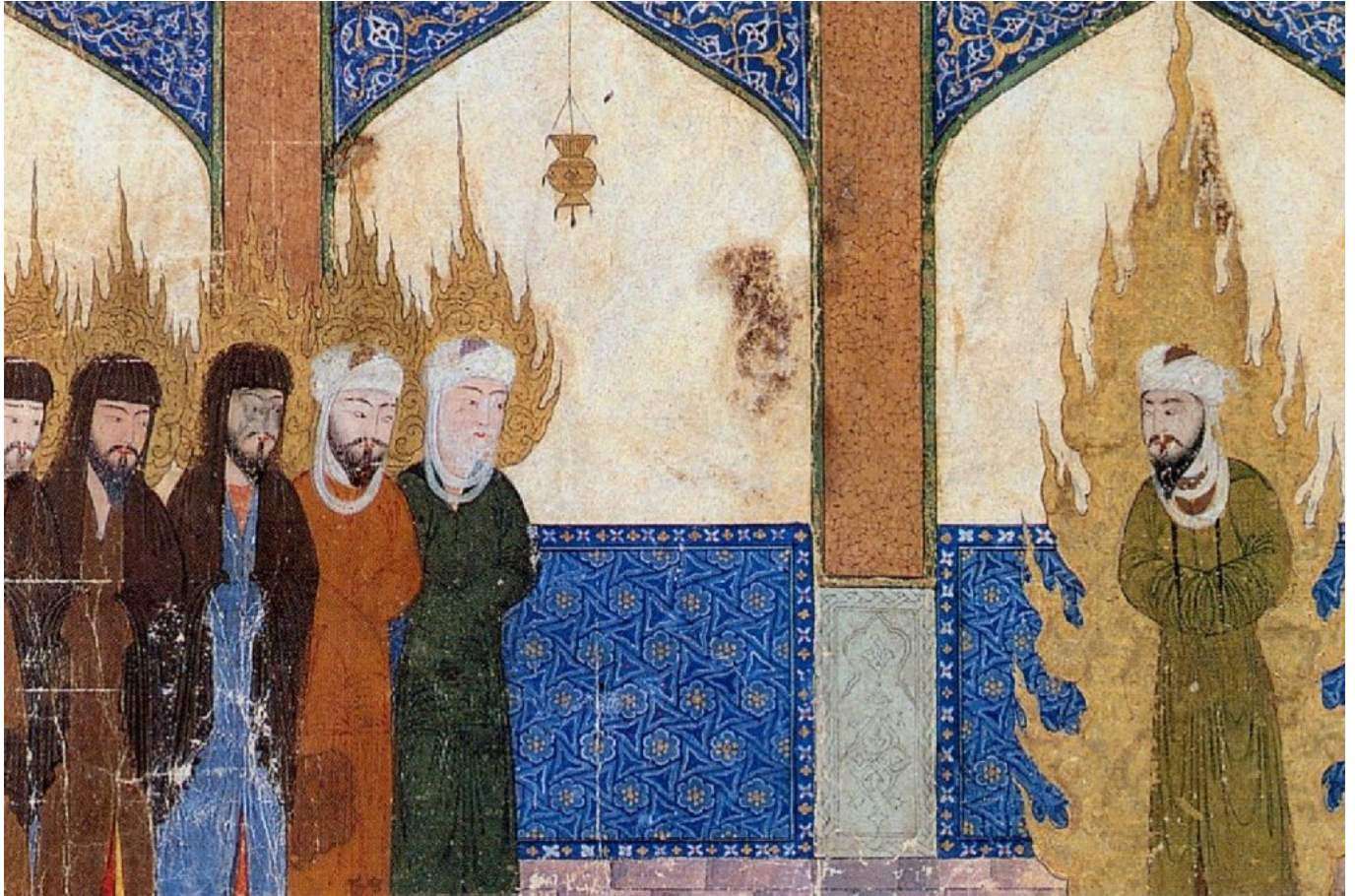


Religion's two faces, idolatry and faith



by Lev Tsitrin

“There is one God, and Mohammed is his final messenger” is the well-known distillation of Islamic creed. Compare it with “I have no way of knowing whether it is factually true, but the notion that there is one God, and that Mohammed is his final messenger, strongly appeals to me.”

The difference is obvious. The former is a statement of fact, the latter, a statement of belief. The former is unequivocal, the latter isn't. The former closes off all other options, the latter doesn't. The former expresses a dogma, the latter states a preference resulting from one's upbringing or study.

And I will add what may not be as obvious: the former is a

manifestation of idolatry; the latter is a statement of faith.

Why so?

Let's start by defining the terms. Much of our lifetime is devoted to growing into the world we are born in. One thing we learn is that while prior generations made great strides in acquiring knowledge that they passed on to us, and that much more has been discovered by our contemporaries, much remains unknown.

And, much worse, much is unknowable.

What we do know, comes from empirical experience. What cannot be verified by it, cannot be known.

How do we know what we know? Scientists make experiments, archaeologists do excavations, eyewitnesses record what happened in their lifetimes – telling us of our physical environment, and of our history. But we want to know more. Every child eventually asks this key question: where did I come from?

That specific question has a biological answer, of course – but its broader extension of “where did our world come from” is much more difficult to answer – all the more that the question always gets extended: if the Universe is a result of Big Bang, than what caused the Big Bang? We live in causal world, so it is only natural for us to try to find the First Cause. Without knowing it, our knowledge remains disappointingly incomplete.

Where there is demand, supply is not far off. Every culture – that is, every island of humanity – developed its own answers based on its observations. Aztecs noticed that day is followed by night, but a night invariably gives its place to a day; hence, there is a war going on in heaven, a war between light and darkness, between sun and moon. The sun is good, bringing light, warmth, and harvests; moon is evil, causing cold, darkness and famine. Hence, people must support sun in its

battle with moon. The sun needs to be nourished for the nightly fight – by hearts torn out of human bodies. In other places, people made different observations: in Arabia, for instance, a gentleman by the name of Mohammed became known for knowing what the creator of the Universe wants from us – because the Creator told him. And similar things occurred elsewhere.

And then, the islands of humanity expanded, and they came into contact with each other – and when people started to compare notes it became crystal-clear that since answers to the question of “why are we here?” were different, they could not all be true. Which is the true one? That’s what we want to know!

And, it turns out, there are no reliable means of finding out: where no empirical observations are possible, no decisive proof can exist – and since people don’t like to be in the wrong (and since the stakes are high – the dominant position in this world, and in the world to come, no less – not to mention the bruised egos of the defeated, and triumphant feeling of the victors), the debate gets heated and not infrequently, violent. For the higher-minded (and who is not high-minded among those who lend their minds to such high matters?) the stakes are even higher – for it is unworthy of them to settle for anything other than truth: truth, and only truth should be pursued. Only the true God should be worshiped. Worshiping anything else is a waste of religious energy, and an insult to God.

Hence, the notion of idolatry as religious devotion to a figment of human imagination, as a worship of an illusion – as an activity that is less than worthless. And this attitude is not unreasonable. It is based on a very sound observation that something small cannot contain something big. Aesop illustrates human propensity to build untenable grand schemes by telling a fable of a mountain giving birth to a mouse. This is believable; what is beyond belief is that a mouse can give

birth to a mountain – because, while a mountain is big enough to contain a mouse, a mouse is too small to contain a mountain. Since God created the universe and humanity, God is far greater than a human, so a human cannot create a God. Man-made gods are therefore worthless idols; worshiping them is not just sinful, but stupid.

Idolatry needs to be avoided – but how? How to know what's true? One way is by aggressively projecting confidence – via a government decree that a given creed is a correct one. Coercion works. Threatening the intelligent few who may harbor doubts with state's persecution will erase wrong thoughts – while the unthinking multitudes mechanically swallow whatever the government feeds them: the higher-ups know better.

Needles to say, the problem with this approach is that being sure and being right are two totally different things, and the former in no way guarantees the latter. Just because the rulers of Afghanistan and Iran, of China and North Korea exude confidence in their “right path,” the rightness of that oppressive path remains highly doubtful. The mere ardor of the followers is no guarantee that they are in the right. One can be as devoted to a wrong creed as to a right one; witness the practice of human sacrifice that has been revived nowadays in suicide bombings.

So how to not wind up worshiping idols? The answer is – by making sure that one's views are fully rooted in reality – that is, in the reality of what we can, and what we cannot know. Is it possible to find the Koran appealing? It is a matter of upbringing or taste (or lack thereof), so the answer is a definite “yes.” Is it possible for anyone to know whether Koran is a record of God's will? The answer to this question is an equally definite “no” – it is impossible for anyone to know whether God talked to Mohammed. Because of that “no,” one's unequivocal “there is one God, and Mohammed is his final messenger” is an idolatrous statement: it provides a man-made picture of a god. But place it into a framework of human

reality, modifying it to “I have no way of knowing whether it is factually true, but the notion that there is one God, and that Mohammed is his final messenger strongly appeals to me,” and what’s there to disagree with? It is a statement of one’s faith, a testimony to one’s heritage, to one’s education, to one’s tastes. Nothing less – but nothing more, either.

And there will be a practical difference in the behavior too – a difference in a way of influencing others. Basking in self-righteousness and the feeling of superiority, the idolater will be coercive, persistent, and occasionally violent (think ayatollahs and the Taliban). Not so the person of faith, knowing that his message is that of mere personal preference, and not of hard truth. If, despite his efforts, it falls to convince, it is no big deal. Coercion is out of question. Respect to the others’ views is a given – as is awareness of legitimacy of the others’ attempts at persuading him: a religious discourse becomes, in equal measure, both a give and a take. This not being hard science; there can be no monopoly on truth here.

This attitude informs the greatest-ever statement on religion that I know of – the First Amendment’s disestablishment clause, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” It affirms faith, and disavows idolatry. In fact, the entire First Amendment is rooted in the healthy skepticism of the finality of the prevailing state of knowledge, religious or otherwise, and emphasizes that all knowledge is a work in progress. Hence, it opposes “abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” (in practice, the principle of free speech is routinely violated – the governments grants the right of speech exclusively to corporations rather than individuals, thus eviscerating the “freedom” in “speech” – but this is [another story](#))

We tend to think of religion as of something uniform, and only differing in particulars of a given creed – but not in religion’s overall message (of peace, we are being assured by the politicians.) Not so. Religiosity comes in two completely different forms, idolatry and faith. While there is nothing wrong with the latter, there is nothing right – or good – about the former. Idolaters are cock-sure, they are aggressive and oppressive. Not so the people of faith.

With Hamas and Hezbollah, Taliban and ayatollahs filling the news, we need to understand who we are dealing with. They are surely religious, but they act like crazies. And what makes them crazy is the particular variety of religiosity they practice – the variety that is called “idol-worship.”

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