

The Only Being Worthy of Worship

Journal	Science, Religion and Culture
Manuscript ID	SANDF20140720170721
Manuscript Type	Original Research Article
Date Submitted by the Author	Sun, 20 Jul 2014, 05:36 PM
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Abstract

Most theistic systems treat worship as a virtue, but worship – toward a being believed to be divine, sacred, or supramundane in some extraordinary sense – involves attitudes of any of the following: propitiation, surrender/submission to, appeasing, or praising, among others. Because such worship implies the moral superiority of the worshipped, if not the surrender of one's moral compass to that being – symbolically, ritually, or literally – it raises the question of the moral justification of worship. I argue that the conditions required to be satisfied for worship to be morally justified are so stringent that they are almost never satisfied, on the one hand, and that even when their satisfaction is approximated it is insufficient for purposes of justifying worship, on the other hand, minor exceptions justified on other grounds (to be discussed) notwithstanding. Related to the issue of worship in theistic traditions are the beliefs that doubt is a vice, that faith is a virtue, and that mindless surrender of one's moral compass is a virtue, all of which may be seen as exemplified in Abraham's willingness to perform the ritualistic human sacrificial killing of his own son. I argue that a catch-22-type paradox, according to which only a being with perfect moral judgment could discern that another being was worthy of total surrender of one's own judgment, undermines the claim that worship of the sort exemplified by Abraham's attempted sacrifice was morally justified, and that the same results follow for acts of worship in general.

During my five mile run today, I jogged past a mosque, the Masjid Bait Ul Tahir and Ahmadiyyah Muslim Center, on West 8th Street in Brooklyn. The statement on the façade caught my eye:

“There is none worthy of worship, except Allah. Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.”

Reflecting on the many implications of this statement, both for Muslims, Christians, and Jews, on the one hand, and also for everyone else, on the other hand, is what led me to write this article.

Let us first clarify what we mean by the word “worship,” and then what we mean by the word “worthy,” the former of which is etymologically related to the latter (worship: worthy-ship). In the same way that David Hume (2004, X) restricted his analysis of “miracles” to those allegedly supernatural events that are thought to be literal violations of the laws of nature, setting aside all weaker, derivative senses of the term, so too I shall restrict my analysis of the term “worship” to those forms of behavior – whether formal or informal, ritualistic or spontaneous – that embody, express, manifest, or otherwise demonstrate an attitude or attitudes of many if not most or all of the following: adoration, veneration, propitiation, honoring, surrender/submission to, appeasing,

or otherwise praising a being recognized as or believed to be divine, sacred, enlightened, or otherwise supramundane in some extraordinary sense that need not be defined but which religions associate with conceptions of deity or divinity. I wish to make explicit that I am not addressing -- but rather setting aside -- all other meanings of the term, whether or not derivative of this meaning, such as may be found in statements such as “she worships *Gone With The Wind*” or “he worships the Yankees”), and whether or not this meaning is derivative of any such other meanings, such as may be possible in the case of ritualistic primate gestures of submission toward alpha males, the worship of masters by their slaves or concubines, and so forth. Nonetheless, I will make comparative references to such related forms or types of worship, for analytic purposes, where appropriate.

Some theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas (1985, 103, a. 3, 4), make a distinction between two forms of worship, namely, adoration (*latria*) and veneration (*dulia*), holding that only an uncreated being is worthy of the former, whereas created beings may be worthy of the latter. I do not think adoration is inappropriate for created beings, for example, when a mother adores her child or a yogi adores his guru. Nor do I think the majority of individual elements listed in my characterization of attitudes definitive of worship are inappropriate for created beings; for example, it seems appropriate for a martial artist to venerate her sensei after years of sagacious guidance, for a child to propitiate its parent for a boon, for students to honor a brilliant professor, for a husband to appease his wife, for a teacher to praise a student’s great essay, or for a child to surrender/submit to its parent’s will, or even for a weaker primate to gesture submission toward and subsequently groom an alpha male. Each of these and many other easily imagined examples illustrate that any of these attitudes may be appropriate among created beings, given the right sorts of circumstances and contexts.

There is an ambiguity connected with the claim that any of these may be *appropriate*, but we will disambiguate that when we turn to the notion of *worthiness*; for, presumably, if a being is worthy of worship, then it is appropriate to worship that being. Aquinas and the folks at the mosque that inspired this article presumably think only God is worthy of worship, and it is this idea that prompted my analysis, so I will restrict the remainder of my analysis to those ideas that are at least in the very close vicinity of this claim. For the sake of our analysis, then, let us stipulate clearly that we mean to analyze the use of the word “worship” in the strictly religious sense, akin to Hume’s strictly Biblical sense of “miracle,” which sense involves the bulk – if not in the ideal case, the unity of the entire collection – of those presumably virtuous attitudes listed above. As with the Socratic notion of the unity of the virtues, presumably the sort of worship that Aquinas and the folks at the mosque have in mind involves a strong, unified collection of the dispositions and attitudes outlined above, as opposed to something so simple and narrowly self-serving as merely petitioning God for help in the absence of any history of the other attitudes or dispositions. The genuine attitude involved in genuine worship is therefore, we may suppose,

quite robust, sincere, authentic, and well-integrated into the character of the individual in question that possesses it in the ideal case.

Let us consider now the idea of someone or something's being *worthy* of worship, in the strictly robust, unified, supramundane or Humean sense (that is, the Biblical sense, as opposed to derivative or weaker senses). To my way of thinking, for any being to be *worthy* of worship in this sense, it is irrelevant whether or how that being came to be. For example, if God was worthy of worship and He created Jesus and Jesus was literally an extension of God in some metaphysically robust sense, then the fact that Jesus was a created being would not disqualify him from the possibility of being worthy of worship. Conversely, if space or matter is eternal and uncreated, that does not necessarily qualify them for worship. What matters to my thinking in terms of whether or not a (putatively supramundane) being is worthy of worship is whether or not that being is sufficiently if not essentially constituted by many (if not all) of the following characteristics, many of which imply or are dependent on each other. There may be other characteristics that such a being must possess, but a worship-worthy being (in the Humean or Biblical sense, which I shall hereafter cease to mention) must be, at least, most (or all) of the following:

1. as morally worthy of worship as any being could possibly be
2. the most morally perfect being that is possible
3. as loving as a morally perfect being could be
4. as knowledgeable as a morally perfect being could be
5. as powerful as a morally perfect being could be
6. as friendly as a morally perfect being could be
7. as accessible as a morally perfect being could be
8. as generous as a morally perfect being could be
9. as forgiving as a morally perfect being could be
10. as merciful as a morally perfect being could be

There may be other ways to arrive at a similar set of minimal requirements for a being to be genuinely *morally* worthy of worship, but the way I will try to argue for these minimal requirements will be simply by explaining why I think some of them are obvious. I assume that once some of them are justified in this way, similar justifications for the others may easily be

surmised, as well as for any other minimal requirements for such a being that might belong on the list.

Thus, let's begin with item 1. Item 1 simply emphasizes the sense of worship-worthiness that is necessarily *moral*. What that means is easily brought out through contrast with *amoral* and/or *immoral* senses of worship-worthiness. So, an *amoral* worship-worthiness – that is, a form of worship that could be neither necessarily moral nor necessarily immoral – might be seen, for example, if early homo sapiens nature lovers were to ritualistically worship some awesome element of nature, such as lightning or rainbows, if certain devout art lovers were to worship a famous work of art or architecture (say, a temple or ancient ruin), or when Western agnostic yoga practitioners who are also lovers of all things beautiful in nature deem a morning sunrise worthy of some form of ritualistic acknowledgment or worship, which they express in the form of their performance of *Surya Namaskar* (Sanskrit: sun salutation), a series of yoga poses performed ideally at sunrise, facing the sun. An *immoral* form of worship-worthiness might involve a sacrificial killing in honor of the goddess Kali or Satan, an evil cult leader, or a powerful gang leader. There is no doubt that members of gang culture will construe certain forms of ritualized killings not only appropriate ways to honor those above them in the hierarchy, but expressing a form of respect, submission, honor, and the like, and such individuals might be said to worship these evil beings, bowing down to them literally, making offerings to them, praising and propitiating them and so on. In other words, there may be amoral and/or immoral forms of worship that might be deemed appropriate under certain circumstances and in certain contexts, that is, they may be deemed worthy of pursuit or performance for various selfish, pragmatic, or other reasons that are themselves either amoral or immoral.

By contrast with these *amoral* and *immoral* reasons for worship, any genuinely *moral*, or morally justified, reasons for worship would have to be reasons that were not prompted essentially by amoral or immoral purposes, such as self-interest-based desires to improve one's standing (or the standing of those close to one) with a powerful being, regardless of whether that being is created or uncreated, natural or supernatural. In other words, the only reasons for worship that are genuinely moral reasons are those that are contingent upon, and prompted by recognition and appreciation of, the genuinely moral perfection of the being that is to be worshipped. Only the most morally perfect possible being, therefore, is worthy of genuinely moral worship. Worship in this sense would be demonstrative, performative, expressive recognition and appreciation of moral perfection for its own sake. A derivatively possible form of morally acceptable worship might be one that seeks to emulate the morally perfect being that is worshipped, by focusing on and worshipping it, in the hopes that this saturation in the object of contemplative worship will lead to the cultivation of the properties worshipped in oneself, which may be illustrated by the

Buddhist practice of “divine pride,” whereby the practitioner imagines her own future enlightened self as a Buddha and draws that timeless being into one’s present mental states (Powers 2007, 273), but this sort of practice – Buddhist or otherwise – presupposes that the being in question is, in fact, morally perfect, in which case it does not circumvent the requirement of moral perfection for purposes of morally justified worship.

Thus, reasoning about the moral-worthiness requirement in item 1 leads logically to the moral-perfection requirement in item 2, that is, the requirement of the moral perfection of the being that is morally worthy of worship. Having established item 2, it is appropriate now to note that any being that is morally worthy of worship, being a morally perfect being, must possess all moral perfections, such as those listed in items 3-10. Of course, to the degree that a being approximates all 10 items, that being is to that degree morally worthy of worship. There may be degrees of moral worthiness.

I take it that none of these seven items (3-10) needs an explicit account, explanation, or justification for its inclusion on the list, once items 1 and 2 have been justified, insofar as they seem intuitively to be the sorts of characteristics that a morally perfect being would possess. But I will offer one simple argument that applies to all of them, an argument whose abstract impression might be said, perhaps ironically, to be traceable back to St. Anselm’s ontological argument (1979). That argument, briefly, reasoned that the very concept of God, being that of the greatest conceivable being, implied that God must exist, for an existing God would be a greater conceivable being than any non-existent God.

The Anselm-inspired argument I have in mind is as follows. Any being that possessed, say, only nine or fewer of the 10 items on the list would be less morally perfect than any being that possessed all 10 such items. It follows that all 10 items are required of a morally perfect being. Of course, if one already had a pre-existing concept of a God-like being that possessed some but not all of these characteristics, say, because the Biblical God is depicted as a jealous and wrathful God but also as a perfect being, what I would insist on emphasizing is that we are constructing a conceptual argument about the moral requirements for a being that is absolutely morally worthy of worship, and we have shown that such a being must be morally perfect. If the Biblical God fails to satisfy these requirements, then believers in that deity ought to reconsider whether or not that being is genuinely and absolutely morally worthy of worship, rather than merely a powerful supernatural being that might nonetheless be worthy of worship for amoral or immoral reasons of

a practical, self-interested nature, or only partly morally worthy of worship. Again, these are not the same thing – not at all, although many believers often conflate them.

Items 3-10 are all elements of a being that possesses all moral perfections, but there may be other elements of moral perfection, such as the following. A morally perfect being might also have to be:

11. as giving of grace as possible
12. as compassionate as possible
13. as kind as possible
14. as trustworthy as possible
15. as helpful as possible
16. as honest and truthful as possible
17. as communicative as possible
18. as forthright as possible
19. as responsive to the needs of all beings as possible
20. as pro-active as possible

Indeed, there may be other characteristics required of such a being. Again using my Anselm-inspired argument, any being that lacks any of the items in 1-20 is less morally perfect than any being that possesses them all, in which case it follows that items 1-20 (and probably many other similar items) are all requirements of a morally perfect being, which latter is a requirement for any being to be absolutely morally worthy of worship.

Returning to the quoted statement that inspired this meditation on worship-worthiness, according to the proprietors and likely many of the congregants at the Masjid Bait Ul Tahir, only Allah is worthy of worship. (I will only mention the problematic implication here to the effect that, if this is true, then other presumably divine beings like Yahweh, God, Jesus, and Brahman, some or all of which might be thought to be identical with Allah, would not be worthy of worship unless

they were identical with Allah.) Undoubtedly, many Jews and Christians have similar beliefs, and on a charitable interpretation of those beliefs, they all have the same divinity in mind, understood somewhat differently, for various historical and other reasons. We can also leave aside, for the sake of simplicity, related issues, such as whether the formless Brahman the Hindus have in mind is also the same divinity, which is but one form of the thesis of divine monism embraced by certain forms of Hindu henotheism, to the effect that all manifestations of a spiritual nature (possibly including everything in the universe) are manifestations of the One.

Thus, simplifying matters, my question is whether the Judeo-Christian-Islamic (Abrahamic) divinity – which is the major source of claims of exclusionary authority about such matters – actually satisfies these requirements of worship-worthiness. The façade at the mosque also displayed another statement that suggested the answer might be in the affirmative: “Love all, hate none.” That is at least some evidence that the Abrahamic divinity is morally worthy of worship, if such an omniscient, omnipotent being actually exists that loves all and hates none, but reflections on Biblical accounts of God’s wrath during the Deluge, His killing of all first-born Egyptians during the first Passover, and the like – to mention just a few cases involving but one aspect of the tripartite Abrahamic faith – suggest otherwise.

Reflection on all of this leads me to two sets of considerations. The first set of considerations boils down to this question:

1. Do all of the Abrahamic sources and lived traditions depict the Abrahamic divinity as satisfying all of the 20 criteria above?

As my two examples involving the Deluge and the first Passover alone suggest, anyone versed in these texts and their lived interpretation would be hard pressed to think the answer to this question is supportive of the idea that this divinity is absolutely morally worthy of worship. The second set of considerations may be summarized in this question:

2. Is there any Abrahamic-religion-independent (religion-neutral) evidence or reasons for thinking that the Abrahamic divinity both exists and satisfies all of the 20 criteria above?

Reason and observation, unfortunately, do not significantly support the idea that such a characteristics-possessing divinity exists at all. He certainly might exist insofar as that idea is not logically self-contradictory, and some might think certain things count as some evidence that He does exist (such as Biblical and other testimonials, the fact that one's ancestors devote their lives to faith, etc.), but it seems more reasonable to doubt that He does exist, all things considered. For it is difficult to imagine that such a being could be maximally communicative and pro-active in securing the maximal welfare of all sentient beings and allow even just the three Abrahamic religions to have caused so much suffering and confusion among their collective populations, much less every other competing, contradictory religious belief system, not to mention all the other ills of this world – ills for which the world's most coherent theodicies amount at best to fairly transparently poor attempts at apologetics.

I would like to use another Anselm-inspired argument, to shift attention in another direction altogether, to the consideration of other beings that might be *somewhat* morally worthy of worship in the absence of reasonable grounds for belief in the Abrahamic or related conceptions of the deity. One of the primary directives in Buddhism, especially in Mahāyāna (later) Buddhism, is the cultivation of *bodhicitta*, a Sanskrit term referring to an awakening mind/heart of infinite compassion and altruism, if not the primary directive of the Mahāyāna (Gyatso 1997). This is often expressed in a mantra that is chanted in a *metta* (Pāli; *maitrī*, Sanskrit: loving-kindness) meditation, with many variations on the following:

May all beings be safe. May all beings be happy. May all beings be free from suffering.
May all beings experience enlightenment.

As a rule (there are always exceptions), Buddhists do not direct their salvation-oriented attention to divinities at all, but rather they believe that cultivating *bodhicitta*, a heart of compassion and a mind of altruistic (non-egoic) mindfulness or wakefulness, is the way to attain *nirvana*, spiritual fulfillment, enlightenment. As an act of initiation into Buddhism, they take symbolic refuge in the Buddha, the historical human mortal they believe to have first attained *nirvana* through his own efforts and to have shown the way for others to attain it themselves, without relying on any gods, they take refuge in the *Dharma* (his teachings), and in the *Sangha* (the community of Buddhists). They might even be said to worship the Buddha when they meditate on his qualities, chant prayers with his name in them, and so forth. This leads us to question whether the Buddha is somewhat morally worthy of worship.

If the Buddha must possess all 20 items on the list above to be morally worthy of worship at all, then it seems to follow that he might not be morally worthy of worship. Of course, devout Buddhists might disagree, but where they would have to focus their disagreement is in terms of some of the 20 requirements listed above, namely, those it is unreasonable to think a mere human possessed, which they could reject on the ground that they take him to have been an otherwise ordinary mortal. For example, most Buddhists would disagree with item 5, since they do not believe a being that is morally perfect must be omnipotent, but only that such a being must be lacking an illusory sense of ego and thus lacking all ego-volitions. They might also disagree with item 20, because often enough the Buddha takes a gentler, more patient approach, allowing his followers to learn things through their own experiences. Buddhists might therefore eliminate 5 and 20, and insert items 21 and 22 instead:

21. A morally perfect being must have perfect patience
22. A morally perfect being must always respond to the needs of sentient beings in the manner that is most suitable to their particular predicaments as spiritual beings

They might also make a few other substitutions and modifications, adjusted for human mortals as opposed to immortals or gods. No doubt, folks can quibble about this or that particular item, and whether or not it is essential for a morally perfect being, or a being as morally perfect as it is reasonable to think any human being could be, whether the Abrahamic divinity is reasonably depicted as possessing that attribute, or whether the human Buddha or some other saintly person possessed it. For example, there are varying interpretations of the Buddhist idea that the Buddha's enlightenment involves something more plausibly described as the perfection of wisdom, on the one hand, or omniscience, on the other hand, and even among those who take the latter literally, some interpret it to mean that the Buddha can know anything worth knowing (which most Buddhists restrict to things that are enlightenment-oriented or, perhaps less credibly to a non-Buddhist, that he can know anything that he directs his attention to) (Nāgapriya 2004).

Such disputes are important for certain purposes, but not for our purpose here. Our purpose here is simply to point out how there are divergent conceptions and standards of moral perfection, some of which do not hinge upon belief in an omnipotent creator deity and which are relatively reasonable, plausible, and morally worthy of our attention and respect. Surely the directives of universal altruism and infinite compassion are such items, worthy of adoration, veneration, and

emulation, but as much as I respect and honor such attributes, my intuition is that these are not the sorts of things that can be sufficiently established or known to be deep dispositions in another, in which case I doubt I would ever sufficiently trust the altruism of a putatively enlightened Buddhist master or other guru-type human being so much that I would completely surrender my will, judgment, and moral compass to that person – which complete moral trust and surrender, recall, is what the Abrahamic tradition exemplifies in the willingness of its namesake patriarch for his willingness to sacrifice his innocent son's life on the command of what he believed to be the deity.

Of course, it is arguably the case that if anyone can tell whether someone else is enlightened, that judge would probably have to be enlightened in order to be able to discern enlightenment in another, which is reminiscent of the paradox of seeking wisdom to the effect that one would have to be wise to recognize it. The paradox-of-wisdom-type problem attending the case of Abraham is nearly insurmountably more puzzling simply on the ground that a human discerning whether a being was a morally perfect deity would involve a far more disproportionate epistemic gulf than that between an unwise person and the wisdom of another. Thus, there is less reason to think any human could achieve a level of confidence on such a matter that was justifiable.

A colleague and friend of mine, Rick Jarow, Professor of Religion at Vassar College, and I were once co-teaching a course there on Contemplative Ethics, when a student asked us how one can tell if someone else is enlightened. Professor Jarow's answer was both sagacious and humorous: "Ask their spouse!" What is sagacious about it is that unless one lives intimately with another for many years, it is doubtful one can feel confident that another is truly spiritually evolved, much less enlightened. The element of moral submission – surrender of one's own moral compass – in worship ought not to be handed over without significant confirmation of the claim that the being to which it is being handed over is in fact significantly enlightened and approximating moral perfection. A few encounters with what one takes to be visions of the divine are, unfortunately, evidentially indistinguishable from a few encounters with hallucinations, from the perspective of external justification, from which vantage the principle of parsimony generally suggests the superiority of any error theory over any supernatural theory, any and all details typically notwithstanding, as Hume (2004) forcefully made clear.

If we compare the Abrahamic divinity with the Buddha in terms of my two sets of considerations above (reflected in questions 1 and 2, about whether there is reason to think the being in question satisfies the 20 criteria, and whether there is independent reason to think the being exists, respectively), then it is arguably the case that there is historical, Buddhism-independent reason

for thinking the Buddha actually existed, taught these principles, and probably possessed most if not all of the items in the Buddhist version of our 20-items list (dropping items 5 and 20, and adding items 21 and 22, or some such more careful delineation of such items), and that he was, as much as any human being can be, spiritually evolved enough to be considered enlightened. The lived history of interpreting Buddhism in the countless lives of Buddhists, Buddhist cultures, and Buddhist nations, moreover, is far more consistent with these Buddhist beliefs, values, and teachings than the Abrahamic traditions have proven to be consistent with their beliefs, values, and teachings. (The Inquisition, the Crusades, the battles between Jews and Muslims, and between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, to mention just a few, amply illustrate this deficiency in the Abrahamic traditions.) An Anselm-like comparison, therefore, suggests that it is more morally justifiable to perform a Buddhist ritual – say, to take refuge in the Buddha and to take up the practice of *metta* (loving-kindness) meditation – than it is to perform an Abrahamic ritual, such as the putatively deivorous act of Holy Communion.

The point is not to try to convert followers of Abrahamic religions to Buddhism, but to suggest that followers of Abrahamic and similar belief systems might want to reflect on what their personal motivations are for worshipping their divinity, and for believing that their divinity is morally worthy of worship. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son to God represents the ultimate act of trust, loyalty, submission of one's will, and surrender of one's own moral compass to God. Something on that order of moral magnitude demands that the agent performing the action must know with absolute certainty that the being that is being worshipped is absolutely morally perfect, or else the action is unconscionably immoral and unjustified, despite what any ancestral tradition says to the contrary. But here is the problem with this line of thought: how can any human being that is not morally perfect himself or herself know with absolute certainty that another being is absolutely morally perfect? It seems close to inconceivable. Thus, the presumption cannot be in favor of such an act of submission and surrender, and particularly not in any case where the act in question is *prima facie* the act in question is *prima facie* immoral moral, as would have been Abraham's sacrificial murder of his own son.

Countless other human actions seem to be or to have been motivated by similarly questionable intentions in the name of religion. However, before anyone seriously considers performing any action prompted by their particular religious or spiritual belief system that might otherwise be considered seriously immoral by otherwise rational beings that are not already members of the same complex belief system, it behooves them to reflect deeply, carefully, and with an open mind about the sorts of considerations that we have entertained here. Most of the more problematic types of actions that fall intuitively into this category are those that are predicated on the belief that one's own particular creed, denomination, or interpretation of some religious belief system is

the correct one, and that all of the others are relatively incorrect. How can any human being confidently assert that *only* the deity at the head of their own particular belief system is absolutely morally worthy of worship, of surrender of one's will and one's moral compass, when the prophets, saviors, messiahs, mystics, and other spiritual leaders of almost all of the world's major and minor religious or spiritual belief systems have demonstrated the same relatively *limited* satisfaction of the 20+ criteria listed and examined above, if, in fact, they were truly existing historical beings and the stories about their lives were even relatively true.

A far more rational and morally justifiable principle would be to maintain one's own moral compass under any and all circumstances, except perhaps if one could with absolute confidence know that a being with far greater moral perfection than oneself was giving one advice – catch-22-type logical blocks against this sort of epistemic possibility notwithstanding. Even then, it would be prudent to be cautious, as one who would need to look to others for moral guidance admittedly lacks sufficient moral judgment and thus could easily be misled to think one was perfectly confident in another without actually having sufficient grounds for that confidence, or easily misled to think someone was morally more knowledgeable than oneself morally when in fact that person was simply more well-versed in certain texts, arguments, or other rhetorical forms of persuasion that were not necessarily motivated by all that is right, good, or holy. To my lights, if a being I took to be a deity asked me to sacrifice my son, then I would first either doubt that being was a deity or I would doubt my own sanity, before taking such a request seriously. One thought I would certainly consider was whether this being who made such a request or command is morally worthy of my trust, respect, worship, or submission, even if this being has given me solid reasons to think it is a supernatural, immortal, or otherwise supramundane being, since the belief landscape in which supernatural beings are thought to exist includes malevolent and deceitful ones.

To my lights, any being that could make such a request must be deficient in one or more of the 20+ items listed above, and thus cannot be an absolutely morally perfect being, in which case there would not be anything remotely resembling a moral reason strong enough for me to seriously consider obeying its commands – which is not the same as having a prudential reason to consider obeying an evil command, something anyone confronted by a coercive mobster or other evil human being might have self-preservation-based reasons to consider. Truly devout Abrahamic believers might think that simply shows that I am unworthy of their God. They typically reason that it was only a test. When the reply is made to the effect that God theoretically knows everything and thus knows the answers to tests before He administers them, the counter-reply is usually that the purpose of the test was for Abraham to know both that, unlike other deities that his peers were performing human sacrifices to, God does not require human

sacrifices (though he still accepted animal ones), and that Abraham himself was worthy of God's grace (through his act of absolute trust in God under such dire circumstances). But that leads to the following dilemma, either lemma of which is problematic for the Abrahamic believer:

- Either (a) Abraham absolutely knew already that God was absolutely morally perfect, or
- (b) Abraham didn't absolutely know already that God was absolutely morally perfect.

If (a), however, then since Abraham already knew absolutely that he could trust God, then Abraham did nothing praiseworthy enough to serve as the basis for God's decision to treat him as the great patriarch of Judaism and Islam or to treat all of his future progeny as His chosen ones. If (b), on the other hand, while the act would merit a reward from an amoral being or an immoral being, such as a demon or a gangster, it would not merit a reward from an absolutely morally perfect being, because such a being would not endorse an agent's acting on such an ill-informed understanding, as doing so could only be motivated by selfish interests and/or fear and the like in the presence of a powerful, superior being, regardless of whether that powerful being was a natural being or a supernatural one.

I am open-minded enough to realize that I might be missing something, and if I am, I certainly and sincerely hope one of the agents of this divinity (or the divinity itself) will come forth to bring it to my attention. I also mean no disrespect to the Abrahamic tradition; after all, I was born into it and raised in it, having gone to Catholic grammar school and so on. I must confess that I have been exposed to these beliefs so deeply that some part of me hopes very much that some palatable, plausible version of them is true (although I cannot formulate even a rough sketch of what that might look like), and that I hope to come across such a credible model. I am aware that I remain nonetheless biased in favor of it, given that I was raised in it and by now I have very powerful spiritual longings, but reasoning in an honest, open-minded way suggests that these longings might never be satisfied, and likely will not be satisfied.

The way that I deal with the fear that was instilled in me from early on, the fear that is programmed through conditioning to accompany any questioning or criticism of the credibility of these religious ideas, is as follows. If the universe is governed by an absolutely morally perfect being, then that being knows that my intentions are to believe only what is true, that I have become aware of the fact that it is morally more important to be sensitive to the differences between such things as truth and falsity, knowledge and mere belief, facts and mere hopes, and

that I aspire toward the embodiment of *bodhicitta* (an awakening mind and altruistic heart) in all my endeavors. If the universe is not governed by such a being, it makes no difference to my beliefs and motivations – they remain valid and important, and they possibly become more commendable or noble thereby. Thus, what matters most – regardless of what kind of natural or supernatural beings exist or what or how they may or may not have communicated with us – is trying to believe what seems most to be true and trying to do what seems most to be right and good. I think any mind and heart that adopts such intentions as their primary modus operandi in life is *worthy* of respect from any being, natural or supernatural, much more so than is allegiance to a morally less-than-certain religious belief system predicated on the carrot of heaven, the whip of hell, and the absurdity of treating doubt as a vice and mindless surrender of one's moral compass as a virtue.

In conclusion, it is doubtful any being is worthy of the sort of worship Abraham was willing to perform for his God.

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