

In Search of the Object of Devotion

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History of Worship

Believing in a Divine Origin and worshipping Him is one of the oldest aspects of human life. Historical research conducted by archaeologists and anthropologists has revealed that even primitive humans who lived thousands of years before the first civilization was formed had deep religious and metaphysical beliefs, such as belief in divine spirits and life after death. It seems that from the dawn of history humanity has inherently known that they have not been forsaken in this vast existence; rather, they are under the influence and authority of metaphysical entities and powers that preside over their existence and have a part in their destiny.

The drawings discovered in ancient caves, statues and various ornaments that have been found in underground excavations or deep within caves are all testimonies to the existence of various religious beliefs. Moreover, the remains of the dead, the method of their burial, and the existence of animal skulls, weapons, and valuable artifacts alongside the bodies are all proof of the fact that ancient humans, in some way, believed in life after death.

According to Islamic thought, humans innately seek and believe in God; in other words, they have an innate predisposition towards worshipping God and also possess a type of inborn cognition of Him. However, because this cognitive predisposition is not adequate for perfect worship and understanding of God, holy prophets have been appointed among various peoples throughout history in order to perfect this innate guidance and enlighten humankind in theology, self-knowledge, and the relationship between “God, humanity, and the world” and thus bring forth the fruits of human intellect and nature.

The holy prophets have always enjoined worship of the One Divine God—divine meaning that He is superior to and exempt from the natural and material world. Thus, in proportion to the influence that this invitation to worship has fostered in each person, humanity’s beliefs in general have been fluctuating between the boundaries of monotheism and polytheism.¹ This fluctuation has resulted in a wide-ranging spectrum of theological beliefs among earlier nations and societies even after emergence of the prophets.

Naturally, because polytheism [shirk] and idolatry, in contrast to pure monotheist beliefs, have material qualities and effects—such as worship of idols, stones, animals, etc.—it is only logical that historic analysis should come across more signs of these beliefs. Because monotheism is

less material, historic analysis should be able to demonstrate the radices of monotheism in human history to a much lesser degree. Even so, this truth does not make “monotheism” .insignificant or marginal

The Perfection and Excellence of Islamic Theology

In any event, for various reasons that are too extensive to include in this exposition, the long history of religion—generally speaking—has been witness to an astonishing diversity concerning religious beliefs and religious customs of various peoples. Apart from monotheist views, the diversity of polytheistic and henotheistic² religions has overwhelmed humanity with its profuseness.

According to Islamic tradition, Islamic teachings in theology and other branches of religious studies, such as eschatology, are the most complete religious teachings at our disposal. Contemplation of the profundity of Islamic theological teachings is enough to prove this claim. Nevertheless, it is obvious that understanding the importance, profundity, and richness of Islamic theology can only be complete when Islamic beliefs are compared with those of other religions and sects, especially mundane religions and beliefs. This comparison, if preformed .with contemplation and impartiality, can effectively reveal the excellence of Islamic theology

A Glimpse of Mundane Religious Theology

There is no reliable and accurate knowledge concerning the religious lifestyle of ancient humans. Research on this subject has its own particular problems. Nevertheless, today, we have acquired some information on this subject through archeological research and analysis of the beliefs and religious ceremonies of contemporary primitive tribes. According to recent findings in archeology and anthropology, there are common elements in most primitive religions that exist with little variation in contemporary uncivilized and primitive tribes.

A common practice among ancient humans was veneration and glorification of various plants and animals. Religious historians term this plant or animal “Totem” and call veneration of these objects “Totemism”. Each of these primitive tribes worshiped a specific totem or group of totems and sometimes worshiped a particular animal that they believed to be one of their ancestors.

They believed that totems had an occult power called “Mana” which made them worthy of veneration and glorification. Therefore, they strongly avoided harming or eating these totems and believed that the spirit within the totem protected them. Sometimes totems were chosen out of fear (lions and snakes for example) and sometimes beauty and exquisiteness were the grounds for worship (peacocks and gazelles for instance). Totem worshipers endeavored to

make themselves resemble their totems.

Other than glorification of plants and animals, various lifeless objects were also sacred; such an object is termed “Fetish”. Fetishes were venerated by various primitive clans and were taken on battles and hunts. Natural fetishes (non-manufactured) such as pebbles, unusual and rare pieces of wood, and meteor stones usually had strange and singular shapes and were considered sources of magical powers. Later, among more advanced peoples who were able to fashion metal objects, worship of manufactured fetishes became common and gradually transformed into a form of idolatry.

Parallel to belief in holy objects, plants, and animals, a kind of “Animism” was prevalent. Animism is the belief that various aspects of nature have independent souls and spirits that can influence human destinies. In addition, wholehearted belief in sorcery and magic and avoidance of specific objects due to the belief that they had occult powers are several other beliefs and customs that were to some extent existent among primitive tribes.

These facts show that affinity and dependency towards a superior power and the inclination to venerate and worship this power has commonly prevailed in a simple and rudimentary manner among ancient humans. However, this primitive feeling and inclination—influenced by factors such as imagination, ignorance, lack of knowledge, fear and insecurity, etc.—manifested itself in the form of the worship of special objects, plants, and animals. In other words, ancient humans were very far from the intellectual maturity they required to receive divine knowledge concerning cognition of the source, administration, and design structure of existence.

Subsequent to prehistoric eras, history was gradually witness to the formation of great civilizations in various parts of the world. In this era, main elements of tribal religions endured, although sometimes they acquired “modern” forms. For example, belief in totems and fetishes, and also idolatry and animism transferred over to newly established civilizations in various forms. As well, these civilizations were the sources of new forms of theism such as polytheism and henotheism.

Ancient Egyptians evolved through all the phases of rudimentary religions, such as totemism and animism, and finally tending towards multitudes of gods, they became absolute polytheists. They regarded the Egyptian pharaohs as the offspring of the Sun and considered them to possess some form of divinity. The erectors of the Egyptian pyramids designated the pharaohs as Sons of Ra (the Egyptian sun god), and built in their names pyramids whose shapes are allegories of the rays of the Sun.

Sun worship was commonplace among ancient Sumerians. The name of their sun god was Shamash. Inanna was their great goddess of cities, plants, and fertility. Each Sumerian god

resided at a specific temple where it was worshiped. In addition to belief in multiple gods, the Sumerians also believed in mythological creatures and spirits. In the second age of Sumerian civilization, the Babylonian-Assyrian period, there were numerous gods with similar names. In the most ancient religious texts of the Hindu civilization—the Vedas—gods are described in human forms. In its initial form, Hinduism includes the two elements of nature worship and polytheism. The Vedic gods, great and small, were elements and aspects of nature that had gained divinity. The common characteristics of these gods included possessing human forms, compassionate natures, immortality, and lack of individuality. In addition, the followers of Buddha deified him after his death and gradually, many other gods became objects of their worship.

According to the ancient Chinese, the world is under the dominion of “Shangdi” meaning ‘Above Sovereign’. In some narrations, the creation of humanity is attributed to Shangdi. An army of gods governed affairs under the authority of Shangdi because he was too great to attend to the problems of mortal beings. There is no complete list of these gods. A group of the Chinese gods guarded the people’s homes and thus every Chinese house was believed to contain both celestial and worldly inhabitants.

In ancient Greece, polytheism was rampant. Every family had their own god and the fires in their ovens constantly burned in the name of these gods. Offering food to the gods was one of the most prevalent religious ceremonies in people’s homes. In addition to the god that each family had, each tribe, clan, and city worshiped their own specific god. The Greeks’ religious imagination, by extending beyond their own locality, formed the common mythologies and gods of ancient Greece. The Greek people had a god for every aspect of nature and society, worldly and celestial powers, good and evil, various affairs, etc.

In Rome, people believed in numerous spirits—those who lacked a specific form or independent personality. They would beseech some of these spirits for prosperity in agriculture and harvest. Others were venerated and deified within familial circles. There were innumerable official Roman gods who had special priests in government temples and who were worshiped with special customs and rites.

In pre-Zoroastrian Iran, the “Magian” belief was popular. This belief propagated dualism and belief in a god of good and a god of evil. Zoroaster corrected this belief after his appearance and altered the beliefs of Iranians from polytheism towards monotheism.

According to what was said, we can identify a set of religious and ideological principles and elements that are more or less common in all religions described.

As we have established, in these religions, instead of One God, there were numerous gods.

Sometimes the number of these gods would increase in proportion to cities, tribes, and even families. Therefore, the theology of these religions must be described as an extreme version of polytheism, which is very distant from pure monotheistic thought. The incarnations of these gods were natural elements, celestial bodies, various animals, and even particular people and thus were not divine beings but merely aspects of nature. These gods were subject to much change as a result of social progress, wars, encounters with neighboring civilizations, etc.; insomuch that at times, following these factors, a god would lose his former glory or a goddess who had no previous status would join the ranks of important and official gods! Occasionally, a number of gods, who were products of the fantasies and imaginations of their worshipers, would combine and bring about a new god who was an amalgam of the traits and attributes of the previous gods. Among most peoples, various prevalent mythologies about gods spoke of childbearing, combining, and internal battles among gods! The pinnacle of these mythologies can be found within the ancient Greek civilization, especially in the epics of Homer and Hesiod. The majority of these gods were not divine and incorporeal beings. In fact, they had humanlike personalities and they were confined by human characteristics and relationships, such as reproduction, marriage, and paradoxically death. Often, governing the affairs of nature was divided among gods and each one was the custodian of one or several natural processes, such as the wind and rain, and were heeded and beseeched only in their specific domains. Today it has become apparent to most people that the gods of ancient peoples are in no way worthy of worship and cannot answer our innate longing to worship a divine and holy being. Nevertheless, the prevalence of the worship and veneration of these gods among ancient peoples reveals a fundamental need—the need to worship, venerate, feel dependant upon, and have a link with a superior being—in the depths of our soul; a need that has been fulfilled to perfection by the Islamic religion.³

Notes:

1. - One of the much-discussed issues among historians of religion is the question of whether, historically, monotheism predates polytheism or vice versa? According to religious references, indisputably after the appointment of the first prophet [the prophet Adam], monotheist belief existed among humans and after that, monotheism and polytheism endured in parallel and thus some people were monotheists and others were polytheists.
2. - Henotheism refers to belief in a superior god who has delegated a portion of the affairs of

the universe to other gods and goddesses. Polytheism—general meaning intended—also encompasses this belief, but if we use polytheism in parallel to henotheism—with the particular meaning of belief in several gods—then these two definitions may be considered synonymous.

3. - Several recommended references for supplementary reading:

Eliade, Mircea, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, Trans. Philip Mairet. New York: Harper & Row, 1967.

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