

WHY WORSHIP GOD?

Steven M. Cahn

Assuming God exists, should we worship God? This article contends that even if God is omniscient, omnipotent and omni-benevolent, and created and sustains the world, we should adopt the attitude towards God exhibited by Abraham in Chapter 18 of Genesis. There, having been informed of God's willingness to destroy Sodom, Abraham persuades God that if the city contains ten innocent inhabitants, justice requires the plan to be altered. The story undermines the divine command theory of morality, demonstrates that God is subject to change, and suggests that God is prepared to be challenged rather than worshipped.

'We bow the head in reverence, and worship the King of kings, the Holy One, praised be He.'—The Union Prayer Book for Jewish Worship

Let us assume that the universe was created and is sustained by God, an omnipotent, omniscient, omni-benevolent Being. My question is: what attitude should we take towards God? Should we praise God? Should we bow the head in reverence? Should we worship God?

If, like the Psalmist, you believe that 'The Heavens declare the glory of God, the sky proclaims His handiwork',¹ then praising God presents no problem. Of course, some, like the author of the Book of Ecclesiastes, have been little impressed by our world, saying, 'Then I accounted those who died long ago more fortunate than those who are still living; and happier than either are those who have not yet come into being and have never witnessed the miseries that go on under the sun.'² Although

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the goodness of creation is thus open to dispute, praising God presents no conceptual difficulties.

How about displaying reverence for God? To revere someone is to regard that individual with profound respect. Thus you might revere your mother or father, a beloved teacher, an inspiring political leader, or a great artist. In that sense you might also revere God, indeed, more than any other being.

Would bowing the head be an appropriate way to display reverence? The answer is not clear. In Japan bowing is a means to offer thanks, show respect, or express an apology. Intended for such purposes, bowing the head or bending the knee is unproblematic. But what if bowing is intended as a form of worship, denigrating oneself and exalting another beyond challenge? Is worshipping in that sense ever appropriate?

To seek an answer, let us consider a hypothetical case. Suppose a fabulously wealthy developer decides to create a utopian town, providing all its inhabitants with a spacious home, a generous bank account, and the finest in schools, parks, roads, stores, and a variety of other amenities. Let us suppose further that this developer is a person of extraordinary wisdom and kindness, who has planned to maintain the town far into the future. Presuming you are an inhabitant of the town, what should be your attitude towards the developer?

No doubt you would admire the developer's planning and appreciate the developer's generosity. Probably you would support the town's expressing its gratitude to the developer by placing a statue in the town square, naming a building, or celebrating an annual holiday. Which option would be most appropriate would to a large extent depend on what the developer preferred. As it happens, however, the developer answers no questions and is unavailable to anyone seeking direct interaction. Thus none can be sure what the developer wishes.

How about worshipping the developer? Would that response make sense? Few, if any, would think so. But

why the reluctance? After all, the developer created and sustains the town, holds power over the town, has displayed extraordinary knowledge in planning the town, and acts as benevolently as possible towards the town's inhabitants. Why, then, would the town's inhabitants hesitate to worship the developer?

An obvious reply is that the developer is not God. But how significant are the differences between them?

First consider their powers. God is far more powerful than the developer, but the developer appears to possess all the power the town requires. Granted, the developer doesn't decide matters of life and death, but had the developer chosen to become the town's despot, judging who is to live and who to die, would exercising those powers render the developer more admirable? Quite the opposite, most would suppose. Furthermore, would the developer become more worthy of worship by having created three, thirty, or three hundred utopian towns? No.

Another difference between the developer and God relates to the scope of their respective knowledge. God knows everything that can be known, while the developer doesn't, but the developer has near total knowledge of the town. If the developer acquired knowledge about more places, more people, and more things, would that increase in knowledge render the developer worthy of worship? Again, no. Suppose the developer was a master psychologist who understood the desires and fears of each person in the town. Would that knowledge increase the appropriateness of worshipping the developer? Hardly. After all, while the finest performers in a field of endeavour may deserve honours, even a perfect performance doesn't call for worshipping the performer.

The developer always acts ethically towards the town's inhabitants, while God always acts rightly in every situation. But does quantity of right acts matter? Most people act rightly sometimes, some act rightly most times, and a few act rightly at all times. But even if the developer is in the latter category, worshipping the developer still appears

inappropriate. Indeed, were an individual to seek to be an object of worship, that desire would itself suggest weakness, not strength, of character. Why would that same principle not apply to God? In that regard, recall the words attributed to God by the prophet Amos:

‘I loathe, I spurn your festivals,
 I am not appeased by your solemn assemblies,
 If you offer Me burnt offerings – or your meal offerings –
 I will not accept them;
 I will pay no heed
 To your gifts of failings,
 Spare Me the sound of your hymns,
 And let Me not hear the music of your lutes,
 But let justice well up like waters,
 Righteousness like an unfailing stream.’³

Which of God’s attributes, if any, is supposed to imply that God seeks or deserves worship? God’s power is overwhelming, but power alone does not call for worship. God’s knowledge is as complete as possible, but immense learning, while admirable, does not imply the appropriateness of worship. God’s goodness is perfect, but to be good is to be made uncomfortable by praise. God created and sustained the universe, but the developer’s having created and sustained the town (or innumerable such towns) does not suggest that the developer should be worshipped. Why is God different? Admittedly, while each attribute of God taken alone does not justify the worship of God, perhaps all together do. I see no argument, however, why possessing any combination of attributes renders God more worthy of worship than does each attribute separately.

What, then, should be the appropriate attitude towards God? The best answer I know is implicit in chapter 18 of

the Book of Genesis, in which God tells Abraham that God is considering destroying the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Here is the key passage:

‘Abraham came forward and said, ‘Will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? What if there should be fifty innocent within the city, will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent who are in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?’

And the Lord answered, ‘If I find within the city of Sodom fifty innocent ones, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.’ Abraham spoke up, saying, ‘Here I venture to speak to my Lord, I who am but dust and ashes: What if the fifty innocent should lack five? Will You destroy the whole city for want of the five?’ And He answered, ‘I will not destroy if I find forty-five there.’ But he spoke to Him again, and said, ‘What if forty should be found there?’ And He answered, ‘I will not do it, for the sake of the forty.’ And he said, ‘Let not my Lord be angry if I go on: What if thirty should be found there?’ And He answered, ‘I will not do it if I find thirty there.’ And he said, ‘I venture again to speak to my Lord: What if twenty should be found there?’ And He answered, ‘I will not destroy, for the sake of the twenty.’ And he said, ‘Let not my Lord be angry if I speak but this last time. What if ten should be found there?’ And He answered, ‘I will not destroy, for the sake of the ten.’⁴

While the story, four chapters later, of God’s commanding Abraham to prepare the sacrifice of his son Isaac, has attracted far more attention than the story of Abraham bargaining with God, I find the earlier story more revelatory

about the appropriate relationship between human beings and God.

To begin with, Abraham recognizes his own cosmic insignificance as compared to God. Nevertheless, Abraham challenges the justice of God's plan to destroy Sodom. Hence the story is inconsistent with the divine command theory of morality, according to which justice is defined by whatever God commands. Abraham asks God to reflect on the justice of destroying Sodom, should the city contain fifty innocent inhabitants. If the goodness of an action were determined by God's will, then God's plan to destroy Sodom could not be shown to be wrong, for whatever God commanded would be right. But by appealing to God's wish to act justly, Abraham convinces God to act differently, because God's proposed action would not be just. But then the concept of justice is not merely a matter of God's will but an independent standard that God recognizes. If the reason to worship God is that God's will creates morality, then consideration does not serve as a justification for worshipping God, because although God always acts in accordance with morality, God does not create morality.

Note that while Abraham recognizes that his powers are no match for God's, God is subject to the power of reason. Abraham could not have prevented God from destroying Sodom, but the power inherent in sound reasoning is decisive, and Abraham is using that power to change the will of God. Thus humanity is not without leverage against God, and if the reason to worship God is supposed to be that God has all power and humanity has none, the story of Abraham's bargaining with God indicates that such a justification is mistaken.

Notice that God is subject to change. God begins by planning to destroy Sodom, then agrees to condition that decision on whether the city might contain innocent people, whether fifty, forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty, or ten. For those who worship God because God is thought to be unchanging, that justification is ineffective, because God keeps changing the number of innocent persons required to save Sodom from destruction.

Still, God might be thought worthy of worship because of God's controlling whether we live or die. In the chilling words of Jonathan Edwards,

The God that holds you over the pit of Hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times so abominable in his eyes as the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince; and yet 'tis nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into that fire every moment . . .

No wonder Edwards was unable to finish his sermon as 'there was a great moaning and crying out throughout the whole house . . .The tumult only increased as the "shrieks and cries were piercing and amazing."⁵ In short, Edwards forced the congregation to confront the awful truth that they were doomed, and only God could save them.

Surely God, as described by Edwards, is terrifying. The lesson is: make a wrong move with God, and you will be condemned to a horrendous fate. No wonder religious services often call for bowing one's head, averting one's eyes, kneeling, and even grovelling. In the spirit of humbling oneself, rituals are performed and prayers recited as exactly as possible, so that God is not angered. The prevalent emotion is fear, along with the hope that we and our loved ones will be spared God's wrath.

The obvious analogy is between God and a despot. In the despot's country inhabitants take great pains to avoid engaging in any actions that would call attention to themselves and attract the despot's wrath. Obviously, however, no despot should be worshipped, although inhabitants may

be forced to go through the motions of appearing to worship the despot.

Of course, the despot, unlike God, is hardly benevolent and surely not omni-benevolent. The goodness of God, however, is not a reason to worship God but, on the contrary, a reason *not* to worship God, because a good being would not want to be worshipped. And that insight is exemplified in the story of Abraham bargaining with God about the destruction of Sodom.

When Abraham suggests to God that God needs to think further about the action about to be taken, God does not disregard Abraham, or berate him, or tell him that he has no right to be raising doubts. Rather, God listens to Abraham's reasoning and makes a suitable adjustment to the plan as originally proposed. Had Abraham worshipped God, then Abraham would simply have accepted God's plan, praising it and extolling God. To worship is to venerate or pay homage, not to question and challenge.

The eminent rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan, founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, which explicitly rejects supernaturalism, was once a guest speaker at a religious service where the congregation recited the traditional words, 'Trust in the Lord with all thy heart and lean not upon thine own understanding.' Rabbi Kaplan announced to the assemblage that this prayer was one he refused to utter, because he could not relinquish the right to trust his own powers of reason. His attitude is an echo of Abraham's bargaining with God, for Abraham did not trust God's judgment about Sodom. Instead, Abraham relied on his own understanding and successfully challenged God's plan.

Those who believe in God should follow the example of Abraham, praising God as frequently and fervently as wished, acclaiming God's omnipotence, omniscience and omni-benevolence, and thanking God profusely for creating and sustaining the universe. Like Abraham, though, believers should not treat the word of God as beyond challenge by human reason. God may be worthy of as much praise

and gratitude as human beings can offer, but even God is not to be worshipped.

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Notes

¹ Psalms 19:2. The translation is from *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988).

² Ecclesiastes 4:2.

³ Amos 5:21–4.

⁴ Genesis 18:23–32.

⁵ The quoted material is found in George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 220, 223.