

A Note on Praise, Faith, and Worship

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Several years ago, a friend invited me to attend a high school choral recital in which his daughter was performing. That's not my idea of a fun time, but since it was a friend who asked, and since I had no prior plans for the evening, I decided to go along.

The program for the recital was quite surprising to me. Ten songs were performed in total, and of these, seven were religious in content; only three were secular. It seems that chorus is the one place where it's still alright to openly promote religion in public schools. Prayers have been banned from football games and other sporting events, but apparently chorus is still open territory for such proselytizing.

The finale was a song called: "Praise Him." It was a good ending, as it provided a bit of comic relief to see a middle-aged woman flouncing across the stage while exhorting the singers to "*Praise Him! Praise Him!*"

But the experience, especially the finale, left me with a question that has often puzzled me. Why would a very wise and very powerful entity really want or care for praise from humans? It doesn't make any sense. It would be like a human seeking adulation from an ant. Nonetheless, most religions strongly encourage their followers to praise and glorify their deity, and this is particularly true of the Judeo-Christian religions. The bible is replete with passages that encourage followers to praise their god, and this leads to the following question. If the notion that a very wise and very powerful deity would seek and desire praise from human beings is absurd - and it certainly is - then why is this concept such an integral and prevalent part of religious practice? This is an interesting question. I will return to it shortly.

First, however, I would like to consider two other things that deities tend to require of their followers. Here I am referring to *faith* and *worship*. The word *faith* has many different meanings (my dictionary lists a total of seven different definitions), but in this note, the word *faith* has only one specific meaning, i.e., the unequivocal belief in a particular deity or deities. Similarly, *worship* will always refer to reverence or glorification given to such a deity. Note that while most religions *encourage* followers to praise their particular deity, nearly all *demand* that they believe in the deity (faith) and worship that deity. This is particularly true of Judaism and Christianity.

First consider Judaism. The first four of the ten commandments all relate to demands on faith and worship. Note in particular the first commandment (no gods before me) and the fourth commandment (remember the Sabbath and keep it holy). Belief is taken as a starting point; worship is required on at least a weekly basis. And note that these are not requests; they are *commandments*.

Consider also the passage in Exodus 20:5 (biblical references are to the *King James Version*), where the deity says, "... for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me." Putting aside the unjustness and vindictiveness in this statement, it stresses how important faith and worship are to this deity. He is actually jealous of belief and attention that is given to other gods.

Christianity, if anything, places even greater emphasis on faith. Consider the statement in John 3:16, possibly the most quoted of all biblical verses: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Note that there is no mention here about leading an exemplary life - or even a good life. It's apparently just a matter of believing. This point is further emphasized in Ephesians 2:8-9, where Paul writes: "For by grace are ye saved through faith ... not of works, lest any man should boast." It seems that works (deeds) are of secondary importance at best.

And this raises an interesting point about Judeo-Christian morals, values, and priorities. The Judeo-Christian deity is apparently willing to forgive just about any offense, including heinous crimes such as rape and murder, so long as the guilty party asks the deity for forgiveness. Apparently, the only thing that can't be forgiven is to not believe in this deity in the first place. Apparently, in Judaism and Christianity, it is far worse to not believe in their deity than it is to commit monstrous crimes.

I now raise analogous questions pertaining to faith and worship. Why would a deity powerful enough to create our incredible universe want so much for humans to believe in it and worship it? Could such a deity have issues with low self-esteem? Of course not. The fact that some humans actually think that such a deity would want their faith and worship is just a reflection of human weaknesses and insecurities.

Another point to consider is that a very powerful deity could reveal itself at any time. By *reveal itself* I simply mean that the deity perform a feat that has no natural explanation. Some might say that this has already happened, as in the parting of the Red Sea or Jesus Christ walking on water - but these events are referenced only in ancient books written by unknown authors. Why doesn't the deity reveal itself in a large public setting so that it becomes a true historical event? Bill Maher once remarked that if Jesus Christ came down from the sky during the halftime show at the Super Bowl, then he (Maher) would have to admit that he was wrong. So would other atheists as well. But in the long history of our planet, an event like that has never happened.

Over the course of time, humans have believed in thousands of different deities, yet not one has revealed itself in the manner described above. Why is that? The most direct and obvious explanation is that, quite simply, there are no deities to reveal themselves. But there are other possibilities too - one can easily imagine a deity that chooses not to reveal itself. For instance, there could be a deity that is simply not interested in human affairs, and this possibility is entirely consistent with human experience. What is much more difficult to imagine, however, is a deity (such as the deity of Judaism and Christianity) that apparently wants very much for you to believe in it, yet refuses to reveal itself, but will none the less reward or punish you depending on whether or not you choose to believe. It's as if the deity is playing a very silly - but very serious - game with you that goes like this. *I want you to believe in me. If you do, I will greatly reward you. If you do not, I will greatly punish you. None the less, I will give you no direct evidence of my existence. The choice is now yours.*

I can't believe in such a deity. To me, this is pure nonsense. In fact, I make the following claim.

Claim: There may or may not be a deity (or deities). However, if such a deity does, in fact, exist, it is

- totally indifferent to whether or not you praise it.
- totally indifferent to whether or not you believe in it.
- totally indifferent to whether or not you worship it.

In other words, such a deity would not be so petty as to concern itself with issues of praise, faith, or worship from humans.

The above claim is somewhat of a counter argument to Pascal's Wager. Pascal argued that while there may or may not be a deity, you should take the "safe" route of choosing to believe in and worship the deity. (For some inexplicable reason, Pascal just assumed that the deity would be the deity of the bible.) The above claim starts with the same hypothesis (there may or may not be a deity), but ends with a very different conclusion.

I now return to a question posed earlier, i.e., if it is an absurdity to praise, profess belief in, and worship a deity (especially a deity that chooses not to reveal itself), then why are these actions such integral parts of nearly all human religions? For completeness, I will consider two separate cases.

First consider the case where the deity (or deities) involved are quite flawed individuals. The notion of a god with serious character flaws might sound odd today, but it was commonplace in the old days. Nearly all of the Greek gods had serious character flaws, as did the Roman gods (which were closely patterned after the Greek gods). Similarly, many of the Egyptian and Norse gods had serious character flaws. This makes sense when you consider that primitive man had no way of understanding why cataclysmic events such as volcanoes, violent storms, floods, and earthquakes occurred. To primitive man, these acts of destruction were apparently caused by someone who was both very powerful and very badly behaved - hence the notion of a powerful but flawed deity. If you were to believe in such a deity, it would be eminently reasonable for you to praise it, worship it, possibly even make sacrifices to it, and generally toady up to it in every way you could. After all, if this god is so flawed as to act destructively just because it's in a bad mood, it might very well appreciate praise and flattery just as much as a human would.

I'll now take up the second (and from a contemporary viewpoint, more relevant) case of a very wise and very powerful deity that also has no serious character flaws. As I have argued, such a deity would be indifferent to praise, faith, and worship from humans. Yet many religions (including Judaism and Christianity) claim to represent such a deity and also insist that you most definitely should praise, believe in, and worship their deity. At this point, it is important to distinguish between *religion* and *organized religion*. A religion is just a set of beliefs, which may or may not involve a deity that demands to be praised, believed in, or worshipped. Organized religion, on the other hand, *exists primarily for the purpose* of praising, professing belief in, and worshipping a particular deity. Without praise, faith, and worship, there is no need for all the

priests and preachers and other church officials. More generally, without praise, faith, and worship, there is no need for organized religion.

But organized religion has been around for a long time - long before the bible was written. In ancient Egypt, the high priests of their religion were second in power only to the pharaoh. As such, they lived very powerful and affluent lives. And that is the point: organized religion is very profitable, providing jobs to many and positions of power and affluence to some. Some other examples follow.

Consider the role that *tithing* plays in the Old Testament. A *tithe* was an obligatory ten percent tax on the ancient Israelites. This tax was placed on pretty much everything that was produced, including livestock, grains, fruits and vegetables, herbs, milk, and honey [Leviticus, Chapter 27]. OK, but were the goods that were collected from tithing actually given to their deity? Of course not. What use does a deity have with material goods? And besides, how do you pay a deity that refuses to reveal itself? No, the goods collected from tithing were given to the tribe of Levi, which was made up of priests and other religious functionaries [Numbers, Chapter 18]. Thus, tithing existed for the purpose of supporting their organized religion. There was some talk of providing for the poor and needy (as with modern day organized religion), but most of this tax was used to support the tribe of Levi (i.e., their organized religion).

Now consider the extent to which organized religion is big business in the United States today. A recent study ["The Socioeconomic Contributions of Religion to American Society: An Empirical Analysis," Brian Grim (Georgetown University) and Melissa Grim (Newseum Institute)], estimates that the annual revenues of all faith-based organizations in the United States is \$378 billion. It goes on to estimate that the fair market value of goods and services provided by religious organizations (this includes contributions of businesses with "religious roots") is \$1.2 trillion. Note that this latter value is more than the combined revenues of the top ten technology companies in the United States, including Apple, Amazon, and Google. This is incredible. Even if the estimates given here are somewhat off, keep in mind that we are comparing organized religion to some of the largest companies in the world.

Next, consider the total wealth of the Catholic Church. This discussion will be very brief - no outsider really knows the extent of their wealth since religious groups are not required to follow regular accounting and disclosure rules. Nonetheless, let's state the obvious: the total wealth of the Catholic Church is enormous. The value of their real estate holdings alone is huge. Many experts estimate that the Catholic Church is the single richest organization in the world.

Finally, consider the case of modern day televangelists. The successes that televangelists achieve are truly amazing. They go on television, ask for donations, and large sums of money just come rolling in. I highly recommend a video clip of John Oliver on YouTube [Televangelists: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO)], which gives a revealing glimpse into how these individuals operate and the mind-boggling extent to which they are able to accumulate wealth. Televangelism not only pays, it pays extremely well.

These are just a few examples, but the larger point is that throughout history, organized religions have acted as commercial enterprises, providing jobs to many and positions of power and affluence to some. Organized religion is very profitable. It exists for much the same reason that there are beer vendors at baseball games.

I'll now summarize the main points of this note, using a question-and-answer format.

Question 1: Why would a very wise and very powerful deity want humans to praise it, believe in it, and worship it?

Answer: It wouldn't.

Question 2: Then why is organized religion so insistent that praise, faith, and worship are the keys to winning the approval of the deity?

Answer: That's what organized religion has to offer. Without praise, faith, and worship, organized religion doesn't really exist.

Question 3: So why does organized religion exist in the first place?

Answer: Because it's profitable.

And so long as organized religion remains so profitable, there will be no shortage of praise, faith, and worship.