

Idolatry

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Abstract

This article argues that monotheism defines itself by its rejection of "idolatry" rather than by the belief in one God. The opposition between monotheism and idolatry is further developed by discussing how it is related to distinctions between true and false religion, creator and creature, loyalty and betrayal, order and disorder, and clarity and ambiguity.

Resumo

Este artigo afirma que o monoteísmo se define pela sua rejeição da "idolatria" e não pela crença em um Deus. A oposição entre monoteísmo e idolatria se desenvolve mais em discutir como ela está relacionado a outras distinções: por ex., religião verdadeira/falsa, criador/criação, lealdade/traição, ordem/desordem, e clareza/ambigüidade.

1. Introduction

The popular movie and television series *Highlander*¹ is based upon the concept that a group of immortals are living among us undetected. They look and live like other human beings, except that they will only die when they are beheaded. If one immortal cuts off the head of another one, he automatically absorbs the latter's "life force" and thus becomes more powerful than before. As a result, the fixed and limited group of immortals go through life in constant danger of being attacked; and for each one of them, the only effective way of protecting himself is by seeking out others to kill first, so as to absorb their power and thus have a better chance of conquering the next attacker. Since immortals have an eternity to go, they know that it is only a question of time before the next fight will take place; and since

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1 The original movie *Highlander*, starring Christopher Lambert and Sean Connery (dir. Russel Mulcahy, 1986) was followed by three sequels (1991, 1994, 2000). From 1992 on, five tv-series were produced, with Adrian Paul in the main role.

each fight means that there is one immortal less, the eventual outcome can be predicted with mathematical certainty. For although the immortals could theoretically choose to leave each other alone and live in peace forever, each one of them knows that he will live forever if, and only if, he will be the one who eventually succeeds in killing all the others. Hence the sentence that is repeated like a mantra throughout the series, usually right before a fight: *there can be only one*.

The violent history of monotheism has unrolled in the name of an immortal being who will accept no equal next to himself, but whose claim of exclusive hegemony has been challenged continuously, whether by competitors who might take his place, or by critics who expected him to embrace "live and let live" values of tolerance and mutual respect. The Immortal's logic, however, has been quite different: *pace* good intentions and highminded ethical ideals expressed by part of his followers, the reality of monotheism has been dominated, rather, by an ethic of *live and let die*. It is entirely unnecessary to argue that point in great detail: the historical record speaks for itself². In this paper, however, I will concentrate not so much on the killing of flesh-and-blood people, but rather on symbolic murder, focusing on the iconoclastic impulse as central to self-definitions of monotheism.

Contrary to widespread assumptions (see e.g. recently Rodney Stark³), the belief in "one God" is *not* actually the bottom line of monotheism, and it is misleading to frame the problematics of monotheism in terms of the opposition between "one God" and "many gods". For one thing, it reflects the mistaken idea that theology and theological doctrine is the basic foundation or "hard core" of religion, which in turn reflects the protestant theological bias that religion is essentially something believed rather than something done⁴. And for another, it is an open invitation to vague and fuzzy discussions, because it is always possible to argue that many so-called monotheisms are actually polytheistic (see e.g. the Christian trinity or angelic hierarchies), and that so-called polytheisms are actually monotheistic (see e.g. supreme gods

2 For a very readable introduction meant for a large audience, see J. KIRSCH, *God against the Gods*.

3 Stark rightly criticizes the tendency among sociologists to ignore or marginalize the importance of ideas and beliefs. However, probably as a result of his explicit reliance on secondary sources (R. STARK, *One True God*, pp. 3-4: 'no part of this book is based on original historical research'), he does not ask himself whether the abstract theological proposition "there is only one God" or the moral injunction "one should worship only one God" really has as much to do with the actual historical realities of so-called "monotheisms" as its theologians would like us to believe. As a result, he risks falling into the krypto-protestant trap of conflating religion with doctrinal theology.

4 W.J. HANEGRAAFF, *The Dreams of Theology*.

in polytheistic religions). The very fact that both monotheism and polytheism can apparently be found on both sides of the boundary that supposedly divides them suggests that at stake is something more than the opposition of "one" versus "many". And indeed, as formulated by Halbertal & Margalit, the prohibition against idolatry - rather than that of polytheism - is actually 'the thick wall that separates the non-pagans from pagans'⁵.

2. If monotheism is not about One God, what then is it about?

As brilliantly argued by Jan Assmann, Western monotheism can be seen as a product of the distinction between *true and false* in religion⁶. This distinction, although first drawn by Akhenaten in the 14th century B.C., he refers to as the "Mosaic Distinction" because it has come to be linked to the name of Moses in the actual mnemohistory of Western civilization. It created the new phenomenon of what Assmann refers to as "counter-religion": a type of religion that does not function as a means of intercultural translation (the gods of one pantheon being considered translatable into those of another) but as a means of intercultural estrangement, because it defines its very identity by rejecting and repudiating the gods of other and earlier peoples.

Narratively, the distinction is represented by the story of Israel's Exodus out of Egypt. Egypt thereby came to symbolize the rejected, the religiously wrong, the "pagan". As a consequence, Egypt's most conspicuous practice, the worship of images, came to be regarded as the greatest sin. Normatively, the distinction is expressed in a law code which conforms with the narrative in giving the prohibition of "idolatry" first priority. In the space that is constructed by the Mosaic distinction, the worship of images came to be regarded as the absolute horror, falsehood, and apostasy. Polytheism and idolatry were seen as the same form of religious error. The second commandment is a commentary on the first ... Images are automatically "other gods", because the true god is invisible and cannot be iconically represented⁷.

5 M. HALBERTAL & A. MARGALIT, *Idolatry*, 236.

6 J. ASSMANN, *Moses the Egyptian*, 1-2.

7 *Ibid.*, 4.

The mosaic distinction, then, takes concrete shape in the form of the true religion of the one invisible God, defined by its rejection of the false religion of idols.

This first aspect of monotheism is closely related to a second one, which concerns the opposition of *Creator and creature*. If the first biblical commandment is about the *exclusivity* of the one God, the second commandment is concerned with applying this claim of exclusivity to his most important attribute, *creativity*. In their study of the Dutch iconoclastic revolt of 1566, Solange Deyon and Alain Lottin nicely point out what is at stake:

Issued immediately after the admonition not to have another God than the Eternal, the biblical interdict (Exodus 20:4 and Deuteronomium 4:15) is first and above all directed against the idolatrous practices ... but it also means to warn against the unconscious desire, betrayed by the fabrication of images, and of statues in particular, of giving a semblance of life to inert objects, and thus daring to equal the Creator...⁸

Firstly, then, the commandment is concerned with the tendency of the creature to usurp the place of the creator. And secondly, it is concerned with the next step that might easily follow: that he will end up worshipping the works of his own hands. For reasons of conceptual logic - working, I assume, unconsciously - such worship is considered taboo because it implies an inversion of the very order of creation⁹: if God has created man and man creates idols, then the picture of man worshipping those idols corresponds to the image of God worshipping man. However, from a third perspective we seem to be dealing, rather, with the picture of a *woman* "worshipping" other men! Here we encounter the dynamics of *loyalty versus betrayal*. As demonstrated in detail by Halbertal & Margalit, the Bible metaphorically defines idolatry as sexual sin:

Through the root metaphor of marriage, God's relationship to Israel is construed by the prophets as exclusive. Within the marriage metaphor God is the jealous and betrayed husband, Israel is the unfaithful wife, and the third parties in the triangle - the lovers - are the other gods. Idolatry, then, is the wife's betrayal of

8 S. DEYON & A. LOTTIN, *Les casseurs de l'été 1566*, 116. On this whole issue of creation, cf. the important discussions in M. CAMILLE, *Gothic Idol*, 27-57.

9 My argument here is inspired by the discussion of contrariety and inversion in S. CLARK, *Thinking with Demons*, 1-147.

the husband with strangers, with lovers who had no shared biography with Israel, the other gods whom Israel never knew¹⁰.

As modern readers we must take care not to overemphasize here the aspect of "romantic jealousy", in the sense of an emotional fear of betrayal¹¹; although I believe that this aspect is of considerable importance, at least as crucial is the legal issue of a marriage contract in which the husband provides material support in return for the exclusive right to his wife's sexual favors. This is why idolatry is not only seen as sexual unfaithfulness, but more specifically as prostitution:

The main function of the husband in Hosea's metaphor is the satisfaction of the wife's material needs. Extending the metaphor, it is God who satisfies Israel's needs by giving grain, wine, and oil. ... The sin of idolatry is whoredom. Israel gives her favors to whoever pays her the highest fee ... The sin of idolatry as whoredom is made even worse by the great gap between the husband's faithfulness and love for his wife, and the wife's faithless behavior. For the wife sexual relations are based on pay, and she believes that the lover pays more¹².

Or at least, that is what the situation looks like from the perspective of the betrayed husband, who finds it obvious that he is the faithful and loving party who has done nothing to deserve his wife's calculating and loveless behaviour. But what about his wife's perspective? Perhaps it was him who drove her into her lovers' arms, because she could no longer stand his possessiveness, his authoritarianism and his paranoia... One of the peculiar characteristics of monotheism, I suggest, is the One God's apparent inability of critical self-reflection when it comes to the legitimacy of absolute divine authority, claims of exclusive allegiance, and the use of violence against anyone who competes with him or rebels against his authority. From a neutral point of view, the promiscuous "idolatry" of the husband's wife might as well be a sign of legitimate rebellion against tyrannical behaviour. Given the husband's terrible threats of punishment¹³, perhaps she has good reasons to prefer her lovers.

10 M. HALBERTAL & A. MARGALIT, *Idolatry*, 237.

11 See A.M. PINES, *Romantic Jealousy*, 2-6; and the extensive analysis of God's jealousy in M. HALBERTAL & A. MARGALIT, *Idolatry*, 25-30.

12 *Ibid.*, 13-14. However, see also their interesting discussion of idolatry as nymphomania (*ibid.*, 14-18).

13 See M. HALBERTAL & A. MARGALIT, 12-13.

We now come to a fourth aspect: *order versus disorder*. The one God seeks to control his followers (metaphorically: his wife) by means of a heavy emphasis on his Law, implying that every individual has to answer directly to God, who is invisible and all-knowing, so that from his supervision there can be no escape. Psychologically, to say the least, this makes a great difference with the typical situation in pagan contexts, where divine power and control is divided over many deities who are experienced as visually present in specific locations. Translating this situation into political terms creates no problems on the conceptual level: since the Emperors cannot deal with every detail in the lives of their followers, they delegate part of their power to lower representatives, who in turn delegate theirs, and so on. The final result is a nested pyramid hierarchy that quite nicely mirrors the concept of a hierarchy of higher and lower deities (perhaps presided over by one highest god). For monotheism, in contrast, the conceptual problem is unescapable. The human leader - whether an emperor or a pope - does not have God's attributes of invisibility and all-knowingness, and is therefore forced to use hierarchical structures of political control. But such structures are fundamentally at odds with the divine model, where every individual is accountable not to a "lower representative" or a specific visible deity, but directly to the one and only God. The axiomatic concept that authority belongs to only one person (whether divine or human) may be unproblematic for the one God himself, but is bound to create acute stress among those of his human followers who consider themselves chosen to represent him and lead the people. Unlike their pagan colleagues, they themselves cannot escape the scrutiny of their invisible leader even for a moment: when they mess up, they will be caught. But unfortunately, they are sure to mess up, for their task is impossible: to maintain Law and Order according to a strict monotheistic (that is to say, non-pyramidal) model, which would theoretically demand that each individual's behaviour is personally scrutinized by the emperor or the pope. Thus they are forced to compromise, by creating a political structure modeled after paganism rather than after the model of the One God. In this situation, they will always be caught between a rock and a hard place: God might find fault with them for allowing the Law to be broken and disorder to rule, but also for doing this by creating a political structure in which they themselves play a role of "lesser gods"¹⁴.

14 The interiorization of divine authority in Protestantism (i.e., interiorly, each creature finds himself face to face with his Creator) may be seen as an attempt to overcome this problem in a manner that refuses any compromise with "paganism".

Finally, monotheism is about *clarity versus ambiguity*. To understand this point, we must first see that the principles discussed so far create problems for monotheists because their implications tend to conflict. The fundamental monotheistic idea that there is only one true religion (1st aspect) is quite compatible with a concept of Truth as a radically transcendent mystery that is unattainable by mere human creatures; and moreover, such a concept is strongly suggested by the very emphasis on the abyss between creator and creature (2nd aspect): how could mere creatures presume to understand the very depths of the Creator? Nevertheless, effective rule by the One God (3rd & 4th aspect) is not well served by appeals to mystery and inscrutability, but requires clarity: laws formulated in unambiguous discursive language, so that they leave no doubt about their meaning.

Idolatry is bound to be problematic from this perspective, not only because it symbolizes everything that is against the Law of the one God, but for two other reasons as well. Firstly because it is based upon ritual practice rather than on doctrinal belief, and secondly because images are by definition ambiguous as regards their meaning. In other words, we are dealing with a basic opposition between the potential clarity of ideas and the unavoidable vagueness and multi-interpretability of images and behaviour - an opposition that obviously links up with the 4th aspect discussed above, since order requires clarity while vagueness tends to be perceived as disorder. But there is more at stake: the claim that images convey some kind of "meaning", combined with the admission that this meaning cannot be translated into unambiguous verbal propositions, results in the suggestion that their message must be an alternative to the official ideology¹⁵. It is easy to see how this line of reasoning was bound to get mingled up with the traditional rejection of idols, resulting in a tendency towards the demonization not only of religious statues and pictures, but of images in general: they were "speaking another language" that could not be understood rationally, and on the monotheistic premise of "one Truth" such an obscure language could only be the language of the devil.

A strange irony seems to have been at work in this context. At least since Augustine, Christian theologians have constantly reiterated that religious images were to be seen as symbols, metaphors or allegories, not direct representations: the relation between signifier

15 This dynamics, I suggest, is at work not only in monotheism but also in the rationalist and scientific ideologies that developed since early modernity; the protestant version of monotheism, in particular, created a discourse that easily lent itself to being secularized, while retaining an instinctive aversion against "idolatry".

and signified had to be based upon mere human convention¹⁶. The idolater is thus mistaken in his belief that a god can be present in an idol; strictly speaking his sin consists not in actually worshipping demons, but in worshipping the lifeless products of his own hand and imaging them to be inhabited by gods. On the other hand, neoplatonic theories revived since the 15th century gave a new intellectual respectability to the instinctive feeling - naturally evoked by ritual practice, even if rejected by reason - that the images and statues were *really* inhabited by intelligent beings; for they suggested a doctrine of "real signs" based upon the concept of an *intrinsic* (not just conventional) connection between signifier and signified¹⁷.

3. Conclusion: what is wrong with idolatry?

Of course there is no point in denying that monotheists claim to worship only one God (even though one might dispute whether they actually *do* so, or whether their opponents do not), but too much emphasis on that point tends to make us overlook the nature of monotheism as a "counter-religion" which defines its very identity by means of a polemical contrast with idolatry. If we try to summarize what, from a monotheist point of view, is wrong with idolatry, we find something like the following:

- is an *error* to present the gods as visible, for the real God is invisible.
- It is an expression of *hubris*, for in "making gods", the creature usurps the place of his creator.
- It is an *inversion* of the very order of creation, for the "creator" ends up worshipping his own creations.
- It is a *betrayal* of the exclusive covenant with God to fornicate with other gods.
- It is *subversive of authority*, for it stimulates human beings to look up to lower representatives in lieu of the One Power.
- It is *misleading*, because the ambiguity of images lures human beings away from the clarity of divine law and doctrine.
- It is *irrational*, because whatever "message" images convey, that message resists translation into discursive language and conceptual logic.

¹⁶ See the brilliant discussion in C. FANGER, *Signs of Power*, and summary in W.J. HANEGRAAFF, *Forbidden Knowledge*, p. 241 n 49.

¹⁷ I am only briefly alluding here to a very complex subject that would deserve much more discussion. For starters, see the classic article by E.H. GOMBRICH, *Icones Symbolicae*; and cf. W.J. HANEGRAAFF *Sympathy or the Devil*.

I do not mean to claim that either this list of eight errors, or the five aspects from which they are derived, is exhaustive or complete: I assume that more aspects could be discussed, or some of them could be further subdivided, and that the list of errors could be expanded further. My main point is that "idolatry" can only be understood in terms of its polemical relation to "monotheism", which in turn is defined by this very same relation - rather than by the numerical "one" as opposed to "many". The term idolatry therefore does not refer to any clear and unambiguous doctrine, but to a religious practice that has come to evoke a fuzzy set of emotional connotations, many of which function on an unconscious level and continue to influence our thinking up to the present day.

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