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Monotheism, Worship, and the Good

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7.1 MONOTHEISM AND THE HISTORY OF WORSHIP

Michael Harris (2022) asks whether "the concept of worship is in fact well-suited to a Jewish context." He suggests a somewhat narrower or more precise focus on *avodah* and *tefillah* (service and praise?). This got me thinking about the array of things that are or have been covered by the English word "worship" and its ancestors.

Let's begin at the beginning (for which I rely on the *Oxford English Dictionary*). Before the mid twelfth century, the word "worship", or its Old English predecessor, which was more like *worthship*, was not a particularly religious term. Rather it signified socially "the possession of high rank or position," or the condition of having or deserving honor. It could also signify "respectful recognition" of such rank, position, or merit. Only later, in Middle English, did "worship" come to signify what we would call religious worship.

This is an example of a much larger phenomenon. In the history of religion, our relation to gods, and eventually to God, has commonly been conceived on the model of social relationship to someone possessing high rank or position, such as that of a chieftain, king, or emperor. Traces of that history are clearly present in the Jewish and Christian bibles, and even in hymns and liturgical texts written quite recently.

However, some of those traces do not really fit the God of monotheism. They involve practices that suggest a conception of deity that is much too small for monotheism: a deity whose favor we can earn by gifts or flattery, or whose anger we can ward off by depriving ourselves of something precious; a deity that may not exactly eat

anything that we could provide, but might inhale with great gratitude the aroma arising from burning up the whole body of an ox. Is that the God that hung the stars and knows what is on our tongue before we say it? Surely not.

Human monarchs and dictators have reason to insist on being flattered and treated deferentially – not because they are invulnerable, but precisely because as humans they are vulnerable, and the most obvious way of getting rid of them is by killing them – as has happened to quite a lot of kings and dictators in the course of human history. But it would be absurd to think there is any way in which we mere humans could get rid of the God of monotheism. Such a God can easily afford to be as philosophically unvindictive about any complaints we may bring against him or her as is the God who speaks from a whirlwind to the biblical Job.

That point is, of course, already recognized in many passages of the Bible. In Psalm 50, God is portrayed as addressing the misconception very directly, declaring,

> I need no bull from your stall,
> nor he-goats from your folds.
> For every beast of the forest is mine,
> the cattle on a thousand hills. . . .
> If I were hungry, I would not tell you;
> for the world and all that is in it is mine.
> Do I eat the flesh of bulls,
> or drink the blood of goats?

And the psalmist represents God as going on to address "the wicked," who do wrong to their neighbors, questioning the validity of their worship, and asking pointedly, "Am I like you?"[1]

The God of monotheism is too big and too resourceful to need or want tangible presents from us, too secure and self-knowing to crave flattery. If God the omnipotent, God the omniscient, wants anything in particular regarding us, it can only be because God cares about us. And that's a starting point for thinking, not only about worship, but about monotheistic ethics more generally. It suggests that if we are to have a chance to please God by caring for what God cares about, we are not likely to be able to do better than by caring wisely and well for ourselves and for each other.

[1] Psalm 50:9–13,21, mostly from the RSV, but borrowing some from the translations in Mitchell Dahood (1965), and Herbert Hartwell (in Weiser 1962).

That is an important starting point for Biblical prophecy. Here (in roughly chronological order) are several prophetic texts about the relation between worship and the ways we treat each other:

Amos 5:21–24, 27:

> I hate, I despise your feasts,
> and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
> Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and your cereal offerings,
> I will not accept them,
> and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts
> I will not look upon.
> Take away from me the noise of your songs;
> to the melody of your harps I will not listen.
> But let Justice roll down like waters,
> and righteousness like an everflowing stream,
> . . . says the Lord . . .

In short, the justice or injustice of our relations to our fellow humans affects the significance and value of our worship to God. A similar point is made in Micah 6:6–8:

> With what shall I come before the Lord,
> and bow myself before God on high?
> Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
> with calves a year old?
> Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
> with ten thousands of rivers of oil? . . .
> He has showed you, O man, what is good;
> and what does the Lord require of you
> but to do justice, and to love kindness (חסד - *hesed*),
> and to walk humbly with your God?

And in Isaiah 58:3–9 a post-exilic prophet imagines a conversation between a worshiping population and God. They complain,

> Why have we fasted, and you don't see it?
> Why have we humbled ourselves and you don't notice it?

The prophet replies that God sees them oppressing all their employees and quarreling with each other on the day of the fast, and comments that fasting like that will not make their voice to be "heard on high." And the prophet asks on God's behalf,

> Is not this the fast that I choose:
> to loose the bonds of wickedness,
> to undo the thongs of the yoke,

> to let the oppressed go free,
> and break every yoke?
> Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
> and to bring the homeless poor into your house;
> when you see the naked to cover him,
> and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? . . .

"Then," the prophet declares —

> Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
> you shall cry, and he will say, "Here I am".

7.2 MONOTHEISM, SOCIAL STRUCTURES, AND MODERNITY

I cannot honestly end the history lesson there, however. Quite early in the history of monotheism, as I have argued, it was perceived that the God of monotheism is too big, too powerful, and too secure, to have some of the motives that drive the chieftains, kings, and emperors on whose social roles conceptions of the roles of deity were modeled. Appropriate changes were made in the motives and policies ascribed to the deity. But the structure of God's social relation to us was still commonly conceived as like the relation of human lords to human underlings. Until the dawn of modernity.

As pertains to philosophy and theology in general, I would say that modernity was dawning in Europe around the dawn of the seventeenth century. But as regards the social modeling of the divine, I would say the changes were beginning to appear around the dawn of the eighteenth century. This is something that struck me rather recently, when I returned to a question that David Sachs posed to me when I was finishing my PhD in philosophy at Cornell half a century ago. He asked: Why has the problem of evil been a much more burning issue for philosophical theology since about 1700 than it was before that?

Was it really a less burning issue before that? I think it was in fact. There was plenty of discussion of questions about how God is or could be related to evils of various sorts, but rarely with any suggestion that the question might threaten the viability of theistic belief. A revealing example can be found in discussions of Molinism.

Alvin Plantinga (1974), saw in Molinism an opening for a theodicy. He poses the question why God didn't create a world in which human life goes better than it does in the actual world. And he proposes what he takes to be the Molinist answer that God didn't create such a world because God couldn't have created such a world. Not that no such worlds are logically and causally possible, but that God knows that each such world

includes free human actions that would not in fact be performed in the relevant situations. I have argued elsewhere that we have no good reason to believe that there are in fact counterfactual truths of that kind (Adams 1977). In the present context, however, I set that objection aside as irrelevant.

For what I want to point out here about Molinism is that if we go back to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Molina, the author, and Suarez, the perfector, of Molinism would be appalled by Plantinga's use of their theory. They did not intend it to show that the presence of human free will in the world significantly limits what God can accomplish in the world. On the contrary, they designed it to show how God could keep substantially complete control over the world while allowing free human actions that are causally undetermined. That was to be possible by virtue of God's bottomless supply of "graces" that could be given to humans to make it the case, without causally determining, that they would voluntarily do the right thing.

Molina held that in this way God preserved both Jesus and his mother Mary from all sin throughout their whole lives.[2] Suarez held that

> it is alien to the common doctrine, ... and to the divine perfection and omnipotence, and is therefore of itself incredible enough, to say that God cannot predetermine [praedefinire] an honorable free act, in particular and with all its circumstances, by his absolute and effective will, the freedom of the created will still being preserved.
>
> (Suarez 1859–1879, p. 354)

We moderns, however, may well regard that as a highly manipulative strategy that would leave God with the lion's share of responsibility for whatever the created agent does.

So we face Sachs's question again: Given all the wicked and cruel sins that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theologians and philosophers believed God was knowingly permitting but could have prevented, why were they not as concerned about a theological problem of evil, or as invested in theodocies, as their successors increasingly were in the eighteenth century? There are clues in the texts:

(1) **Descartes:** *Principles of Philosophy*, Book I, ch. 38 (from the French)

> And though God could have given us a knowledge so great that we would never have been subject to error, we have no right to complain about that

[2] Molina, *Concordia*, qu. 14, art. 13, disp. 53, memb. 4, n. 15–24.

> to him. For though among us [humans] one who was able to prevent an evil and did not prevent it is blamed for it and judged to be guilty, it is not the same in relation to God. For the power that some human beings have over others is instituted so that they might prevent their inferiors from doing evil. But the complete power that God has over the universe is quite absolute and free.

(2) **Malebranche:** *Traité de la Nature et de la Grâce*, Disc. I.xliii

> Being obliged to act always in a manner that is worthy of him, in ways that are simple, general, constant, and uniform, God . . . has needed to establish certain laws in the order of Grace, as I have proved that he has done in the order of Nature. Now because of their simplicity, these laws necessarily have some unpleasant consequences for us; but these consequences are not a good reason for God to replace those laws with more complex ones. For those laws are better proportioned in wisdom and fertility to the work they produce than any others that God could establish for the same project . . . It is true that God could provide a remedy for those unpleasant consequences by [switching to] an infinite number of particular volitions; but his wisdom, which he loves more than [he loves] his Work, . . . does not permit that.

Those are assumptions of a classist social and political context: everything is to serve the needs, wants, and glory of the people on top! Unpleasant consequences for those who are lower on the totem pole are taken for granted. But of course no mere mortal – not even a king – is a top dog in relation to God. So God is top dog in relation to all of us, and God's will and God's glory are more important than anything else. Though there may be bits of religious truth buried in that, there's also a lot to criticize in it, including a lot that is clearly contrary to words of Jesus and other Biblical teaching. In the classist context, however, it was hard to motivate interest in a "problem of evil" that called the goodness of God into question.

In the dawn of the eighteenth century, however, Leibniz was a transitional figure in thinking about social roles for God. His ambivalence is on display in section 215 of his *Theodicy*. There he describes Pierre Bayle's more uncompromisingly modernist stance on the topic at issue:

> M. Bayle . . . imagines a prince who is having a city built, and who by bad taste prefers it to have airs of magnificence, and a bold and unique architectural style, rather than conveniences of all kinds for the inhabitants. But if this prince had genuine greatness of soul, he would prefer convenient architecture to magnificent architecture. That's M. Bayle's opinion.

Leibniz agrees, but only in part. He grants that "the structure would be bad, however beautiful it might be, if it caused sickness among the

inhabitants – provided that it would be possible to build one that would be better, considering beauty, convenience, and health all together." And the point on which his intentional disagreement with Bayle is clearest is also clearly classist. He says,

> I believe, however, that there are cases in which one will rightly prefer the architectural beauty of a palace to the convenience of some domestics.

Of all the topics on which historic assumptions about social rights and obligations of top-dogs and underdogs began to come under sharper criticism in the eighteenth century than they had before, I believe that none is more important for our present discussion than that of slavery. The Latin root of the English word "service" usually meant "slave" in ancient Latin, and I believe that more or less the same is true of the root of *avodah* in Biblical Hebrew.

A prophet I quoted above may have been urging his hearers to free their slaves – to manumit them – when he told them "to undo the thongs of the yoke, . . . and break every yoke" (Isaiah 58:6). St Paul, in his letter to Philemon, drops a very broad hint that it would be a good thing for the Gospel if Philemon would not only forgive but also manumit his slave Onesimus who had run away but was coming back to him carrying Paul's letter. But there is something very important that neither Paul nor the prophet of Isaiah 58 says about slavery. They do not say that chattel slavery, the status of being owned as property by another person or group of persons, is simply not a morally legitimate status of human beings. Indeed, I am not aware of any place in the Bible where that is said. The Pauline epistles contain various approaches to equalizing the religious status of Christian slaves and their owners, for instance:

> He who was called in the Lord [when he was] a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ.
>
> (I Corinthians 7:22)

> There is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ.
>
> (Galatians 3:28)

> Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.
>
> (Colossians 4:1)

But Paul never denies that masters have property rights in slaves.

I believe that that denial is demanded of us. I believe it is and always has been true that chattel slavery is not a morally legitimate status of any

human being, although that truth was rarely recognized by our ancestors before the eighteenth century. I do not feel called to blame Paul, and earlier prophets, for not seeing the matter in the same terms as I think we must. Goodness knows, it is likely there are some moral truths that will be clear to future generations though our generations have not recognized them. But I think we must be clear about the moral illegitimacy of chattel slavery.

7.3 WORSHIP AS COMMUNION WITH GOD AND WITH EACH OTHER

With such historic considerations in mind, I leap across the centuries and ask how we should understand the sense of the word "worship" that is exemplified in saying that Jews have weekly public worship on Saturday, Christians on Sunday, and Muslims on Friday. To focus on a case with which I am familiar, I ask what is going on when God is worshiped in the Episcopal cathedral in Trenton, New Jersey, which I have been attending for several years. I leave open for discussion the question how far what I say about that example can be generalized.

The word "worship" can be used in this context as a noun, referring to everything that is done during the hour or more of worship as part of "the service of worship." The word "worship" can also be used as a verb in this context, and God is always the explicit or implicit object of that verb. It is God that we worship. That relation is straightforward enough when the action of worship is praying to God or praising God. But, in much of what is said and done as part of the worship by members and leaders of the congregation it is not so clear that God is the direct object of the action. For instance, several passages from the Bible are read aloud to the congregation during the service, and one of the ministers will preach to the congregation, usually drawing out a message from one or more of the biblical texts that have been read aloud.

And the actions are not exclusively verbal. We all participate in passing "the peace" to each other with a handshake or an embrace. In that there need not be a sharp distinction between blessings from God and blessings from one member to another. And there are the weekly sacrament of communion with God in Christ in consecrated bread and wine, and much less frequently a baptism with water. All of that is part of our Sunday worship. But in much of it we, the worshipers, are at least as much objects of the action as God is. How then are we to understand what worship is?

My hypothesis about worship in the indicated sense is that its central purpose or function is quite broadly communion with God, or simply relating well to God. And that is a two-way street. The prayers and hymns to God presuppose that God "hears" them, or at least is aware of them and understands them, completing that direction of the conversation. But I would not say it is just the worshipers that are active, while God just receives. Worshipers hope, and often believe, that in worship something comes to them from God. It may be in words that are spoken; or insights, challenges, or assurances that are granted, in listening attentively to a scripture reading or a sermon. That is to say, listening with attention both to what one hears and to what is going on in oneself. Or it may be in sacraments, or in a sense of God's presence. Such hopes are cherished in somewhat different ways in different Christian traditions.

The close connection in ordinary worship between what we may believe we receive from God and what we receive from each other echoes points developed in Section 1 of this chapter, about connections between monotheism and the morality of our treatment of each other. A New Testament passage particularly worth citing on this point is I Cor. 11:17–34. In it St Paul specifically addresses the importance of the quality of relationship of people who worship together, as a determinant of the nature and value of what they are doing in relation to God. Paul is distressed by reports about how an early form of what some of us call the sacrament of the Lord's Supper was being observed by the Christian congregation he had founded in Corinth. He had heard that some of the more prosperous members were bringing and eating their own more sumptuous food without sharing it with the others, "so that one goes hungry and another gets drunk." In addition, those who came early began the observance without waiting for those who came later. All of this would have been alienating and humiliating to those who were left out. Paul's reaction was famously severe: "When you gather to eat, wait for each other," and don't eat what you don't share. Otherwise you are eating and drinking condemnation on yourselves.

7.4 FUNERALS, AND THE VALUE OF SYMBOLS

From what I have said thus far, you might conjecture that I believe that social righteousness – doing what is right and helpful in relation to our fellow human beings – is the central task of religion and should be the main aim of our worship. Certainly it is an indispensable aspect of

religion and of worship. But it is by no means all there is to religion, or the only important dimension of worship.

What more do I have in mind? Let's start by thinking about funerals. Most of this final section of this chapter originated as a sermon I preached in the Presbyterian church I attended in Los Angeles. It was a few weeks after the deaths of two members of my department at UCLA. They were colleagues and friends of nearly twenty years, and about my own age. My wife Marilyn and I had in fact conducted a funeral for one of them, at the request of his family.

In the sermon, I was asking myself, and the congregation that heard it, What do you do when you can't do anything to change what you really want to change? This may be a somewhat un-American question. We Americans think of ourselves as a very practical people. It is probably no accident that the first major philosophical movement to originate in America was called "Pragmatism." Our culture celebrates opportunity, resourcefulness, and success, and has relatively little patience with helplessness.

My question may indeed be uncongenial to modern moral thought in general, and not just American thought. Ours is an activist moral outlook. We commonly assume that the ethical question is "What should I do?" And there's been a strong tendency in modern ethical theories to evaluate actions directly or indirectly in terms of their consequences. There's a lot to be said for activism, but I believe there is a gaping hole in most modern ethical thought at this point. It has little or nothing to say to us in a situation of helplessness.

Whether we like it or not, helplessness is a large part of life. Human life begins and ends in helplessness. Between infancy and death, moreover, we may find ourselves in the grip of a disease or a dictatorship or an economic disaster to which we may be able to adapt, but which we cannot conquer. Even if our individual situation is more fortunate, we will find ourselves relatively helpless spectators of most of the events in the world about which we should care somewhat, and many of those about which we should care most. Dealing well with our helplessness is therefore an important part of living well. An ethics that has nothing to say about this abandons us in what is literally the hour of our greatest need.

So what do we do when there is really nothing that we can do? Of course people's reactions differ widely, and ways of dealing with grief are deeply individual. But in responses to death many people (I think probably most) want to have some sort of public or semi-public ceremony. Many of them do not hold what are ordinarily thought of as

religious beliefs, but they want to do something. And a funeral is something to do when there is nothing we can do.

An activist ethics has led some people to view funerals with a certain moral suspicion, as unproductive and wasteful responses to tragedy. Certainly it is possible for funerals to be offensively wasteful, but I believe nonetheless that funerals, and more broadly ritual, have an indispensable role in our response to tragedy and helplessness. And I'm not thinking only of the helpful effect they may have on our feelings. They are important primarily for what they mean – for their value as symbolic actions.

The value of doing good, in the sense of achieving good results, is certainly crucial for ethics, but the symbolic value of actions should not be neglected. We take it for granted that the value of what we cause, or at least of what we intentionally cause, is an important factor in the moral quality of our lives. Why should we not assume also that the value of what we stand for symbolically is also an important factor in the moral quality of our lives? We sometimes speak of that quality, after all, in terms of the "meaning" of our lives – and there is no reason to suppose that symbolism is irrelevant to meanings!

Living well can be seen very largely in terms of being for the Good and against evils. What kind of results we bring about, or try to bring about, in the world is obviously important to what we are really for and against. But it is not the whole story. Encounters with helplessness make clear the inadequacy of trying to evaluate our lives entirely in terms of the value of what we cause or bring about, or even what we can try to cause or bring about with any serious hope of success. We face the question, how we can be for and against goods and evils that we are relatively powerless to accomplish or prevent. One answer is that we can give more reality to our being for the goods and against the evils by expressing our loyalties symbolically.

Indeed it is only by virtue of our systems of symbols that we are able to be "for" or "against" most goods and evils. A dog can desire food, and in some sense love its owner. A dog can also be mean or gentle. But if we said that the dog loves gentleness or hates meanness, all we could mean is that it likes being treated gently and dislikes being treated harshly, or perhaps that it is apt to spring to the defense of another creature being abused. There is no way that a dog could be in favor of gentleness or opposed to meanness wherever they are found in the world. How is it that we can be for or against such goods and evils in a way that dogs cannot? Clearly it is by virtue of our ability to make use of conventional

symbolism to express explicitly, to others or to ourselves, our allegiance or opposition.

And while it is certainly possible for us to be for or against a good or evil without expressing that openly, it is not easy. If you express explicitly, sincerely, and openly to your friends at least, your religious faith or your hatred of oppression, you take a stance. You are for Judaism, or Christianity, or you are against tyranny. Now suppose that under the pressure of persecution, and perhaps justifiably, you repress all outward expression of your loyalties. After a while, you yourself may begin to wonder how much reality there is in your opposition to oppression. Are you actually opposed to it, or do you only wish that you could be? Among the acts in human history that most of us most admire are acts of symbolic opposition to tyranny. Surely many of them sprang less from a belief that they were likely to have good consequences than from a sense of a moral need to express, at least symbolically, what one is for and what one is against.

But it's not only in relation to tragedy, evil, and helplessness that symbolic expression is a moral and spiritual need. It is just as important in relation to the immensity of actual and possible good. Doing good is important. But our ability to do good, and even to conceive of good so as to care about it, is limited. Our nonsymbolic activity, perforce, is a little of this and a little of that. Getting ourselves dressed in the morning, walking or riding or driving to work, and then home again to fix and eat dinner, as the case may be, we try, on the way, and in between, to do some good, to care about people and be kind to them, to enjoy and perhaps create some beauty. But none of this is perfect, even when we succeed; and all of it is fragmentary.

If one loves the good as such, shouldn't one in principle be for the good wherever it occurs or is at stake? But we do not know about most of the good and opportunities for good in the world; and we cannot do very much about most of what we do know. We can care effectively only about fragments that are accessible to us. Intensively as well as extensively, we cannot engage the whole of goodness nonsymbolically. I have an inkling of a goodness too wonderful for us to comprehend. But concretely I must devote myself to getting my essay a little clearer, more engaging, or more cogently argued than the last draft was.

Symbolically we can do better. Symbolically I can be for the Good as such, and not just for the bits and pieces of it that I can concretely promote or embody. I can be for the Good as such by articulating or accepting some conception of a comprehensive and perfect or

transcendent Good or goodness, and expressing my loyalty to it symbolically. I cannot do that with any clarity, if at all, without symbols.

Believers in God find this value of symbolism supremely in worship. Limited as the extent of my concrete love and beneficence and political influence must be, I can still pray for "all sorts and conditions" of people. Qualitatively limited as I inevitably am in the goodness of my life, and even in my conception of the Good, I can still name and praise a transcendent Good. And fragmented as my concerns are in dealing with various finite goods, I can integrate my love for the Good symbolically in explicit worship of the one God.

Grave moral and religious temptations attend this symbolic integration. It must not be allowed to become a substitute for nonsymbolic goodness that is possible for us, fragmentary and imperfect as the nonsymbolic goodness must be. The biblical prophets were right in denying the value of merely symbolic worship in lives that could have included important concrete imitation of divine justice, but did not. Similarly, if I loudly proclaim for so-and-so for President, but do not give a dollar to her campaign when I could well afford to give more, the significance of my symbolic action is questionable. Symbolic expression by itself, when one could also have done other things that matter, does not normally constitute love for the Good – or for anything. But a genuine love for the Good can find in symbolic expression an integration and completion that would otherwise be impossible.

I connect these thoughts about symbolic expression and worship the felt need for ritual in connection with death, of which I spoke earlier. It is striking that in Jewish liturgy, the traditional prayer that is most strongly associated with mourning and commemorating the dead, the Kaddish, has relatively little to say about death or the deceased, but is largely devoted to praise of God. Precisely because there is nothing we can do to affect a death that has occurred, we may want to affirm the meaning of life in the face of it by expressing symbolically our allegiance to the supreme Good. However little we can do, if we can do anything at all, we can worship. As Isaac Watts put it,

> I'll praise my Maker, while I've breath,
> and when my voice is lost in death,
> praise shall employ my nobler powers.
> My days of praise shall ne'er be passed,
> while life and thought and being last,
> or immortality endures.

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