

The Ignobility of Worship

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Before beginning our discussion of the thesis that worshipping God is ignoble, let's remind ourselves of five other complaints against religion.

The first is that religion makes people behave worse than they would otherwise. According to this complaint, religion is a leading cause of war, persecution, and suffering.

Religion has this effect, we're told, because of the righteousness it inspires in believers. People strongly disinclined to harm another for any other reason lose their scruples when they believe they are doing God's work. As the old saying has it, it doesn't take much for a bad person to do evil; for a good person, it takes religion.

Now, of course, wars and persecutions almost always have many causes. To evaluate the thesis behind this complaint, we should consult historians, the scholars best able to help us to tease out the different factors so that we may see just what role religion has played. According to the historians, though, politics and economics are the central figures in most violent conflicts. Religion is usually only a supporting character, even when it is an important one.

That so many parents today in Canada elect to have their baby boys circumcised is some evidence, I think, that religion has no unique power to overwhelm our innate disposition to treat each other well (supposing we have any such disposition). If the thesis behind the complaint is true, we would expect to find that very few people for whom circumcision is not part of their religion will ask to have their child's penis mutilated. After all, the procedure hurts the child, offers no clear benefits, and puts the child at risk of infection and other complications. And yet, it turns out, the majority of parents who have their boys circumcised don't do so for religious reasons.

The upshot seems to be that people are destructive and cruel for all sorts of reason, and that the feeling of righteousness is fed by more than just religion. Further, as the faithful will remind us, if religion can push people against their own natures to be destructive and cruel, it can just as easily push them against their own natures to be constructive and kind.

A second complaint against religion is that its stories and myths are fantastic and ludicrous, its rituals and objects risible, its messages and morals puerile or ugly.

There is much justice in this complaint. As far as plot, tempo, setting, and character go, a third-rate novelist could do better than just about any biblical author. Then there are the funny hats, the incense, the wine-that's-blood: a sea of kitsch and magic.

Even worse are the messages and doctrine the religious find in their scriptures. Take Christianity, for instance. Christian doctrine has it that we are all sinners, that many of our sins consist in our having had sex with certain people or in certain ways, or in merely desiring or imagining having sex with them or in those ways, and that we yearn for forgiveness of these

sins. Forgiveness is ours for the taking, though, for in being scapegoated and executed Jesus took away our sins, at least if we believe that he did.

It is an old complaint, that much in religion is silly or nonsensical, and often pernicious as well. But it's a complaint owned as much by the reformer of religion as by the critic. Men as pious as Xenophanes and Socrates have made it their mission to clear out the garbage within contemporary religious practice—not, thereby, to free us from all religion, but to help us find or construct a better one.

A third complaint has it that the forms religious institutions and religious observance take are inevitably inadequate to the experience of the numinous or divine. The churches and temples and mosques and synagogues are things of the material and social realm, not things of the realm into which the worshipper enters in her devotions. Churches and the like are marked by hierarchy and authority, and trade in money, status, and power. Not only are they of only little help to the communicant in her attempt to perceive the divine; they often, because the people entrusted with them are as petty or corrupt as any officials, prevent the faithful from living truly religious lives.

Now certainly this is not a complaint against religion, per se. Indeed, only the faithful can sincerely level it. Further, it's a complaint that applies to every institution or practice through which people aim at something noble. Universities, for instance, are inevitably inadequate to their mission to educate people and to foster research. Hospitals, as well, are inadequate to their mission. No institution through which one strives to achieve something important will ever serve one's striving perfectly.

Even more than in the case of the previous complaint, this complaint belongs to the faithful. Those who feel it might work to make the institutions of religion they inhabit better, even as they realize they can never be made perfect.

A fourth complaint is that core religious doctrines rest on no good evidence or, even, are demonstrably false. The faithful, then, either haven't thought the matter through or are gullible or are engaged in wishful believing, violating their own standards of warranted belief.

For this to be a complaint, though, there needs to be something wrong with failing to think things through, with gullibility, or with wishful believing. Perhaps a good case can be made against failing to think things through or being gullible. Much harder to make is a case against believing wishfully. Because we are talking about how people should live, the case against living in light of beliefs held wishfully has to show that believing wishfully puts one at risk of harm, harm understood in terms of one's own interests and values. Moreover, it has to show that the risk of such harm outweighs the chance of one's being benefitted by one's wishful beliefs.

I doubt that this can always be done. That is, I think prudent wishful believing is not only possible but fairly easy, and that core religious doctrines are the sort of claims to which one can help oneself without much risk.

This isn't the end of the story, though. A defender of religion might point to the peace of mind, solace, and hope for the future that belief brings the faithful. He might also note that religious belief gives one's life meaning and purpose, and that this can secure a person in her commitments, all of which makes for a rich, satisfying life. An important response to this line of argument is to ask from whence came the need for beliefs about a transcendent or divine source of meaning or purpose? Perhaps it is religion itself that creates the specific needs that religion then attempts, sometimes successfully, often not, to meet.

A fifth complaint charges the faithful not with gullibility or with violating their standards of warrant, but with living in faith. The difference between believing something wishfully and holding it on faith is this: the wishful believer denies that she believes on insufficient evidence (that is, she is not consciously aware that she is believing in violation of her standards of warrant); the faithful believer understands that he lacks evidence or epistemic warrant for believing, but believes anyway.

The complaint is that to be faithful is to be dogmatic, and dogmatism is often or usually debilitating. People without dogmatism believe only that for which they have evidence or other epistemic warrant, and the surety with which they believe corresponds to the strength of their evidence or warrant.

The faithful can respond that religious dogmatism need not put one at risk of harm, even if other forms often do. But they can also respond more radically. We all live in faith, they might contend, the irreligious as much as the religious. We all believe something or other though we understand we lack grounds for believing. That experience is a good guide to how present events will turn out, for instance, is something people hold only on faith. If it is true that we all believe something or other on faith, then critiques of religion will have to focus on the content of basic religious beliefs, and not on the fact that those beliefs are held on faith.

The specific complaint against religion that concerns us at this moment, though, is that central to religion is worship, and worship is not a fit attitude for a person to take toward something.

The faithful pretty much agree among themselves, despite their differing religious traditions, just what worship is, and what its elements and functions are. For all theistic traditions, and some non-theistic ones as well, worship is central to what the religion is all about. In worshipping God, the faithful say, we acknowledge God's perfection and supreme worth and our complete dependence on Him, and we express to Him our total adoration, veneration, esteem, devotion, and love, as well as our unreserved trust in Him and our gratitude to Him.

In worshipping, we are aware of God's presence and, thereby, of His purity. This awareness leads us to acknowledge our own sinfulness. This acknowledgement results in an experience of renewal through God's cleansing or forgiveness. We become open to receive the teaching of the divine (for the Christians, we receive the Holy Spirit), a teaching that, in some religious traditions, consists in insight, not instruction. The cleansing and the teaching engenders in us a commitment to do the will of God in the world, or at least (because we are aware of our frailty) to try harder to do the will of God.

Worship, then, is the act of serving God by acknowledging God's supreme worth and by expressing to Him one's love and devotion, an act that also, and necessarily, brings such benefits to the worshipper as cleansing, insight into the meaning of faith and one's relation to God, and renewal.

The customary patterns, procedures, places, and symbols of worship found in a particular religious tradition are helpful to the faithful within that tradition, because they can adjust the person's mind and attitudes toward worship, but they are not necessary. A person can worship in any place, at any time, in any circumstances.

Now the love and devotion one expresses in worship are distinguished from the love and devotion one might express to a person other than God in that they are total and complete. The same goes for all that follows from love and devotion. One's trust and sense of dependence and gratitude are likewise without reservation. This brings us to the first argument

against religion from worship. Worship is not an appropriate activity for a person to direct toward a being unless that being is worthy of worship. God, despite His perfection, is not a being worthy of worship. Thus, worship is not an appropriate activity to direct toward God. We shouldn't act inappropriately, or, at least, we shouldn't worship inappropriately. Therefore, we shouldn't worship God.

If worship is central to religion, as the faithful say it is, then religion is without a core.

One might well agree that nothing other than God could be worthy of worship, for nothing other than God is perfect, and only something perfect could be a candidate for worship. Wayne Gretzky in his prime was the greatest hockey player ever (let's suppose), and he has received more honours than any other player. (All NHL teams, not just those for which he played, have retired his number, an honour the league has extended to no other player.) But Gretzky, worthy of the honours he has received, is not perfect (not even in his prime was he a perfect centre), and, so, does not merit worship.

But why is absolute perfection itself supposed not to make God worthy of worship? Since He is perfect, God is omniscient, omnipotent, and all loving and just, for these attributes are particular perfections. But none of them, the argument goes, is itself a property that compels worship, as distinct from great esteem and admiration and, in the case of love and justice, great love. The same holds for any other attribute likewise constitutive of absolute perfection: omnipresence, eternality, immutability, impassibility, unity, immateriality.... None gives us a reason to worship God.

There are two criticisms of this argument. One is that it is not by virtue of God's attributes that God is worthy of worship. It is, rather, by virtue of God's functions, the functions sustained by those attributes. God is the creator, sustainer, and redeemer of all that exists, and that, according to this criticism, is what makes God worthy of worship. It is because God holds within Himself the meaning and purpose of each individual's life, and sustains its place within the meaning of all existence itself, that the faithful are right to worship God.

The argument against worship, that is, focuses on what God is, rather than what God does. Even if the contention central to the argument is correct, that no property or attribute of God makes God worthy of worship, still, God's action, His function as the meaning of existence, does make Him worthy of worship.

The second objection is that the argument supposes that worthiness-of-worship is itself a property or attribute, in this case, a property or attribute of one or a set of God's properties or attributes. The argument asks whether omniscience, say, or perfection itself, confers the attribute of being worthy of worship on God. But this way of looking at worth, the objection says, is misguided. Worth is something assigned to a being by a person—it's located in the attitude a person takes toward something. The thing has value by virtue of being valued, not in itself as another feature of the thing. (Perhaps it's best not to talk about the worth or value of things, for that cannot help but sound as though things possess value as a feature or attribute. Perhaps it's best just to speak of valuing alone.)

To claim that God's omniscience or perfection (or redeeming activity) gives one no reason to worship God simply neglects that worshipping is an action a person performs on the basis not only of his beliefs but his conative and affective attitudes as well—or primarily. Thought of God's perfection or status as redeemer draws worship as a response from those inclined to worship that which is perfect or holds within it the meaning of their lives or place in existence.

Now, noting that worship is a response to an object (via beliefs about that object) is not to deny that the person who responds with worship might thereby be wise or foolish. The response of worship, like any response, might be inappropriate. But to judge worship an inappropriate response to take to God one must take into account the attitudes generally of the worshipper. Worship would be inappropriate only to the extent that for that person, being a worshipper is debilitating.

Worship involves love, so perhaps we can see this point more clearly by considering romantic love or companionate love, the sort of love two adults might have for each other. While it is true that Sally loves Albert because of Albert's looks and manners and wit and love for her, none of Albert's properties is worth loving, or worth loving Albert for. Mary knows exactly why Sally loves Albert and, yet, she doesn't love Albert. He's not her type. Mary simply doesn't respond to those properties as Sally does. Albert does not have love-worthiness as one of his properties such that anyone who doesn't love Albert must be making a mistake, failing to see something that's there.

Nonetheless, though Albert is Sally's type, Sally might be making a mistake, or at least being foolish, in loving him. Her love for him, given her other attitudes and her situation and prospects, might cause her frustration or grief, or otherwise be debilitating. Sally might be wise to try to appreciate another type.

The point that worship, although it involves a host of beliefs, is an activity, not a belief or any other cognitive attitude, enables us to criticise views of worship held by many of the faithful. Some worshippers hold that God, by virtue of His perfection or the divine functions His perfection sustains, is entitled to our worship. Our unreserved trust and esteem and love are His due. Those who do not worship, then, are failing to see something that's really there, namely, God's entitlement to our love and devotion. Now, to be entitled to something is in some way to command it, or at least to expect it and to be wronged when one fails to receive it. Yet trust and esteem and love, though they might have to be earned, can be no one's due, no one's to command. Unlike those things that are one's due—respect, say, or a pension—no one can be wronged by not receiving them. Worship, then, even if God merits it, is not something He can command; it is not something to which He is entitled, it is not His due. Worship is a gift, even should it be inappropriate to refrain from giving it.

To summarize: The first argument against worship, that God is not worthy of worship, fails, perhaps because it looks to God's perfection and attributes rather than to God's functions, certainly because whether God is worthy of worship is as much a matter of the believer's emotions and values as it is of God's nature. Rather than investigate God, then, if we are to find an argument against worship, we should look to the worshippers themselves.

Let us continue, then, with a second argument against worship. The essential idea of this argument is that worship requires the worshipper to divest herself of her moral autonomy. Worship reduces people to obedience. To worship is to be slavish.

In worshipping God, one expresses complete devotion to God and complete trust in Him. To devote oneself completely to another, though, would be to give up one's concern for oneself. To trust another completely is to give up one's own judgement.

Now why should we not give up our concern for ourselves in favour of doing God's will? Why should we not give up our own judgement in favour of God's?

One answer is that to be slavish is beneath us. We are rational animals, able to think for ourselves, able to act on our own initiative and for our own reasons, and so we should prize our rationality, never surrender it.

One might respond to this answer that of course we prefer to prize our rationality and to cultivate it rather than to hand it away; that's part of our identity. But that we happen to like or dislike something isn't in itself a reason for others to live as we wish them to. Sally doesn't like for Albert to be slavish, but that's neither here nor there to Albert.

Another answer, a better answer, is that being slavish is debilitating. The argument then is that in worshipping we surrender our moral autonomy, and in surrendering our moral autonomy we harm ourselves, "harm" understood from the perspective of our actual own interests and values given our circumstances and prospects. We can't possibly want to come out a loser from our own perspective, and so we have compelling reason not to worship God, even should we believe God exists and is worthy of worship.

So how is worshipping debilitating? Is it inevitably debilitating? Even if worship is often debilitating, probably it is not inevitably so. It's possible to have good reason to make oneself a slave, or so it seems. Being another's slave might solve all sorts of problems; loving one's master might bring all sorts of pleasures. Still, a person who has surrendered himself to God is always at risk of psychic pain. Surrendering is an action that that person performed autonomously, something he did for his own reasons, whether they were good or bad; continuing to submit to the will of God is also an act he performs autonomously. Should this come to light in that person's consciousness, it could undercut his identity as a slave of God, with whatever debilitating psychic effects that might have.

A different argument is that absolute submission to God requires that one never doubt or even question that one owes such submission to Him. If God is perfectly trustworthy, then one fails to honour God properly should even the smallest doubt cross one's mind. This recognition will breed in one the fear that one will fail in one's obligations to God. Living in such fear cannot but be debilitating. Even should one not expect punishment from God for one's failure, because one loves God one will be pained for not loving Him as one should.

This argument neglects the crucial point that at those moments when one is questioning or doubting God or one's commitment to Him, one is not worshipping. At those moments, one is taking stock, one is considering whether to be a worshipper or not. Thus, since one is not worshipping at those moments, one is not failing in one's worship. This is not sin, of course, unless, maybe, one's ignorance at that moment is somehow wilful or otherwise culpable. To sin one must refuse to act appropriately in light of one's beliefs about the facts. Even if we grant that failing to worship when one has no questions or doubts is to sin (this is the sin Satan commits), we need not hold that to question or doubt is to sin; it is, rather, to try to collect and understand the facts.

A third argument begins with the claims that worship requires absolute submission and absolute submission requires denying to oneself one's commitment to one's own flourishing through one's freely chosen actions. One cannot, however, deny one's commitment to one's own flourishing through one's freely chosen actions, at least not without suffering the conflicts of a riven consciousness. But a mind split between submission to God and commitment to oneself will be a mind in psychic pain. Better, then, not to worship.

The conclusion of this argument would seem to be empirically testable. If the conclusion is true, worshippers are alienated from their own lives and are experiencing the psychic and practical stresses and strains of being at war with themselves. So, do worshippers exhibit the malaise of those with divided loyalties? Are sincere worshippers typically unhappy? We could look to see.

But another response is to challenge the claim that absolute submission is incompatible with commitment to oneself. After all, it is one oneself who is submitting, and for one's own reasons. Perhaps one can submit to God absolutely while not denying to oneself one's commitment to one's flourishing, for in submitting one is expressing that commitment.

Nonetheless, in worshipping, one is submitting to the will of another, and that is to be slavish. At least those of us who prefer not to bend a knee, then, have an excellent reason not to engage in worship, no matter how greatly we love and admire God. (Well, so long as our preference not to bend a knee doesn't conflict, or doesn't conflict strongly, with our other preferences, given our circumstances and prospects.) And this, we might declare, is the end of it.

Except that submitting to the will of God in worship is entirely unlike submitting to any other in at least two respects. First, the worshipper submits out of love, a love the worshipper understands to be required. Second, God issues no commands or directives.

Typically, slaves do not submit out of love but out of fear. And, typically, the slave receives orders. Neither need be true of the worshipper.

It can, consistently with worship and devotion, be entirely up to the worshipper to discover for himself, using his own resources and his own judgements, what meaning life has and what his purpose in this world is. In submitting to God he need surrender none of his rationality or moral autonomy. Indeed, he needs them if he is to discover or create himself as a servant of God. He is assured that there is a meaning and that he has a purpose, and his experience of worship warrants his assurance. But he need defer to no one else's judgement; the quest that is his life is up to him.

In the end, then, it seems that worship need not be degrading and the worshipper need not be slavish. In the real world, of course, worship is often degrading and worshippers are often required, by their religion or its authorities, to be slavish. Yet it appears that there is nothing intrinsic to worship that requires the faithful to abandon their rationality or autonomy. The argument against worship does not give all worshippers reason to set religion aside.