order to avoid danger and looking only for God's help."

I respond: To tempt (*tentare*) is, properly speaking, to put to the test the one who is being tempted (*est experimentum sumere de eo qui tentatur*).

Now we put someone to the test both with *words* and with *deeds*—with *words*, in order to test whether he knows what we are asking about, or whether he can or will do what we are asking him to; and with *deeds*, when, by what we do, we probe (*exploramus*) his prudence or his will or his power.

Now each of these happens in one of two ways: *openly*, as when someone declares himself a tempter (*sicut cum quis tentatorem se profitetur*), in the way that in Judges 14:12 Samson poses a riddle to the Philistines in order to test them; or *with cunning and secretly*, in the way that, as we read in

Matthew 22:15, the Pharisees tested Christ.

Again, sometimes this happens *explicitly* (*expresse*), viz., when by word or deed one *intends* to put the other to the test, whereas sometimes it happens *by implication* (*interpretative*), viz., when even if one does not intend to put someone to the test, he nonetheless says or does something that seems ordered toward nothing other than putting him to the test.

So, then, a man tempts God sometimes with *words* and sometimes with *deeds*. Now we talk with God by praying with words. Hence, with his *verbal petitions* someone *explicitly* tempts God when he intentionally asks God for something in order to probe (*ut exploret*) God's knowledge, power, and will, whereas someone *explicitly* tempts God with his *deeds* when he intends by what he does to put God's power or piety or wisdom to the test. On the other hand, someone tempts God *by implication* when, even if he does not intend to put God to the test, he nonetheless asks for something, or does something, that is useful for nothing other than testing God's power or goodness or knowledge—just as, when someone makes his horse gallop in order to evade enemies, this is not to put his horse to the test, but if he makes his horse gallop uselessly, then this seems to be nothing other than putting the horse's speed to the test. And it is the same in all other cases.

Therefore, when, because of some great need or usefulness someone puts his trust in God's help in his petitions or his deeds, then this is not tempting God; for 2 Paralipomenon 20:12 says, "Since we do not know what we should do, we can only turn our eyes to You." By contrast, when this is done without any necessity or usefulness, this is to tempt God by implication. Hence, a Gloss on Deuteronomy 6:16 ("You shall not tempt the Lord your God") says, "A man tempts God if, having the means at hand, he commits himself to danger without reason in order to test whether he can be delivered by God."

Reply to objection 1: A man is likewise sometimes tempted by deeds in order to find out whether he can do something or whether he knows something or whether, given the deeds in question, he wants assistance or wants instead to overcome an obstacle.

Reply to objection 2: The holy people who work miracles by their prayers are moved by some sort of necessity or usefulness to seek the effect of God's power.

Reply to objection 3: It is because of a great necessity and usefulness that those who preach the kingdom of God forego temporal assistance, in order that they might use their time more expeditiously for the word of God. And so if they depend on God alone, they do not thereby tempt God.

However, if they abandoned human assistance without any usefulness or necessity, then they would be tempting God. Hence, in *Contra Faustum* 12 Augustine also says, "Paul did not flee in the sense that he did not trust in God, but he fled lest he would be tempting God if he refused to flee, since he was able to flee in the way he did." By contrast, blessed Agatha had experienced God's kindness toward her, so that either she did not suffer from any illnesses for which she would need bodily medicine or she would immediately feel the effect of divine healing.

Article 2

Is it a sin to tempt God?

It seems that it is not a sin to tempt God:

Objection 1: God does not command any sin. But He does command men to test Him, i.e., tempt Him; for Malachi 3:10 says, "Bring all the tithes into my storehouse, that there may be food in my house; and test me in this, says the Lord, if I will not open unto you the floodgates of heaven." Therefore, it seems that it is not a sin to tempt God.

Objection 2: Just as someone is tempted in order to put his knowledge or power to the test, so also with his goodness and his will. But it is licit for someone to put God's goodness or likewise His will to

the test; for Psalm 33:9 says, “Taste and see how good the Lord is,” and Romans 12:2 says, “... that you might prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” Therefore, it is not a sin to tempt God.

Objection 3: In Scripture no one is rebuked for ceasing to sin, but one is rebuked instead for committing a sin. But as Isaiah 7:11 reports, Achaz is rebuked because when the Lord said, “Ask for a sign from the Lord your God,” he replied, “I will not ask, and I will not tempt the Lord.” For it was said to him, “Is it not enough for you to weary men? Must you weary my God also?” Again, in Genesis 15:8 we read of Abraham that he said to the Lord, “How do I know that I will take possession of it?”—viz., the land promised by God. Again, as we read in Judges 6:36, Gideon asked the Lord for a sign of the victory that had been promised, and yet he is not rebuked for this. Therefore, it is not a sin to tempt God.

But contrary to this: Tempting God is forbidden by the law of God. For in Deuteronomy 6:16 we read, “You shall not tempt the Lord your God.”

I respond: As has been explained (a. 1), to tempt someone is to put him to the test. But no one puts to the test something of which he is certain. And so every instance of tempting proceeds from some sort of *ignorance* or *doubt*, either (a) *on the part of the one who does the tempting*, as when someone puts a thing to the test in order to ascertain its quality, or (b) *on the part of others*, as when someone puts an individual to the test in order to show something to others, in the manner in which God is said to tempt us. But it is a sin to be ignorant of or to doubt those things that pertain to God’s perfection. Hence, it is clear that it is a sin to tempt God in order that the one doing the tempting might find out about God’s power.

On the other hand, if someone puts to the test what belongs to God’s perfection not in order that he might find out about that perfection, but in order to show it to others, then this is not to tempt God, as long as it stems from a just necessity, or a pious usefulness, along with the other conditions that should come together for this. For as Act 4:29-20 reports, this is the way in which the apostles asked from the Lord that signs should be done in the name of Jesus Christ, in order that the power of Christ might be made manifest to non-believers.

Reply to objection 1: As was explained above (q. 87, a. 1), the payment of tithes was contained in the Law. Hence, it had a necessity because of the obligation of a precept, and it had the usefulness that is stated in the passage, viz., that there should be food in the house of the Lord. Hence, they did not tempt God by paying the tithes.

As for what is added, viz., “Test me, etc.,” this should not be understood *causally*, as if they should pay the tithes *in order to* test whether God would open the floodgates of heaven; instead, it should be understood *consecutively*, since, more specifically, if they paid the tithes, then by their experience they were going to give proof of the benefits that God would bestow upon them.

Reply to objection 2: There are two types of cognition of God’s goodness and will.

The first is *speculative* and, on this score, it is not permissible to doubt or to test whether God’s will is good or whether God is good-tasting (*suavis*).

The other sort of cognition of God’s goodness or will is an *affective* or *experiential* cognition, when someone experiences within himself the taste of God’s sweetness and the agreeableness of God’s will—in the way that in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 2 Dionysius says of Hierotheus that “he learned divine things from the compassion directed toward him.” And it is in this sense that we are instructed to test God’s will and taste His agreeableness.

Reply to objection 3: God wanted to give a sign to King Achaz not for His own sake alone, but for the instruction of the whole people. And so it is as an obstacle to the common welfare that he is rebuked for not wanting to ask for a sign. And he tempted God by *not* asking, both because (a) he would have been asking at God’s command and also because (b) this involved a communal usefulness. On the other hand, Abraham asked for a sign by a divine instinct, and so he did not sin. By contrast, Gideon, as a Gloss on the same passage asserts, seems to have asked for a sign because of the weakness of his faith,

and so he is not excused from sin—in the same way that Zacharias sinned when he said to the angel, “How shall I know this?” (Luke 1:18). Hence, he was also punished for his lack of faith (*propter incredulitatem punitus est*).

Notice that there are two ways in which one asks God for a sign. In one way, in order to put to the test (*ad explorandum*) God’s power and the truth of what He says. And this pertains in its own right (*de se*) to tempting God. In a second way, in order to be instructed about something that is pleasing to God. And this does not in any way involve tempting God.

Article 3

Is tempting God opposed to the virtue of religion?

It seems that tempting God is not opposed to the virtue of religion:

Objection 1: As was explained above (a. 2), tempting God has the character of a sin from the fact that a man has doubts about God. But to have doubts about God belongs to the sin of unbelief, which is opposed to [the virtue of] faith. Therefore, tempting God is opposed to faith rather than to religion.

Objection 2: Ecclesiasticus 18:23 says, “Before you pray, prepare your soul, and do not be like a man who tempts God,” where the interlinear Gloss says, “Namely, one who tempts God prays for what God has taught him, but does not do what God has commanded him.” But this belongs to presumption, which is opposed to [the virtue of] hope. Therefore, tempting God seems to be a sin that is opposed to hope.

Objection 3: A Gloss on Psalm 77:18 (“... and they tempted God in their hearts”) says, “To tempt God is to ask deceitfully, so that there is simplicity in the words while there is malice in the heart.” But deceit is opposed to the virtue of truthfulness. Therefore, tempting God is opposed not to religion, but to truthfulness.

But contrary to this: The Gloss just mentioned contains these words: “To tempt God is to ask in a disordered way.” But as was established above (q. 83, a. 15), to ask in an appropriate way is an act of [the virtue of] religion. Therefore, tempting God is a sin that is opposed to religion.

I respond: As is clear from what was said above (q. 81, a. 5), the goal of religion is to show reverence toward God. Hence, everything that directly involves irreverence toward God is opposed to religion. But it is clear that tempting someone involves being irreverent toward him, since no one presumes to tempt an individual if he is certain of the latter’s excellence. Hence, it is clear that tempting God is a sin that is opposed to religion.

Reply to objection 1: As was explained above (q. 81, a. 7), religion involves professing one’s faith through certain signs that pertain to reverence for God. And so it belongs to irreligion that, because of the uncertainty of his faith, a man does certain things that involve irreverence toward God, and one of these things is to tempt God. And so tempting God is a species of irreligion.

Reply to objection 2: One who does not prepare his soul before he prays, either by forgiving if someone has something against him, or by not otherwise disposing himself for devotion, does not do what he is able to in order to be heard by God. And so he tempts God, as it were, by implication (*interpretative*). And even though this sort of tempting of God by implication seems to proceed from presumption or indiscretion, the very fact that a man behaves presumptuously and without due diligence in those matters that have to do with God still involves irreverence toward God. For 1 Peter 5:6 says, “Humble yourself under the powerful hand of God.” And 2 Timothy 2:15 says, “Take due care to present yourself to God as one approved.” Therefore, tempting God in this manner is likewise a species of irreligion.

Reply to objection 3: Someone is said to pray deceitfully not in relation to God, who knows the

hidden things of one's heart, but in relation to men. Hence, deceitfulness is related incidentally to tempting God. And because of this it does not have to be the case that tempting God is directly opposed to truthfulness.

Article 4

Is tempting God a more serious sin than superstition?

It seems that tempting God is a more serious sin than superstition:

Objection 1: A greater punishment is inflicted for a greater sin. But the Jews were punished more severely for the sin of tempting God than for the sin of idolatry, even though idolatry is the principal type of superstition. For as we read in Exodus 32:28, for the sin of idolatry three thousand men from among them were slain, whereas for the sin of tempting God all of them without exception died in the desert without entering the promised land—this according to Psalm 94:9 and 11 (“Your fathers tempted me”, and later, “and so I swore in my anger that they would not enter into my rest”). Therefore, to tempt God is a more serious sin than superstition.

Objection 2: It seems to be the case that a sin is more serious to the extent that is more opposed to virtue. But irreligion, a species of which is tempting God, is more opposed to the virtue of religion than is superstition, which has a sort of similarity to religion. Therefore, tempting God is a more serious sin than superstition.

Objection 3: It seems to be a greater sin to behave irreverently toward one's parents than to show to other individuals the reverence due to one's parents. But as Malachi 1:6 says, God is to be honored by us as the Father of all. Therefore, tempting God, through which we behave irreverently toward God, seems to be a greater sin than idolatry, through which the reverence due to God is shown to a creature.

But contrary to this: A Gloss on Deuteronomy 17:2 (“When there shall be found among you ...”) says, “The Law especially detests error and idolatry, since the greatest wickedness is to pay to a creature the homage that belongs to the creator.”

I respond: Among the sins that turn themselves against religion, a sin is more serious to the extent that it turns itself more against reverence for God. Now a sin turns itself less against reverence for God when it involves doubting God's excellence than when it involves thinking with certitude that God is not excellent (*quam quod contrarium per certitudinem sentiat*). For just as one is more unfaithful if he is obstinate in error than if he has doubts about some truth of the Faith, so, too, one acts in a way more opposed to reverence for God if by his deeds he professes an error contrary to God's excellence than if he professes doubts.

Now as is clear from what has been said (q. 94, a. 1), superstition professes an error. But as has been explained (a. 2), one who tempts God by his words or deeds professes doubts about God's excellence. And so the sin of superstition is more serious than the sin of tempting God.

Reply to objection 1: The sin of idolatry was not punished by the punishment in question as if that punishment were sufficient; instead, a more serious punishment for that sin was reserved for later. For Exodus 32:24 says, “I will revisit this sin of theirs on the day of vengeance.”

Reply to objection 2: Superstition bears a similarity to religion as regards its *material act*, which looks like religion. But as regards the *end* of religion, superstition is more contrary to religion than tempting God is, since, as has been explained, it involves more irreverence toward God.

Reply to objection 3: It is part of the nature of God's excellence that it is singular and incommunicable, and so doing something contrary to reverence for God is the same as sharing the reverence due to God with another. Nor is the argument about the honor due to one's parents similar, since this honor can without sin be shared with others.