

Prayer

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Assessing the meaning of “prayer” is like assessing the meaning of “game”, “success”, or “happiness”: It comes in so many forms that it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what people might have in mind when they use the word. Typically, it is an act that involves some combination of contemplation and affectation. Thus it can be either introspective or performative in nature. Moreover, it can be done for any number of reasons. The approaches vary, the motives vary, and the goals vary; but the common thread seems to be one or another variant of divination: invoking—or, as it were, tapping into—supernatural powers so as to bring about some desired state of affairs (be it in oneself or out in the world).

Prayer can confer any number of benefits—individual transcendence, social acceptance, and/or some kind of yearned-for dispensation. At the end of the day, people pray because it offers some sort of gratification—be it from solace or from an anticipation of wonderful things (that might be “held in store” for those who are doing it properly).

And so it goes: Prayer can be used to show appreciation or to receive revelation or to petition. It can be an act of submission or an act of reflection. Whether it is counting one’s blessings, achieving enlightenment, or asking for favors, it usually has something to do with “getting in touch with” or “getting closer to” the divine (however conceived).

All this may or may not involve idolatry; which is simply to say that prayer is often a mode of worship—something that is itself far from straight-forward. After all, worship can entail anything from solemn reverence (demonstrating awe) to unctuous praise (demonstrating fealty).

To engage in a thorough inquiry of such a widely-variegated activity, it is difficult to even know where to begin.

Let’s start with imprecation. Petitionary / intercessory prayer can be found in virtually every culture that has ever existed—from the incantations of Wicca to the “duat” of Muslims. The petitioning of deities dates back to the 23rd century B.C. with the (Sumerian) hymns of the Akkadian high priestess, Enheduanna of Ur. Her pleas, addressed to the goddess Inanna, were the earliest record of FORMALIZED (that is: ritualistic) prayer.

The phenomenon is global. On the Indian subcontinent, there’s the Vedic tradition of “upasthana” (alternately known as “stotra” or “bhakti” in both Hindu and Buddhist vernacular). In Persia, there’s the Zoroastrian “dahm[an]” (as attested in the “Avesta”). In the Levant, Judaic “kohanim” prostrated themselves before burnt offerings on the “dukhan”. And around the eastern Mediterranean rim, there were paeans to Mithra[s] (as attested in the Greco-Roman “Magical Papyri”). In each case, people beseech a supernatural entity to fulfill some sort of desire.

We are all inclined to be solicitous of those in power—be that power worldly or otherworldly. When we earnestly want something, and when we believe in an omniscient super-being that heeds our call, we are naturally moved to request that said super-being oblige us. Using prayer as a petition, then, is perhaps its most common form.

While belief in this scheme holds undeniable appeal for the supplicant, there is an ancillary benefit to those in positions of authority. When it comes to enforcing compliance / conformity (vis a vis the established order), prayer as imprecation can be used to serve the interests of those who enjoy worldly power...and deign to affirm it. As is often the case, it is the prospect of wish-fulfillment (and tribulation-avoidance) that impels people to be subservient to those who speak on behalf of the ultimate authority. The thinking amounts to the following: “If you want things to work out well for you, then you’ll get with the program. Don’t rock the boat, lest you jeopardize your good standing in the cosmic scheme.” When one implores X, one is BEHOLDEN TO X; as one is entering into the relationship from an inferior position. By the same token, X (or those who claim to speak on behalf of X) will approach the relationship from a superior position: If you want me to do something for you, you will meet my demands.

Petition is transactional in nature. Ultimately, the terms of the exchange are about using leverage. Insofar as one curries favor with the deity, the thinking goes, one earns the right to issue pleas. Hence worship is not only about reverence; it is—in part—about accruing soteriological capital...which confers the right to adjure. In this sense, orison is done as blandishment; which it simply to say that it is a means of ensuring that one remains in good standing with the Creator of the Universe (who, it is generally believed, doles out reward and punishment accordingly). Thus praise is an sop—a reminder that worship is invariably transactional; as it comes with expectations of a return on investment. Hence the idiom of “indebted-ness” to the deity.

Prayer as imprecation is so commonplace because wish-fulfillment is the most potent enticement in life—be it fanciful or aspirational. It comes as no surprise, then, that the act of prayer was referred to as “*proseukhomai*” (Greek for “toward a wish”) during Classical Antiquity. (The Vulgar Latin term for supplication was “*precaria*”, as used by the Roman Catholic church through the Middle Ages.) Some version of supplication seems to play a role in virtually every culture since time immemorial; as we are creatures that have hopes about some things and concerns about others. Such desires govern our lives.

Beyond the rudimentary calculus of incentives and disincentives, we yearn for good fortune while worrying about misfortune. Consequently, we are moved take measures—some practical, some delusional—to bring about the former (as with the medieval Anglo-Saxon “*Æcerbot*”, used to ensure soil fertility for their crops) and forestall the latter (as with the apotropaic spells of Classical Antiquity, used to stave off tragedy). The more urgent we feel, the more delusive our tactics tend to be. Those who are most predisposed to superstition (viz. theism and animism) are inclined to resort to petitionary / intercessory prayer; especially when in dire straits. When done out of desperation, the sense of urgency disposes one to posit an ever-more far-fetched *ignis fatuus*; which translates to an increased willingness to curry favor with the powers that be...whatever it takes.

The perceived need to earn soteriological capital is integral to this arrangement. For once a supplicant feels that the ultimate authority is willing to—as it were—go to bat for him AS NEEDED, he will be more willing to meet whichever conditions have been set before him. Consequently, he feels more comfortable beseeching that authority. And insofar as certain figures are seen as (worldly) proxies for an (otherworldly) authority, a supplicant will be motivated to play by whatever rules have been stipulated. To do otherwise would be to put that dispensation in jeopardy. In this fanciful scheme, it is supposed that one derives the prerogative to IMPLORE from one’s willingness to SUBMIT. Submit to whom? Well, to the godhead, of course.

To reiterate: There is often a corollary to this arrangement; as those wielding power IN the world (that is: those who are “calling the shots” politically / theologically) are seen as part of a divine plan that must be honored. Consequently, for imprecations to work, one must remain in THEIR good graces as well. This

impression is reinforced to the degree that a worldly authority is seen as a (divinely ordained) proxy for the otherworldly authority. Naturally, the worldly proxy takes measures to ensure this impression is widely held. (“Get with the program, and everything will turn out well. Be derelict in your responsibilities, and you’ll be sorry.” For more on this, see my essay: “The Island”.)

The social psychology involved is relatively straight-forward. Those who feel that they are in existential arrears—especially those who are busy groveling—are much easier to control. Feeling “indebted” means that one will feel obliged to SERVE (in proportion to the perceived debt). The formula is no less true when the debt is to a farcical super-being (where the magnitude of the debt is often infinite). This is in keeping with the feats performed in the etiology and the promises made in the eschatology. “I only exist because of you; and you stand to grant me eternal life” translates to the epitome of indebted-ness.

Paying tribute is a funny thing, as “praise” (the ostensive purpose of NON-petitionary prayer) often has two aspects: worship and gratitude. In other words, it is an amalgam of idolization and appreciation. Such is the nature of benediction—as seen with, say, the “*aliyah le-dukhan*” in Judaic tradition. Showing appreciation (“*hoda’ah*” in Biblical Hebrew) does not require one to fawn (that is: engage in idolatry). Hence it is not necessary to prostrate either one’s mind or one’s body. (Reverence does not mandate servility.) Yet when supplicants engage in veneration, it is often more a matter of truckling than of simply expressing esteem.

Intercessory prayer, then, is as much groveling as it is tribute. This is most evident with respect to a supplicant’s orientation toward the Abrahamic deity; yet it is seen in countless other traditions—from the imprecations of African Shamans (involving animism of some sort) to Shinto priests asking for favors from the kami. As usual, this arrangement comes in handy for those in power (insofar as those in power claim divine sanction), and can be used as leverage whenever political power is at stake. The claim is always the same: It is necessary to believe that abiding the established order is a prerequisite for securing the grace of [insert deity here].

Those who feel that they owe fealty to a figurehead—real or imagined—will be more likely to follow orders from anyone who claims to speak on behalf of that figurehead. Thus propitiation is a means to engender obeisance as a chronic cast of mind.

Indoctrination is the opposite of edification; yet the former is often misconstrued as the latter. Behavioral routines can often serve to reinforce psychological routines; and vice versa. Habits of conduct and habits of thought are, indeed, mutually reinforcing.

In his “The Age of Reason”, Thomas Paine noted that the supplicant “prays dictatorially”. How so? “When it is sunshine, he prays for rain; and when it is rain, he prays for sunshine. He follows the same idea in everything for which he prays. For what is the amount of all his prayers but an attempt to make the Almighty change his mind, and act other than he does? It is as if he were to say: Thou know not so well as I.”

Paine was half right. For many, prayer is treated as an astral version of online shopping—that is: as an imprecation. This suits those who are yearning for wish fulfillment above all else. Petitioning the powers-that-be to fulfill one’s desires has been standard for much of human history. The question, then, is what does this ENTAIL? Is it an act of submission or of liberation? Is it more affective or more contemplative?

The notion that one must suspend critical thinking in order to feel connected to the divine is without merit—and leads more to fatuity than to epiphany. Ritualized prayer, we find, is largely an act of self-indulgence disguised as reverence. One can thus pass self-ingratiation off as self-abnegation; and pass

indulgence off as some kind of deference.

Ritualization is inseparable from conditioning. The rationale for promoting ritualized prayer, then, is relatively straight-forward: IF people are obliged to repeat something over and over and over again, day in and day out, without reprieve, over the course of their entire lives, starting in their formative years, and everyone else in their community is doing the same thing; THEN there is a very high chance that they will eventually come to believe it. Prescribed routines are never about genuine Enlightenment; they are about reinforcing habits. In fact, religiosity subsists via deeply-ingrained habits of thought / behavior. After all, any behavioral routine that is repeated day in and day out will invariably determine the manner in which one thinks; which, in turn, further enforces the behavior.

Though ritualized prayer (that is: propitiation) is done under the auspices of “connecting with” / “getting in touch with” the divine (or, as the case may be, paying tribute to the designated deity), its true purpose is to inculcate the supplicant with pre-fab thought-routines. That is to say: Prayer, insofar as it is ritualistic and obligatory, is part of a program of perpetual reinforcement, used to uphold a regime of institutionalized dogmatism.

As we’ll see, subservience is not a prerequisite for genuine spirituality. In fact, it is positively antithetical to it. The utility of scripted / choreographed prayer is more about conditioning than it is about enlightening. For it conditions the supplicant—positioning him for adherence to scripts / choreography in OTHER contexts. Such a routine involves a phenomenon known in neuroscience as “priming”: establishing a pre-disposition to think / behave in a certain way.

Habits of behavior and habits of thought are symbiotic; so repeated routine creates neural pathway dependency. Behavioral routines ensure people remain fixed within the desired mindset. ROUTINE—religious and otherwise—tends to abet the status quo; so it is encouraged by those who have the most to gain from things remaining as is. Heterodox thinking threatens to undermine the established order, so must be curbed.

(Those IN power USE that power to PROTECT that power; which means upholding the state of affairs on which their continued power depends. In other words: Those who benefit most of incumbent power structures have a vested interest in using their position to preserve them AS IS. This means persuading all others that it’s in EVERYONE’S best interest to honor the established order...as divinely ordained.)

There is an undeniable appeal to petitionary prayer. Groveling—even when formalized—requires minimal cognitive exertion, making it appealing to the mentally lethargic; and useful for those in power...who would much prefer the masses are disinclined to engage in critical thinking...which may lead to questioning the credence of the status quo. The point of RITUALIZED prayer is to FEEL, not to THINK. After all, worship is amplified affectation (directed at a particular object), not an exercise in deliberation (which is forever open-ended).

The *raison d’être* of propitiation, then, is not ratiocination; it is concession.

But not all prayer is a matter of imprecation; some of it is more about introspection (as with meditation). Alas, both the propitiations of deluded votaries AND the contemplative practices of the genuinely spiritual are labeled the same thing: “prayer”. This can’t help but lead to confusion. The problem is that we often fixate on presentation rather than what’s going on beneath the surface. Consequently, when puerile theatrics is passed off as some kind of authentic spiritual activity, many of us are none the wiser.

Another point is worth considering. The idea that pleading in the right manner will bring about certain

states of affairs is not only specious, but perverse. Why perverse? If a loved one died of a horrible disease even after legions had ardently begged for mercy—day in and day out—during the entire ordeal, does that mean that they did not pray vociferously—or sincerely—enough? Had the loved one recovered instead, should we attribute the felicitous outcome to said imprecations?

The former hypothesis leads to sheer absurdity.

The latter hypothesis is beyond obnoxious—as it insinuates that all the world’s countless innocent people who did NOT recover somehow had it coming. The implication is that there is—in some obtuse sense—ultimate justice in how everything turns out...no matter how heinous the outcome. For it’s all according to god’s will.

The “all is how it should be” because “all is as god wills it” can only possibly delude...and/or lead to a kind of existential resignation. This is all splendid for those who benefit from the incumbent power structure, as it precludes any impetus to challenge the established order. (“Who are we, mere mortals, to question god’s unimpeachable will?”)

After all the groveling is said and done, the supplicant has done nothing but abet his own delusion. For the practice of scripted recitation induces a delightful stupor that is interpreted as a profound spiritual breakthrough—as if the hallmark of transcendence were inebriety. The joke is on the supplicant. In reality, he is not swaying some cosmic impresario in one direction or the other; he is merely squandering mental resources on superstitious nonsense. His delusive state validates his unfounded contentions; confirmation bias takes care of the rest.

Assaying Different Forms Of Prayer:

Prayer is not just for asking for favors; it can be a way to show reverence, humility, or appreciation. Rather than beseeching a deity to give one something, what is often referred to as “prayer” can be a matter of deep introspection and/or patient reflection (as with, say, “samatha”); or even just an opportunity to count one’s blessings. This more “contemplative” form of praying is seen as a matter of communing with—or, as the case may be, getting in touch with—the divine. The ancient Greeks referred to this as “henosis”.

Mindfulness is referred to as “vipasyana” (“dhyana” / “dharana” in Sanskrit; “jhana” in Pali) in Hinduism; “nirvana” in Buddhism. It is what Neo-Platonists referred it as “ataraxia”. It was referred to as “shek[h]ina[h]” (indwelling; derived from the Aramaic “shekinta”) in the Talmudic tradition. The general Eastern term for this is the Vedic “moksha”.

This is achieved not via worship; but via some kind of contemplative activity—what was known to the ancient Greeks as “koinonia” and in the Judaic tradition as “kawwana”. In the argot of Eastern thought, this is a matter of bringing one’s “atman” [soul] into alignment with “Brahma[n]” (the divine that pervades the universe), and—having overcome the slings and arrows of worldly existence—achieving a state of serenity. The idea is to achieve a state of mind that is at peace—that is: freed from the anxieties and misapprehensions that addle our minds. Such psychical asperities invariably hamstring our ability to contend with the tribulations of life (and, in having overcome such psychical obstacles, to flourish).

And so it goes: Prayer in the Far East is primarily a contemplative practice, as it is done to achieve communion with the divine; though there is sometimes idolatry involved. This heightened state of consciousness is not a matter of submission; it is a matter of liberation.

This contrasts starkly with “prayer” as propitiation, which typically involves idolatry (that is: worship);

and—as mentioned earlier—is a form of conditioning. Tellingly, the term “hurriya” [emancipation] is to be held in contradistinction to “Islam” [submission to god]; in which the supplicant is characterized as “abd-Allah” [slave of god]. Yet only the emancipated can truly experience the divine. The notion that subservience can somehow be a means to liberation is discussed at length in Appendix 3.

This approach can be contrasted to the Abrahamic tradition, where communion with the divine is seen as a matter of submission—referred to as “deve[i]kut[h]” in Old Semitic. This is often framed as “feeling” the presence of the Abrahamic deity (via the holy spirit, or the breath of god, depending on the preferred idiom); which may refer to anything that “brings us closer” to the divine. But, as we’ve seen, communing with the divine does NOT involve submission. In the Judaic tradition, when such an act was referred to “shek[h]ina[h]”, it typically referred to an un-scripted / un-choreographed, quiet contemplative practice; not to propitiation (a performative act characterized by affectation and idolatry).

Alas. Even when communion with the divine is ostensibly the aim of Abrahamic prayer, groveling invariably enters into the act—serving as a kind of empathogenic / enactogenic tonic. In such cases, the supplicant finds himself pandering to the deity even as he is attempting to get closer to it. (Call it resonance via subservience.) This conflation is commonplace. For example, in Islam, the notion of “wasilah” is sometimes taken to mean getting in touch with the godhead; yet it has connotations of submission.

There are other rationalizations for prayer. Religionists who pray like to think of it as an expression of not just piety, but of self-discipline. But when it comes to petitionary prayer, this impression is erroneous. For obeying commands is hardly an autonomous act. Any idiot can follow orders or engage in supplication; it takes self-discipline to think for oneself.

Genuine self-discipline involves what the Ancient Greeks called “askesis”. Aristotle referred to it as “enkrateia” (the mental discipline required to resist temptation); the Stoics referred to it as “apatheia” (imperturbability). Hindus refer to it as “shravan[a]”. Mental discipline is based on autonomy—and entails what Kant called “maturity”. {1} It is in this way that one may achieve enlightenment (“prajna” / “jina”; “panna” in Pali). {2} This entails being emancipated FROM (anxiety, misapprehension)...which is the anthesis of submitting TO (authority figures, edicts). Finding an inner peace is about transcendence rather than obedience. It is what Mahayana Buddhists dub “Zen” (a Japanese variation of the Sanskrit “dhyana” / “dharana”); and what Kant considered “experiencing the sublime”. This heightened state of consciousness needn’t involve theism. One might even say that theism PRECLUDES such a state.

At first blush, non-theistic prayer may make little sense, as it would seem that one needs an interlocutor to pray TO. Yet when one is not in a master-slave relationship with the divine, groveling is no longer warranted. For, properly conceived, divinity is not a source of authority, it is a source of serenity. Transcendence is not a matter of obedience / compliance, it is a matter of resonance with that which is larger than oneself.

Ritualized prayer cannot possibly lead to transcendence. It is doubtful whether it is even genuinely spiritual. There is about as much mental discipline involved in following an assigned script / choreography as there is in the mind of a canine subjected to a Pavlovian regimen, which operates on a more primeval level of raw satisfaction. Its appeal lay in the fact that it instills the supplicant with the illusion of dispensation...even as it is concomitant with a kind of fleeting mental deterioration. After all, the point is to FEEL, not to think; and then pat oneself on the back for being (ostensibly) thoughtful. This is the primary way that one can be mindless and—with a straight face—call it mindful.

Such Tom Foolery is to be held in stark contrast to prayer as a contemplative activity. Instead of an excuse

to be delusive, it is done to discern the true nature of things—a state of mindfulness that Hindus call “vipasyana” and Japanese Buddhists call “ken-sho” / “satori”. (Such contemplative practice pertains to the aforementioned “dhyana” / “dharana”.) Put another way: Rather than an act of chicanery, it is an attempt to achieve lucidity. When prayer is treated as a contemplative practice (rather than as an occasion to grovel), the aim is to cultivate insight into the ultimate nature of the cosmos. This isn’t about creating a (subjective) neurological effect; it is about elucidating (objective) Reality.

Such insight stems from an alignment with the natural order—what ancient Egyptians referred to as “Rta”; “bina” in the Hebrew vernacular. (One might think of it as being in sync with the rhythm of the universe.) This requires seeing past the veil of illusion—dubbed “maya” in the Vedic tradition. Hindus refer to such insight as “dharma” (being in communion with the divine); Japanese Buddhists refer to it as “daigo-tettei” (a kind of epiphany that plays an analogous role as “revelation” in the Abrahamic tradition). The goal, though, is not to placate a temperamental super-being; it is to be more in touch with the divine (which is seen not as an authority but simply as a feature of the cosmos).

So when it comes to communing with the divine, the key element is lucidity—referred to as “samadhi” in Sanskrit (“samapatti” in Pali; “sanmei” in Chinese). In Classical Antiquity, the Greeks referred to such a state as “theoria”. This entails that one is fully in touch with Reality, shorn of outward appearances. Such an elevated state of mind is achieved via contemplative practice rather than through WORSHIP.

Thus in the Eastern thought, the goal of prayer is insight into the true nature of things. While quite rare, this is not unknown in Christendom. For instance, a form of mysticism in the Eastern Orthodox Church subscribes to an approach known to adherents as “Hesychasm”. {9} And there exists a heterodox Christology whereby the divine is seen as coming from WITHIN—as intimated when Jesus of Nazareth is purported to have averred that “the kingdom of god is within you” (Luke 17:21).

But overall, one’s relationship with the divine in Abrahamic tradition is that of a slave vis a vis a master—a psychical orientation that can only serve to stoke anxiety and create misapprehension. This contrasts starkly with Eastern religions, wherein the relationship with the divine is about ALLAYING anxieties and DISABUSING oneself of misapprehensions.

In the Koran (was well as the volumes upon volumes of Hadith), there is no mention of any concept that pertains to *enlightenment*. The closest Islam’s holy book comes to broaching of such a topic are fleeting mentions of “ilm”. This buzz-term is often translated as “knowledge”, yet it is just an oblique reference to familiarity with—and fealty to—Islamic doctrine. Thus “ilm” is not so much a matter of knowledge in the modern sense as it is a matter of piety. Submission has nothing to do with erudition. {3}

It is personal enlightenment, not currying favor with an overlord, that is the basis for spirituality. When it comes to prayer, this is a contemplative activity. Alas. Abrahamic versions of prayer primarily take the form of propitiation—nay, groveling; and are generally a matter of histrionics and spectacle). This can be held in stark contrast to quiet reflection. It certainly has nothing to do with contemplation.

And so it goes: Ritualized prayer (especially when it involves incessantly repeated recitation) confers sensation of being in communion with divinity—what Muslims refer to as “wasilah” and Sufis refer to as “baqa[a]”.

The incessant reinforcement of ritual prayer ensures that thought-routines remain deeply ingrained. When the assigned propitiations are performed several times a day, every day, they ensure that nobody has time to stray too far from the program. The pre-frontal cortex remains stagnant even as the amygdala is ignited—allowing habits of thought to become further and further inculcated.

The neural wiring of the brain morphs according to the operations it is asked to perform. Famed neuroscientist, Alvaro Pascual-Leone found that people who had only imagine playing notes on a keyboard in front of them exhibit precisely the same changes in their brains as those who had actually pressed the keys. (!) One's mind becomes what one's thought routines behoove it to become. In other words, our habits of thought can literally change how our minds work. Such plasticity is both exhilarating and disturbing, as it holds tremendous possibility as well as plenty of room to be manipulated. For how we regularly use our brains dictates the delimitations of our thinking.

In "The Shallows", Nicolas Carr noted: "Just as neurons that fire together wire together, neurons that don't fire together don't wire together." Ritualized prayer has supplicants using their brains in very specific ways, day in and day out, month after month, year after year—thereby orienting the mind away from certain ways of thinking and toward other ways of thinking. In this sense, ritualized prayer is—at best—a self-imposed cognitive handicap; and, more often, a way to allow oneself to be manipulated.

Ritualized prayer is largely about conditioning. The name of the game for propitiations that are highly-scripted / -choreographed is inculcation...in perpetuity. From the point of view of authorities, demanding people "make salat" five times each day, every day, is an effective way to ensure nobody gets "out of line"; or has much of a chance to engage in "errant" thinking. {7} The ramifications of this is that the (under-used) higher functions of the brain are always trumped by the (hyper-stimulated) lower regions.

The ploy has been employed by authoritarian religious institutions—with staggering success—since time immemorial. (Recall Nazi propagandist, Joseph Goebels' statement about the "big lie": Repeat something enough, people will start to believe it.) Beware of that which you are exhorted to repeat over and over and over to yourself / others. Anything with merit maintains without needing to be recited incessantly. If one finds that one needs to keep repeating something, it probably isn't true.

Salafis recite "al-Fatiha" to the point of distraction; and do so for roughly the same reasons that conservative Roman Catholics recite "hail Mary" or the "Kyrie eleison" ad nauseam. In between sessions, the mind has little opportunity to stray from the assigned routine. The mental choreography that has been prescribed to votaries is thereby perpetually reinforced. Neural pathway dependency is established; and supplicants are rendered the equivalent of Pavlovian dogs.

Awash in serotonin / dopamine, the supplicant experiences a "trip" that is construed as having achieved "wasilah" (communion with the divine). The anterior cingulate cortex (primary hub for analytical thinking; i.e. problem solving) idles as the limbic system goes haywire. With each "salat", the chance for critical thinking is once again forestalled, even as prescribed thought routines are further inculcated.

This is why so many versions of supplication emphasize redundancy. Roman Catholics recite the Rosary over and over and over. Vajrayana Buddhists chant "Om Mani Padme Hum" over and over and over. The Hare Krishna mantra is comprised of just two words repeated over and over and over. The Soka Gakkai chant "Nam-myoho-renge-kyo" ("Devotion to the Mystical Law of the Lotus Sutra") over and over and over. Following the moniker for the godhead in Sufism, practitioners of "Eckankar" recite the single word "HU" over and over and over. For Baha'i, "Allah-u Abhar" is recited over and over and over. Etc. Such votaries insist that there is power in repetition.

Why is it that repetitious (and/or vociferous) soliloquizing is supposed to have magical effects? It might have something to do with the perception that adamancy somehow translates to potency. (Stridency is thus conflated with efficacy.) The hope is that the designated verbiage—if mouthed frequently and insistently enough—might confer some kind of spiritual benefit (e.g. communion with the divine...and consequently

currying favor with a vainglorious god-head).

The scheme, then, is all about conditioning subjects en masse. My reservations about NLP (neural linguistic programming) notwithstanding; insofar as it might hold some water, “dhikr” would be its epitome. It’s all about calcifying neural pathways. Neurons that fire together repeatedly eventually wire together...which makes UN-wiring them that much more difficult. Ossified thinking is the inevitable result.

In the event that “cognitive easing” (that is: obtunding one’s cognitive functioning) can be passed off as “enlightenment”, one has gone down the rabbit hole. For passive-minded mirth is not tantamount to edification. The maudlin displays that are a signature trait of ritualized prayer betray an artificiality (and a superficiality) that belies its spiritual pretensions. Deluding oneself is the OPPOSITE of what’s involved when one engages in a contemplative practice (i.e. meditation).

Contemplation is impossible so long as one is following someone else’s script...or even a script of one’s own making. Critical reflection becomes untenable insofar as one is acting / thinking according to conditioned reflex. Such non-contemplative “prayer” is analogous to consuming without digestion. {8} It is a mere pantomime—replete with histrionics. It precludes the possibility of significant reflection, rendering communion with the divine an intractable task.

Routinized prayer is apt to foster what is called “introspection illusion”, by which one is given the erroneous impression that one commands an unvarnished insight into the cognitive underpinnings of one’s own mental states. This entails selective exposure, which serves as a vehicle for a kind of confirmation bias known as “congeniality bias”. (I feel mesmerized by it, so it MUST be doing something positive for my mind!)

The crux of the matter, then, is a kind of veiled cognitive impairment, which is often perceived as cognitive ENHANCEMENT. Research has conclusively shown that memorizing (and reciting by rote) reduces the role of the brain’s higher functions. In fact, it has the same effects on judgement as does inebriation or sleep deprivation. {5} This is about the (coerced) misallocation of mental resources.

Memorization / recitation tends to preclude incisive critical reflection—just as the impresarios of the religion want it. As Daniel Kahneman put it, “A reliable way to make people believe in falsehoods is frequent repetition. [This is] because familiarity is not easily distinguished from truth. Authoritarian institutions and marketers have always known this fact” (ibid.; p.62). Repetition is the foundation of conditioning; and the prescribed recitation of scripted prayers is apt to engender a kind of anosognosia: a lack of cognizance of one’s own epistemic dereliction.

ROUTINE is the hallmark of cultic activity. A “high control group” involves regimentation, a fetishization of propriety, demands for conformity / fealty, a sense of obligation, and—most importantly—GUILT. Heterodox thinking / behavior must be shunned; anyone with the gall to engage in such activity must be shamed. Once a person is steeped in abashment, he is much easier to manipulate.

It is also worth noting that repetition engenders affinity. (Note that this primarily occurs on the subconscious level.) Reciting an assigned script over and over and over, every day, day after day after day, will create neural pathways. Consequently, it will induce “cognitive easing” over time; and, eventually, pathway dependency. That is, it will render one less apt to analytically scrutinize the inculcated material—which comes to be seen as GIVEN—nay, as sacrosanct. Assumption cease to be seen as assumptions; and they dictate how one thinks about, well, ANYTHING.

“Salat” is all about acclimating votaries to a memplex, then perpetually ingraining it so that it becomes virtually indelible. Reinforcement attenuates the will and ability to engage in critical reflection (something that would endanger the sanctity of the prescribed dogma).

Repetition of, say, “dhikr” and other supplications only makes sense if we were to suppose that the material might slip our minds after we’ve been repeating the same thing over and over and over, every day / week, for years...OR we are worried that god’s characteristics might slip GOD’S mind; so we should constantly remind him of his own greatness, mercy, etc. We might also suppose that our petitions needed to be submitted numerous times in order to be taken seriously. The more incessantly—and ardently—one pleads, the thinking goes, the higher the probability that one will be heard.

Of course, the real explanation for prescribing such behavior is much more straight-forward: inculcation. And so it goes: True Believers are convinced that, if repeated enough, their incantations will lead to preternatural outcomes. In reality, the potency of the practice lies only in REINFORCEMENT, and thus in conditioning.

The logic remains the same even as the liturgical language varies: Hindus recite their chants in Vedic Sanskrit, Jains recite theirs in Magadhi, Siamese Buddhists recite theirs in Pali, Jews recite theirs in ancient Hebrew, Catholics recite theirs in Vulgar Latin, Muslims recite theirs in Arabic, etc.

The Abrahamic version of prayer typically involves some combination of *propitiation* and *imprecation*; yet little—if any—critical reflection. The idea is to get what one wants out of (what is seen as) a pre-arranged schema. This is accomplished, it is believed, by currying favor with the deity-in-question. In other words: paying tribute is about gaining leverage (a.k.a. “grace”) by accruing soteriological capital (i.e. brownie points). Thus supplication is part worship, part entreaty. This is complicated by the fact that one cannot always be distinguished from the other—which is to say: It is difficult to discern where the *groveling* ends and the *invocation* begins.

Both propitiation and imprecation involve unctuous pleading; so it is sometimes difficult to know which of the two one is doing. In some ways, they are indistinguishable. For those with spiritual pretenses, then, supplication is a matter of striking a balance between benediction and beseeching.

Such a balance is rarely found, though, as paying tribute is often done ad nauseam. In the Book of Isaiah (6:3), even the seraphim proclaim: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” One need only page through a Christian hymnal to behold the most redundant book ever created: praise, praise, and more praise...in line after line after line, page after page after page. Clearly, such doxology is designed for conditioning more than for anything else.

Pleas can be for forgiveness as much as for accruing soteriological capital. When acts of confession rather than of imprecation, prayers are acts of penitence (read: requests for penance). However, even confessional prayer implicitly involves beseeching the deity to do one a special favor (to wit: give one a pass on a perceived transgression). “Please forgive me,” we say to those in authority—that is: to who wield the power to reward or punish. Contrition is—by its very nature—a kind of submission; so ends up being just another version of tribute...which, the hope is, will eventually pay off in the end. What makes this problematic is that when one feels that atonement can be achieved through supplication, one is less inclined to atone for anything through deeds. The invocation precludes a need for action; as “grace” suffices for the stead of one’s soul. Such “solo gratia” (redemption through grace alone, not through good works) is ratified in the New Testament—notably, in Ephesians 2/8-9 and Romans 11:6.

In considering prayer a kind of blandishment, the question arises: To what degree is one obliged to placate a temperamental deity? Is he vindictive? Forgiving? Obstreperous? Appreciative? It takes more to satisfy some deities than others; as some tend to be petulant (Yahweh), demanding to be appeased at very turn. (The godhead of the Torah thrown into a dither at any offense; hence is genocidal proclivities.) To complicate matters, deities are placated in different ways (follow these rules, show reverence in this way, etc.), which means that one must be familiar not with moral principles, but with a CATECHISM. Thus doctrinal fidelity, not probity, is the key to salvation.

Regardless of the deity's character traits, the point is to ingratiate oneself with him / her so that one can parlay one's good standing into some kind of existential emolument. The deity-in-question is, it is believed, prepared to do any number of things: healing loved ones who are sick, throwing good fortune one's way, ensuring one's side in a conflict prevails, helping one become better at something, ensuring crops will grow, gaining admission into a desirable afterlife, etc. While this scheme is cheapened by those who treat prayer as the home shopping network (so as to put a gloss on one's avarice), it is invariably about petitioning the powers-that-be to grant one's wishes.

A kind of covetousness—be it saving one's own ass or supporting one's agenda—bolsters one's motive for supplication. Even in its most solemn moments, the relationship is seen as transactional (see my essay on "Fiduciary Theology"). Thus: "I curry favor for the deity, and in return the deity may be willing to heed my imprecations." (Alternately: "I want this arrangement to work, so I am incentivized to appease said deity.")

How does this arrangement work? Via a contractual agreement (that is: by meeting the deity's demands). While some deities are more petty than others, most tend to be rather persnickety when it comes to modes of gratification. "If you want me to go to bat for you, here are my terms" is what such "covenants" boil down to. There's nothing remotely spiritual about such a bargain.

A SURVEY:

It is worth considering prayer in its variety of forms to see what it is that makes it such an integral part of religiosity. In surveying instances of prayer around the world, and over the course of history, it is important not to expand the definition of "prayer" to encompass anything that entrances (that is: psychically "transports"); as, in doing so, anything from skydiving to baking a cake could be considered a form of "prayer".

In virtually every case of prayer as PROPITIATION, we find that it is as much mental as it is physical. After all, one can prostrate one's mind as much as one's body. In the end, supplication is supplication.

Acts of devotion range from perfunctory genuflection to epic pilgrimage. A show of fealty—that is: dedication to the cause—is typically the point of worship. This tracks with even the most pithy of invocations (a "hail Mary" in Roman Catholicism, a "puja" in Hinduism, or "dhikr" in Sufi Islam) as well as with lengthy routines (the longest versions of Hindu / Jain / Buddhist "dharanis" and "kirtan[a]s").

There is a wide array of vocalization used to show fealty—ranging from speaking to singing. (This is not binary; as each, being a devotional act, can incorporate an element of the other). Let's consider this spectrum in ten different religious contexts:

- Hindus recite a "bani", yet sing a "kirtan" or "raga".
- Buddhists recite a "mantra" or "sutra", yet sometimes engage in melodious chanting of the same.

- Tibetan monks abide in quiet contemplation; yet engage in “throat singing”.
- Shinto monks recite a “norito”, yet sing the “shigin”.
- Sikhs recite an “arda”, yet do a version of “sadhana” in which they sing “ragas” (and the occasional “gur[u]-bani”).
- Zoroastrians recited the “Ahuna-Vairya” and “Ashem-Vohu”, yet sing “gathas”.
- Jews recite “tefilat” (like the “Nishmat Kol Chai” or “Sh’ma Yisrael”), yet sing the “kaddish” (as well as hymns like the “Y’did Nefesh”).
- Roman Catholics recite the Nicene Creed (a.k.a. the “Lord’s prayer”), yet sing “canticles”. {22}
- Southern Baptists recite missives addressed to the savior-god, yet sing Gospel music.
- Muslims perform “salat”, yet tend not to sing at all (though the “adhan” / “[h]azzan” is often performed by the mu-[h]ezzin in a quasi-melodic manner).

In each case, the former are spoken; the latter are sung. The latter takes the form of hymns—a practice that dates back to the Mithraic, Dionysian, and Orphic cults of Classical Antiquity. And even this taxonomy is not binary, as “chants” can be performed in a manner that is somewhere between speaking and singing—as with “Zema” (the chant tradition of Ethiopia’s Tewahedo Church).

The prototypical form of scripted recitation is the (often repetitive) utterance of sacred incantation (a.k.a. “chants”). Rhythm and cantillation is often an integral part of this invocation—as with, say, the Jewish “Amidah”. Such a practice can be found from a potpourri of Native American rituals to countless indigenous African rituals—much of it animist.

In any case, prayer is seen as a way to show devotion toward—or, as the case may be, as a way to plead with—the godhead. To reiterate: tribute and imprecation often blur into one another.

There is a notable difference between artistic expression that is infused with spiritual gusto (as with Gregorian chants and Southern Gospel singing) and declaiming something by rote in order to invoke supernatural powers. The former is a matter of exultation; the latter is a matter of incantation. The former is can be an effective way to experience the divine; the latter is little other than a scripted recitation—often accompanied by choreographed gesticulation—so as to bring about some desired result. (Again, the distinction between communion and imprecation.)

Even if done with impassioned stridency (and complete sincerity), a scripted recitation is still just a scripted recitation. The notion that a certain sequence of phonemes might produce a magical effect is silly—be it the incantations of a witch-doctor or a bishop. It’s one thing to praise X from the heart; it’s quite another thing to parrot words. Uttering a prescribed sequence words—especially when done in a tongue one does not understand—may serve to broadcast piety, but it is about as spiritual an activity as brushing one’s teeth.

(Sometimes, a simple sound is used simply as a way to facilitate contemplation—as when Hindus use “Ohm”.)

When we behold a well-performed Gregorian chant or Southern Gospel music, the aesthetic value is in the musical prowess; whereas the psychological value is in the emotive ejaculation. Such value exists independently of the Faith tradition that animated the vocalization, and of the dogmatic system in which it was couched. We admire the music because it is BEAUTIFUL, not necessarily because we suppose it is somehow theologically significant.

The Mormon Tabernacle choir is worth cherishing, irrespective of the fact that the Church of Latter-Day saints is a deranged cult that believes ridiculous things. As with sonatas or paintings on the ceiling of the

Sistine Chapel, the aesthetic value of the work exists independently of the religious context.

(We might even go so far to say that the vast majority of chants—nay, scripted prayer in general—have nil artistic value, and so no real value at all. Note, for instance, the Soka Gakkai chant of “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo”, the Baha’i “Allah-u Abha”, or the eponymous Hare Krishna mantra. In each case, a banal utterance is repeated ad nauseam, as if redundancy somehow yielded potency.)

Art—be it musical, architectural, literary, or pictorial—can certainly capture the sublime. What deludes us, though, is the fact that something that is aesthetically pleasing can be misconstrued as spiritually profound...when it is nothing of the sort. Such misapprehension stems from the fact that certain acts elicit emotive reactions that can be interpreted as “transcendent”. As mentioned, such spectacle is believed to be a way to commune with—or “get in touch with”—the divine. The more melo-dramatized, the more it is supposed to have preternatural effects; and the more likely one is expected to remain in the deity’s good graces. Such sacralized rigamarole is taken to be spiritual; its dramatic flare is seen as an indication of spiritual prowess.

The psychoactive repercussions of ritual prayer—especially when communal—are obvious to impartial observers. Insofar as the prayer is scripted, it has anxiolytic—even hypnotic—effects. If the prayer is ecstatic, it is intoxicating; if it is solemn, it induces a pleasantly comatose state. The effect is either titillation or mental lethargy. Either way, cognitive impairment ensues.

The chemical equivalent of these self-induced states is either chlordiazepoxide (a.k.a. “Librium”) or benzodiazepine diazepam (a.k.a. “Valium”)...depending on the prevailing neurotransmitter (serotonin or dopamine). If the former, the induced mood is serenity; if the latter, the induced mood is exhilaration.

And so it goes: By being flooded with serotonin, one is plunged into a state of bliss. A well-timed dopamine rush will elicit a kind of titillation. Either way, an otherwise sedentary frontal lobe ensures the mind of the supplicant remains intellectually inert...even as he is left with the impression that he has somehow miraculously breached some crucial threshold (whether in his level of “consciousness” or his standing with the deity-in-question). Awash in an alluvion of one neurotransmitter or another, the illusion is achieved. With the pre-frontal cortex in hock and the amygdala in overdrive, one can’t help but be seized with a sensation of being transported. This is interpreted in various ways: as being infused by a holy spirit in the Abrahamic Faiths...or as achieving “transcendence” in New Age mysticism. {6}

Of course, prayer is not necessarily like taking barbiturates. As mentioned, there are forms of prayer that can be healthy—namely: the contemplative kind. Genuinely spiritual activity is achieved with one’s critical faculties fully intact. After all, prayer should be about sobriety, not intoxication. Put another way: Prayer should not require one to be deluded. There is nothing sublime about emulating a programmed robot.

But to the True Believer, this is all beside the point. He ardor to believe is what really matters; and the fact that he really, really, really wants to believe that it is his most cherished beliefs that account for the incredible experience (i.e. of transcendence) that he had, when performing propitiations IN THE NAME OF those very beliefs. The fact that he had such an experience is, for him, incontrovertible proof of his claims.

We can take note of the histrionics—at times lugubrious, at times devotional—exhibited by supplicants in cults of all stripes. From the flamboyant gesticulations of rapturous Pentecostals (as the Holy Spirit surges through them like an electrical charge) to the spastic gesticulations (“shuckling”) of Haredim, the human capacity to be nutty is on full display. (They engage in a daffy repertoire of convulsive bobbing—as if they were simulating an epileptic seizure.) This is not spirituality; it is buffoonery.

When we behold such behavior, we can be certain that there is nothing resembling contemplation—let alone self-reflection—going on. Indeed, spasmodic propitiation—be it the frenetic Hassidic “nusa[k]h” or the more fluid Sufi “sama”—is a sign of delusiveness. Such antics are taken to be a kind of exultant—nay, rapturous—communion; but it is in reality a kind of auto-hypnosis.

It is difficult to engage in critical reflection during paroxysms of religious fervor. Ecstasy is all fine and dandy; but it is inimical to analytical thinking. Ironically, that is exactly its APPEAL. Rigorous logic is a buzz-kill. Objectivity isn't fun. And critical reflection requires one to exert cognitive effort, minimizing its appeal to those looking for revelation.

During propitiation, dramatic mannerisms are often used to show how immersed in the act one happens to be is not uncommon. Note, for instance, the Balinese “kecak” routine (made famous in the film, “Baraka”). Jews who engage in the aforementioned shuckling are engaging in an exaggerated form of “davening” (movements intended to invoke divine power). Why engage in such zany antics? Participants are under the impression that they are getting god's attention via a display of frenetic rocking. There is clearly some sort of pathology at play when people engage in this sort of daffy behavior—a fact that is plain to see were we to translate it to any other context.

When one person does it, we refer to it as “mental illness”. But when a group of people do it in a coordinated manner, we refer to it as “religiosity”—or, as the case may be, “worship”. This begs the question: Why this dubious taxonomy for labeling human behavior? The impression is that mental illness—conventionally conceived—cannot be collective, it can't be conditioned, and it can't be sanctified (all three of which characterize religiosity). Consequently, we feel, a new category is warranted if we are to make sense of such conduct. Such spurious categorization—call it “prayer”, as if it were the same as quiet contemplation—exempts it from the sort of critical scrutiny we'd feel justified in applying were such behavior to occur in other contexts.

As a matter of etiquette, we are indisposed to consider cult activity a kind of dysfunction, let alone a pathology. So we give it its own categorization (religious “Faith”); and just call it a day. The distinction may not be sound, but it is collegial. The problem with this taxonomy is that—in countenancing it—we are forced to suspend judgement in a singular context.

To reiterate: In any other context, the kind of thinking / behavior we observe with the more outlandish exhibitions of religious observance would be accurately recognized for what it is. Loony.

There needn't be anything delusive about spirituality. Yet we are obliged to pretend otherwise...out of politesse. For religionists who insist on not being subjected to critical scrutiny, the de rigueur approach is thus: Sacralize a dysfunction, render it the basis for a Faith community, and PRESTO: It suddenly becomes inappropriate to call it a “dysfunction”...or a “pathology”.

Other than intellectual dishonesty, there are myriad problems with this. To pretend that a scripted / choreographed routine is anything other than an ingratiating enactment is to conflate lower mental functions (emotive ejaculation) with higher mental functions (critical reflection / deliberation). One ends up treating activity in the basal ganglia, amygdala, and the hypothalamus (i.e. the limbic system) as if it were activity in the prefrontal cortex. Doing so is to conflate contrived affectation with deep introspection.

The logic behind scripted / choreographed prayer is quite simple: The more one repeats, the more one will understand. Of course, in reality, this is not how cognition works. Quite the contrary. The more one repeats, the more one is **CONDITIONED**. Ritualized prayer precludes the need for mental discipline

(Aristotle's "enkrateia"; Kant's "maturity") because all the thinking is dictated to the supplicant. Genuine spirituality is predicated on autonomy. Ritualized prayer is based on heteronomy.

In undertaking a scripted orison, the votary prostrates not only his body, but his mind. The benediction becomes an act of sycophancy. Reciting an assigned script—in ANY context—has nothing to do with edification; it has to do with inculcation. This process is emboldened when the mutual-reinforcement of communal rituals is involved.

Coordinated high-jinks—embroidered, contrived, performative—couple with a hefty dose of groupthink. Such propitiation is more affectation than it is contemplation; more an overwrought performance than a spiritual activity. The appeal of communal prayer (especially when scripted / choreographed) lies in the shared experience it offers. When people are doing something that they feel is "special", they often want to share it with fellow travelers. Having a shared experience—especially a shared SPIRITUAL experience—is enticing to anyone who otherwise feels alone...and who is seeking guidance / camaraderie. Religious ritual informs us: Such a person needn't feel like he is going through things on his own; he can take comfort in the fact that others are with him, by his side. "You are not alone," is one of the most comforting things of which a human can be informed.

So what of prayer as a cultic phenomenon? Communal prayer is predicated on a tribalistic cast of mind. As with any other tribal behavior, it is about belonging, having a shared experience with fellow travelers, and experiencing the collective euphoria it elicits. However, being tribalistic, ANY communal activity / thinking entails that all the drawbacks of tribalism. For it translates to exclusionary conduct / sentiment (which invariably involves the marginalization—and derogation—of the other). Being a part of something grand invariably requires a demarcation of insiders and outsiders (those participating in the program vs. those who aren't "with us").

The catch, of course, is that there are plenty of other ways to engage in a shared experience with one's brethren (and thus to foster communal solidarity). Indeed, there are practices that do not involve either groupthink or collective delusion. That is to say: There are communal activities that are not tribalistic in nature. One need not abandon secularism (or humanism, for that matter) in order to achieve this laudable goal.

The notion that everyone should be following the same script is anathema to free-thought (on the individual level) and to cosmopolitanism (on the social level). The proposition that in order for one to pray one's hands must be clean is even more ridiculous. (If there was anything that completely misses the point of prayer, it is ablutions.) Moreover, if god is omni-present, it doesn't matter in which direction one is facing. Or what style of attire one is wearing. Or which language one speaks. Or in which venue one happens to be located. Or what time of day it is.

A key feature of communal prayer is piety-signaling: broadcasting to one's brethren how dedicated one is to the anointed program. It is that kind of illusion that explains why maudlin exhibition is so commonplace in communal prayer. By participating in a shared experience, supplicants can feel like they "belong". They have an opportunity to be accepted by others; to "fit in"; to be a part of something larger than themselves. The prospect of such an arrangement is especially enticing for the existentially disoriented (i.e. those who feel adrift at sea).

The explanation for this phenomenon is the universal (inherent) predisposition toward tribalism: Our urge to do things WITH the designated group AS an anointed "us".

Bottom line: If one's relationship to the divine is personal, then it only makes sense for prayer to be

personalized.

Ritualized prayer is intended to enthrall—by either soothing or titillating. This happens whether or not sonorous utterances are produced. A choreographed routine of arrhythmic genuflection and a prescribed sequence of sounds is treated as a magical incantation. Thus a mere pantomime of (something remotely resembling) spirituality is passed off as “spirituality”; and we are all expected to demure.

Barring “dhikr”, prayers in Islam are not so much incantations as they are prescribed exposition recited in an attempt to curry favor with a cosmic overlord. One does not need to countenance pseudo-scientific theories of NLP to see that repeated affirmation has an effect on one’s habits of thought. (It is no secret that if one says something earnestly enough to oneself, frequently enough, for long enough, one eventually comes to believe it.)

Suffice to say, all methods of “creating your own reality” are a hoax; as the practitioner invariably comes to confuse the fabricated reality in his own mind with Reality—as with shamanism, sooth-saying, etc. (For those who are suckered into this spiritual sham, this is not the only option. One can just read, “The Secret”.)

A final point: The notion that if one prays vociferously enough, one will sway god (and thus fate) in the direction that one desires is not only preposterous, but utterly perverse. For the (implicit) COROLLARY is that when bad things happen to good people, one did not pray vociferously enough.

To illustrate the point: Imagine two innocent (nay, wonderful) people who have been diagnosed with terminal cancer. In both cases, friends and family (who we will assume are also wonderful people) pray vociferously for the life of their loved-one. In one case, the afflicted person dies a grueling death; in the other case, the afflicted person miraculously recovers.

In either case, we are supposed to believe that all is as it should be; that it’s all part of god’s plan. The outcome in any given case can—in part—be attributed to the degree of groveling performed...and that, WHATEVER happened, it happened according to god’s will (the provisions of god: “ahkam”). God being ostensibly benevolent, we are thus expected to countenance the proposition that whatever happened—no matter how heinous—is JUSTIFIED and GOOD.

It is the passions that drive the creation of great art; and there is no doubt that religiosity evokes strong emotions. A key point, though: Insofar as it is scripted, prayer behooves the practitioner to stunt his higher cognitive functions in the name of “spirituality”, forcing him to adhere to prescribed thought-routines that were not of his own making. Doing so enables the passive-minded votary to thoroughly delude himself...and then call it “getting in touch with [insert conception of the divine here]”. This is only possible insofar as one prostrates one’s mind. This is a very tempting prospect: “Worry not; for GOD is at the helm. So all will be well.” The ensuing alluvion of solace can be magnificently overwhelming.

When genuinely spiritual, prayer is not a spectacle. It is not a performance (and certainly not an exhibition). It is extemporaneous (“in the moment”) and personalized. It is based on autonomy, not groupthink. This is, in part, a matter of allocation of resources: mental, physical, temporal, and even financial. Prayer needn’t be incompatible with a judicious allocation of thought, action, time, and money. The point of prayer, after all, is to expunge the noise, not to create more of it.

It should go without saying that most activity commonly referred to as “prayer” is a colossal waste of all of these resources...regardless of the amount of consolation or euphoria it may confer. (Solace and ecstasy are not inherently valuable; and they are often deleterious when predicated on delusion.) The “as long as it

makes people FEEL good, it's worth it" rationalization is a non-starter. Try universalizing this half-baked maxim for half a minute, and see what boneheaded things it can be put in the service of legitimizing.

Make no mistake: Pragmatically-speaking, scripted / choreographed prayer serves as a splendid spiritual prosthetic; and so it has tremendous appeal for the spiritually handicapped—especially for those hankering for something to FOLLOW (esp. people who are chronically awaiting instructions). Indeed, prescribed worship routines provide the supplicant with the enticing illusion that he is “getting in touch with” the divine...even as it does nothing of the sort. One may just as well throw choreographed prostration to the wind and just take some ‘shrooms. (Indeed, psychedelic drugs offer a plausibly “transcendent” experience for anyone who is not concerned with staying in touch with Reality; which is why some people just take a hit of acid and call it a day.)

For the strict religionist, praying is like following directions in an instruction manual. The Sunnah is like a spiritual “vade mecum”: Do it correctly and some ethereal contraption will be activated. HOWEVER, stray from the script / choreography, the thinking goes, and the astral mechanism completely breaks down. (This is commensurate with the idea that the Koran is a celestial guidebook for the life, the universe, and everything.)

It seems not to occur to votaries: If connected-ness with the divine were somehow predicated on the production of a particular sequence of phonemes (or the conducting of a pre-determined internal monologues; or the pantomiming of specific gestures), votaries in so many different religions would be unable to claim parity of (alleged) success in the attempt.

What we find, though, is quite the contrary. For, as it turns out, the endeavor of, say, Scientologists to expunge “engrams” from their mind by “auditing” one another is just another variation on a timeless theme. The aim is invariably to achieve some elevated state of consciousness—one that is free of any of the handicaps that prevent one from flourishing (or, as the case may be, that keep one dissociated from the divine). The Vedic term for this is “moksha”; and each Faith purports to offer THE way to bring it about.

- Hindus aim to achieve “vipasyana” / “dhyana” / “dharana” (i.e. one-ness with “Brahma[n]”, embodied in the godhead, Brahma[n]) by reciting sutras from the “Brahma Samhita”. {9}
- Jains aim to achieve “samayik” by performing the “Namokara” mantra (as tribute to the “Panch[a] Parameshti”). {9}
- Buddhists aim to achieve “nirvana” (liberation) by getting past the veil of illusion, “maya”, which is the source of all suffering. {9}
- Sikhs aim to achieve “sadhana” by reciting their five “banis” at sunrise, whilst supplicating at a “gurudwara”.
- Druze aim to unite with the “Aaqal al-Kulli” (cosmic mind) by reciting material from the “Rasa’il al-Hikma”.
- Taoists (votaries of the religion; not practitioners of the philosophy) invoke the powers of their various gods by lighting profuse amounts of incense, then reciting incantations from the Diamond Sutra.
- Christians aim to be part of the body of Christ (e.g. by partaking in the Eucharist).
- Rastafarians aim to get in touch with “Jah Jah” by doing “Nihabinghi” chants.

We observe the same phenomenon when Orthodox Jews engage in “fillah” (be it via the “kidda” or “amidah”) by simulating what can only be described as an epileptic seizure (repetitive, spastic bowing known as “shuckling”) whilst facing the Wailing Wall—as if gesticulating in the prescribed manner was how one best ways to commune with the divine. {10}

There are all sorts of ways that people attempt to commune with the divine—from Nimbadiya’s Vedic “You are me, supreme divinity; and I am you”...to the SAME WORDS by Sufi mystic, Rumi and Christian mystic, Angela da Foligno. (The Christian variation on pantheism / panentheism is the notion of “pleroma”: the fulfillment of the divine in everything, everywhere.)

The dopamine-rush conferred by exaltation (especially when ecstatic; and especially when rendered a spectacle) can be easily misconstrued as some kind of profound spiritual breakthrough. (“It works! This REALLY IS transporting me. I can FEEL it.”) Far from liberating one’s mind, such seductive routines typically PROGRAM one’s mind. They enthrall the supplicant...while deluding him. The intoxication is easily mistaken for transcendence. Simply label this sensation—this FEELING of empowerment—something mystical-sounding (e.g. “chakra” or “aura”), and suddenly it seems to take on preternatural qualities.

Alas, such ersatz spirituality is endemic to ALL esoterica. The appeal lies in the fact that one need only SAY something in particular, and move one’s body in the right manner, and magic will ensue. It is a prescribed routine of recitation and gesticulation. The in-the-moment sensations that result from such shenanigans serve as confirmation of its lofty claims. (“I can feel the holy spirit!” exclaims the convulsing Pentecostal to himself as he basks in a mesmerizing dopamine rush. It’s as if his speaking in tongues were irrefutable verification of his outlandish suppositions. (How else to explain his internal state?!))

The more ecstatic practitioners of prescribed prayer may as well just skip the shenanigans and treat themselves to a hefty dose of mescaline, psilocybin, methylenedioxy-methamphetamine, or DMT. Heck, they could just cut to the chase and take some LSD. (Such “tripping” comes in handy when one is—as it were—main-lining dogmas.) In both cases (chemically-induced bliss and dogma-activated bliss), the result is essentially the same. The only difference is that the drugging-approach is not choreographed; rather, it is extemporaneous, even chaotic. Either way, autonomy goes completely out the window. For one gleefully relinquishes sovereignty over one’s own mind in favor of “higher powers”.

For the communicant, this abdication of autonomy is all fine and dandy...so long as the enchantment is sufficiently potent. (Why think for yourself when you’re invoking powers higher than you are? Rational faculties are a liability!) The trick is to convince oneself that one is privy to THE ONE TRUE WAY of accessing the divine.

To reiterate: a choreographed / scripted prayer is not only about prostrating oneself PHYSICALLY. After all, the point of outward prostration is to represent inward prostration. Whilst in the thrall of exaltation, it SEEMS as though something paranormal might be happening. As the supplicant’s nucleus accumbens becomes awash in serotonin, he is often seized by a marvelous burst of euphoria—leaving him with the distinct impression that he might be experiencing the sublime.

What the supplicant misses is that his own subjective state does not necessarily reflect (objective) Reality. For what he ACTUALLY PERCEIVES is not the biochemical phenomena of neurotransmitters running amok. Rather, his personal “inner” (phenomenological) experience is of some rapturous and bedazzling episode of “WOW”...thereby confirming everything—and anything—he wants it to confirm.

Votaries in EVERY Faith insist that THEIR version is effective. And so it goes: The Christian’s attempt to be filled with the Holy Spirit can be held to be just as “successful” as the Toltec Shaman’s gambit to channel the energies of the spirit-world or the Druid’s bid to harness the nascent powers of the forest around him. The validation of the process lies entirely in the participant’s impressions (read: the triggered release of his own neuro-transmitters); as if such jerry-rigged subjective states somehow indicated what

was happening IN REALITY.

Having an enthralling experience can be conceptualized in myriad ways; and can be readily put in the service of corroborating whatever dogmatic system happens to be impinging upon a person at that time. The fact that people of so many different creeds have extremely moving episodes of “transcendence” when meditating in no way lends credence to their DOGMATIC claims...any more than it confirms the presence of the Abrahamic deity for Jews, Christians, or Muslims. No matter. FOR EACH practitioner, the experience will be taken as testament to the verity of his own Faith.

Naturally, each supplicant is apt to FRAME his experience of this phenomenon in terms of his own doctrinal positions; and so attribute it the Faith he champions. By perceiving such rapture in that way, he will take the sensation as indubitable validation of the tenets of his FAITH.

That Jews AND Christians AND Muslims AND Sikhs AND Druze AND Jains AND Hindus AND Buddhists AND Wicca AND countless others (including freethinkers who embrace spirituality) can all experience some form of transcendence reveals that it is not the religiosity PER SE that is the clinching factor when it comes to getting in touch with the divine (for experiencing “transcendence”). Each religionist takes his own subjective experience as validation of his own theology—neglecting to notice that EVERY OTHER religionist is apt to do the same. That Faith practitioners of ALL stripes have analogous experiences demonstrates that it is not religiosity that accounts for the phenomenon. There is clearly something else going on.

Clearly, self-induced beguilement (be it a trance or a bout of self-induced rapture) is a universal phenomenon. Each religionist is apt to privilege his own superstitions over those of THE OTHER. It’s always the other guy who’s being “superstitious”; MY beliefs are a matter of “Faith”. Cults are what OTHERS do. I’m “religious”. When it comes to the spuriousness of dogmatic indulgences, WE are the singular exception.

The mere suggestion that the tenets to which WE subscribe as just accidents of history is intolerable. That we’re engaged in a charade analogous to the other guys’ charades is inconceivable...lest we’re doing all this for naught (a verdict that is unacceptable). Hence a collective narcissism is invariably at the root of ritualized (communal) prayer. “I happen to have been born into the milieu that enjoys pre-eminence. My unique position is, as it were, written in the stars. Divine Providence has made it thus. Lucky us!”

Prayer As Divination:

Since time immemorial, homo sapiens have been making appeals to higher powers in an ham-fisted attempt to bring about a desired state of affairs. Incantation is used to make certain things happen. This isn’t so much about beseeching a super-being to do something FOR us; it is a matter of channeling to power so that we can do it ourselves. With scripted prayer in particular, the aim is to invoke latent cosmic powers via the vocalization of thaumaturgic ideophones (that is: magical incantations). This is the same logic underlying the casting of spells or the placing of hexes...and the raft of other invocations of (imagined) supernatural forces that have transfixed highly-superstitious people since time immemorial. Thus, prayer is a means of CONJURING.

As we’ve seen, the appeal of ritualized prayer is—in large part—the intoxicating effect it has; and the illusion of empowerment that it confers. This is especially the case when it seems to involve some sort of magic—whereby one deigns to invoke supernatural forces. The effect of “divination” can be entirely illusory; as the mere IMPRESSION that such thaumaturgy may be occurring has the power to beguile. (As

we learn from even the hokiest of magic shows, it's the PROSPECT OF there being magic that transfixes us; no ACTUAL magic required.)

Faith healers, fortune tellers, and stage magicians have learned to exploit this misapprehension. Whether the practitioner is purportedly engaged in "reike" or palm reading or parlor tricks, the ability to tap into some unseen power is typically considered a CRAFT of which only designated experts (the properly initiated) are capable.

This is the basis for the florid displays and grandiloquent incantations indicative of Theurgy (from the Greek, "theourgia"). It is no secret that meticulously choreographed rituals have been used for divination since Classical Antiquity. The idea has always been relatively straight-forward: By performing certain actions and uttering certain phrases, one could conjure magical forces (gods, spirits, or whatever); and persuade them to do one's bidding.

This was not a passing fad. Theurgic practices were championed by such significant figures as:

- Iamblichus of Calcis (in Syria)
- Aedesius of Pergamum (in Cappadocia)
- Eusebius of Myndus (in Caria)
- Maximus of Ephesus (in Ionia)
- Chrysanthius of Sardis (in Lydia)
- Proclus Lycaeus of Lydia (in Athens)
- Priscus of Epirus (in northwestern Greece)

Even Roman (Byzantine) Emperor Julian was obsessed with theurgy. The allure of such activities is undeniable. Its tendency to transfix participants has been demonstrated in cultures around the world throughout recorded history.

Divination leaves proponents with the impression that preternatural things are afoot—all in THEIR favor, of course; as they are the ones who are doing it the RIGHT way. This was the case with sacraments across the world—from the Jewish "Korban" to the Shinto "Onmyodo".

Theurgic shenanigans were no more wacky than the enactments we observe in religions today—from the "Eucharist" of Christianity to the "dhabihah" of Islam. There are myriad ways to become spellbound when one is under the impression that one is harnessing supernatural powers.

Since time immemorial, priest and shamans have specialized in what can be broadly categorized as divination—especially as it involves conjuring, channeling, and prophesying. They were not necessarily seen as mages (sorcerers endowed with supernatural powers), as were the figures listed in my essay, "Legacy Of Mages". Rather than BRINGING ABOUT certain powers, they were simply adept at tapping into that which existed independently of them; or, as the case may be, CHANNELLING those powers.

Perceived efficacy (read: subjective experience) are taken by True Believers as confirmation of their own beliefs (viz. what accomplishes the desired goal). A sufficiently poignant phenomenological event can have tremendous persuasive power. How else to get, say, a Jew to think that he's doing anything but making a complete fool of himself when he engages in frenetic gesticulations—while reciting vacuous verbiage from his preferred "siddur"—before the Wailing Wall? How else to get a Christian to tremble and weep before a crucifix as he pleads to be forgiven for being human? How else to get a Muslim to grovel before an imagined celestial monarch five times each day—as if reciting certain verses might possibly be anything other than a complete waste of time? In each case, the supplicant is spellbound, carrying out a

mawkish routine in a ham-fisted attempt to “get in touch with” his own conception of divinity. The same goes for witch-doctors as they (allegedly) enter their mystical “trance” states—replete with their own signature exhibition of fealty.

Those smitten with such routines are convinced that the best way to get in touch with the divine was by engaging in a prescribed sequence of gesticulations...while uttering a prescribed sequence of phonemes. From religion to religion, the “song and dance” might change, but the underlying logic remains constant. To wit: The psychological mechanisms at play are the same regardless of the BRAND of scripted / choreographed prayer.

Residue of theurgical bunkum survives in Hassidic theology in the form of “Tikkun Olam” [“repair of the cosmos”]. This refers to magical acts—sometimes conducted under the auspices of the more generalized “mitzvot” / “tzedakah” (pious deeds); though can only be performed by those who’ve been divinely appointed.

As discussed, if you say something—CONFIDENTLY—frequently enough and long enough to yourself, you will start to believe it. This is true of simple propositions as well as with narratives. Memory is funny that way. An account of an event that has been tailored to suit one’s sensibilities (and to comport with pre-conceived notions of how things SHOULD have been) becomes more and more “real” the more one recounts it. Each iteration of the RE-PLAY further ingrains the neural pathways by which the memory is inscribed. (With each replay, the memory itself is affected, typically in a manner that reflects the biases and sentiments impinging upon the recollection.) Even an entirely fanciful version of something will eventually become one’s (subjective) “reality” if it is vociferously enough asserted over a long period of time. {11}

Eventually a scaffolding of beliefs is erected on this foundation. A point is reached where to tamper with the foundation entails threatening the structural integrity an entire dogmatic edifice. Meanwhile, the more extensive the scaffolding is constructed, the more it will—as it were—CEMENT that foundation. Once enough is built around a dogma, the more robust that dogma will become.

Only upon reconceptualizing “prayer” will those seeking to add a spiritual dimension to their lives eschew daft routines for a more genuine spiritual undertaking. The Druze offer a model—as, for them, prayer is not a discrete act; it is an ongoing state of mind. To truly commune with the divine, one no more needs to prostrate one’s body than one needs to prostrate one’s mind. Getting in touch with the divinity in each of us is ultimately about getting in touch with our shared humanity.

Salat:

A penta-partite CPR (circadian prayer routine; a daily regimen of propitiations) is emblematic of traditional Islamic practice. {13} It was most likely derived from antecedent pagan rituals in Arabia. The Mandaeans (a.k.a. “Sabians”) prayed five times each day, and recited, “There is no god but god” in their Semitic tongue.

A CPR is typically not a contemplative activity—as with, say, “dhyana” / “dharana” in Eastern traditions. As we’ve seen, it is an alternately ecstatic and solemn supplication—more a matter of supplication than contemplation. To wit: It is something to perform according to a prescribed choreography, in conjunction with reciting some sort of scripted incantation.

Prayer as meditation is actually, in many ways, the antithesis of “salat”, which is fashioned as more of an

overt act of tribute to the godhead. Indeed, “salat” is conducted as pleading (nay, groveling) rather than as an introspective act.

As we’ve seen, ritualized prayer ends up being more a matter of mental reflex than of contemplation or critical reflection. It serves as a spiritual prosthesis, creating an illusion of a communion with the divine (what Muslims refer to as “wasilah”). The “catch” with “wasilah” is that it is not so much a COMMUNION as it is what Islamic theologians call “taqwa” (a recognition of the Abrahamic deity as the ultimate authority; a cast of mind based on FEAR). Thus: Rather than “vipasyana” (which involves a oneness with the divine), “salat” is more a matter of placating a master (i.e. groveling). In Islamic theology, worship (“ibadah”) is done largely out of fear (“khashyah”)—a matter that I explore in Appendix 2.

A CPR is part of an ersatz “dharma”. As we saw earlier, Eastern thought and the Abrahamic traditions have very different conceptions of “awareness”. (In Islamic liturgy, “ilm” is often translated as “knowledge”, though it actually means “awareness of the Sunnah”.)

In Sikhism, communion with the divine is known as “sach khand”. As with “moksha”, it is a state achieved through liberation, not through subjugation.

“Salat” is just another variation on an idea that goes back to pre-history...and is found in cultures around the world. The regimen of numerous daily prayers is not unique to Islam. There is a Judaic analogue to the Islamic “salat”. The Judaic “tefillah” / “amida” is also a CPR in the Abrahamic tradition. While “salat” is performed five times per day at appointed times, “tefillah” is performed three times per day at appointed times (“shachar[it]” at sunrise, “mincha” in the afternoon, and “ma’ariv[it]” at sunset). Both “salat” and “tefillah” are examples of a scripted CPR. (The Jewish version is performed according to the “Siddur”.) The dawn and dusk CPR goes back to the Vedic traditions of the Iron Age—with the propitiation to Agni at sunrise and the “savitu” at sundown.

In Syriac Orthodox Christianity, there are SEVEN daily prayers (per Psalm 119) based on the “Beth Gazo”. Being a relic of the Syriac tradition, it is plausible that such practices were known in the Hijaz during MoM’s lifetime, when the lingua franca of the region was Syriac.

Note that this is not limited to the Abrahamic tradition. Jains, for example, have the daily recitation of the “Namokara” [alt. “Nav[a]kar[a]”] mantra. Sikhs recite “nitnem” (hymns) on three occasions each day: at sunrise, sunset, and prior to slumber.

The “pillar of Islam” that mandates five “salat” per day (three for Shia) is not Koranically-based. {14} As mentioned above, the penta-partite CPR was likely adopted from the Mandaeans of Nabataea and/or the Sabaeans / Himyarites of Yemen, who often prayed five times each day: sunrise, noon, afternoon, sunset, and at night before going to sleep. Meanwhile, as is still the case today, Orthodox Judaism mandates three daily prayers (the aforesaid “tefillah”): sunrise prayer (“shacharit”), afternoon prayer (“mincha”), and sunset prayer (“ma’ariv”). Thus the imperative presumably dates back to pre-Islamic tradition—some of which were surely present in Yathrib when Mohammed of Mecca arrived.

There are only two—possibly three—occasions during a day that the Koran exhorts supplicants to glorify (“subhan” / “tasbeeh”) and/or praise (“hamd”) the Abrahamic deity:

- 20:130 exhorts votaries to pay tribute at sunrise and at sunset
- 30:17-18 exhorts votaries to pay tribute after waking up in the morning and before going to sleep at night.
- 40:55 exhorts votaries to pay tribute in the morning and evening.

- 52:48 exhorts votaries to pay tribute upon awakening in the morning.
- 52:49 exhorts votaries to pay tribute at dawn (“when the stars fade away”) and at dusk.

Obviously, the discrepant specifications for the timing of salat are attributable to the disparate sources of which the Koran is comprised. It seems that only two occasions are explicitly specified: dawn and dusk.

This is corroborated by 24:58, where it is stated that believers can allow children and slaves to temporarily take leave (of attendance) at three times during the day: prior to morning prayer, at noon when one is inclined to disrobe in the mid-day heat, and after evening prayer. (Never mind those who live in cold climes.) If there were a noon prayer intended, surely THAT would have been the most auspicious manner to specify occasion (rather than the time of disrobing for siesta).

In any case, these verses are all in keeping with antecedent Sabaeen, Nabatean / Syriac, Madaean, and Judaic prayer traditions. They offered nothing new; just a reiteration of extant practices.

Also note that there is no “rak’ah” (choreography) for “salat” specified in the Koran. As we see, not even the specific number of times to perform it each day is made clear. Such a routine was a post-hoc invention (and a very useful one at that, as it serves the desired purpose: the reinforcement of a particular mode of dogmatism). Put another way: Worship is the ultimate vehicle for indoctrination. Habits of action often translate to habits of thinking.

“Salat” is more about CONDITIONING than it is about communing with the divine. {15} For it serves as an occasion for self-indoctrination (a primitive sort of neuro-linguistic programming). *In its scripted / choreographed form, “salat” is more about gushing than about introspection. Serious critical reflection becomes increasingly untenable the more one feels obliged to grovel.*

Today, there is much fuss made over the sequence of proper physical gestures: “wudu” (pre-prayer ablutions) and the “qibla” (the proper direction to face) {16}, as well as “ruku”, “I’tidal”, “sujud”, “taslim”, “kiyaam”, etc. Such stilted choreography comes from the Sunnah, and has no Koranic basis. In fact, the routine is entirely contrived. (In addition to a prayer mat, Shiites incorporate a small stone tablet in their repertoire.)

Touching one’s head to the ground in full prostration is the ULTIMATE exhibition of subservience; a gesture that has probably had meaning since homo erectus walked upright and opted to establish social hierarchies—especially involving submission OF the slave TO the master. (Of course, slavery is not required for expressions of submission. Throughout history, prostration has served as an expression of fealty BY the rabble TO the elite.) Since Islam is, by definition, about complete submission to the cosmic overlord, prostration is ENTIRELY about “ibadah” (supplication).

Interesting fact: Of the five daily prayers in Sunni Islam, how many take place between sunrise and noon? Zero. (The first is to be completed prior to daybreak; the second is to be performed starting at high noon.) As mentioned elsewhere, the sunrise / sunset specification poses problems for those dwelling in Nordic regions. It would seem that certain peoples are obligated to engage in “salat” only twice per annum. Of course, such an exigency would not have occurred to anyone who was under the impression that the Earth was flat, and experienced diurnal patterns homogeneously—as was obviously the case with those who composed the “Recitations”.

Generally speaking, choreography has no place in genuine prayer. The notion that certain motions must be performed in a certain sequence in order to pray properly is patently absurd—be it shuckling, genuflecting, or sujud. It is just as fatuous as the notion that one can mobilize supernatural powers by uttering a certain

sequence of phonemes. (It is actually the combination of actions and sounds that creates the desired effect. Participants are left with the impression that—in doing so—they are going to magically make things happen.)

The only time one should be prostrate with one's forehead against the floor is in "child's pose" while doing yoga. This gesture goes back to the Hindu "panchanga pranama"; and is commonplace in virtually all instances of idolatry. Arguably the most flagrant example of idolatry is prostration toward the Kaaba—a ritual based on Bedouin pagan precedent. (It is comically ironic that Muslim supplicants, in doing "salat", decry "idolatry" even as they engage in the most idolatrous propitiation routine of all...on a daily basis.)

Authentic spirituality is not choreographed—in thinking OR in action, let alone in speech. The spurious notion that getting in touch with the divine must be scripted / choreographed can only be taken seriously by those who insist spirituality is something to be DICTATED.

A bold assertion that things are / were a certain way, when repeated ROUTINELY, will constrain one's ability to think about things in any other way—severely circumscribing one's scope of tolerable propositions. Daily recitations are an extreme example of this. One needn't appeal to claims of neuro-linguistic programming to recognize that regular affirmations can have a strong influence on one's mental attitude. One will find that one can convince oneself of almost anything—no matter how harebrained—if one asserts it with sufficient fervor. {12}

Consequently, those in a position to write the script for this process can have a profound influence over pliable minds (i.e. those craving some sort of guidance). Those open to the powers of suggestion are especially susceptible to being manipulated in this way. When they see others being swayed in the same way, they feel validated. Groupthink serves as its own validation to those engaged in it. It requires formidable mental discipline to overcome such debilitating predilections.

The procedures prescribed for "salat" in Islam have an important purpose: Pavlovian conditioning (read: indoctrination). Take, for example, the (compulsory) repeated tributes to the Dear Leader in North Korea. George Orwell understood the utility of such routines when he posited the daily ritual of the "Two Minutes Hate" mandated by INGSOC in his dystopian novel, "Nineteen Eighty-Four".

In sum: Prayer means different things to different people. There is a difference between meditation (which a contemplative activity) and worship (which is a matter of idolatry). The former is about reflection; the latter is supplication. The question, then, is: Is getting in touch with the divine more about contemplation or propitiation?

Prayer-as-reflection is about tapping into something within us; whereas prayer-as-supplication is a sop to the cosmic overlord. There is a fundamental difference between Eastern-style meditation (which is contemplative) and Abrahamic propitiation (which is not). The former involves introspection; the latter involves groveling. With the former, one seeks communion with the divine; with the latter, one importunes a deity for favor.

A conscientious avoidance of deluded-ness is endemic to clear thinking, and thus a prerequisite for AUTHENTIC spirituality: lucid, noetic, and autonomous. Mindfulness does not involve following instructions. Liberation, not mental prostration, defines communion with the divine. All the obsecrations, rogations, invocations, adjurations, and propitiations in the world will not for a moment help one to get in touch with the divine (though such things work wonders for those satisfied with the ILLUSION THEREOF). If anything, a subservient mental posture precludes the possibility for any such communion, as only pro-active thinking can achieve it. And so it goes with genuine prayer: sober, deliberative, and unscripted.

To conclude: The contrived affectation and formal choreography of ritualized prayer is a memetic residue from Islam's archaic past...and should be seen as such. Only within a constrained mindset does such antiquarian rigamarole seem to make sense. Outmoded conceptualizations of veneration needn't dictate how one communes with the divine. In the final analysis, incantation is incantation is incantation. And buffoonery is buffoonery.

If you are Muslim and you want to truly think for yourself, the first step is to stop doing "salat"; and never memorize—then recite by rote—a passage ever again. {4}

Fasting:

The proposition that fasting is a spiritual exercise that builds self-discipline—or somehow bolsters mental discipline—is based on shoddy reasoning; as well as pseudo-science. Dehydration and/or lack of glucose wreaks havoc on the prefrontal cortex. {17} In other words, it IMPAIRS the part of the brain responsible for higher cognitive functioning; and thus for, well, mental discipline. Such discipline has been valued in spiritual practice since the Iron Age. It's what the Ancient Greeks called "askesis" / "apatheia". (Aristotle dubbed it "enkrateia". Immanuel Kant dubbed it "maturity".)

The cultivation of self-discipline is a laudable enterprise. But spiritual edification via physical privation? Fasting in order to focus the mind? One may as well heat water in order to produce ice. Malnutrition is a surefire way to induce delirium; not a way to augment lucidity.

Depriving one's body of sustenance can, as it were, "break one down" both physically and psychologically—rendering one much more susceptible to suggestibility; and thereby primed for manipulation. Deprivation of ANYTHING the body needs for daily life renders one more open to persuasion. Hungry people are much more easily manipulated. (As discussed above, this is the same idea behind obligatory displays of supplication.)

Procuring mental discipline is not done through caloric deficiency. Fasting in a gambit to bolster one's mental faculties is like depriving oneself of protein in order to build muscle. If one lived in opposite-world, such a gambit might work quite well. Yet back here in Reality, it is asinine.

Concentration requires calories (as well as oxygen). Maintaining the body's weal is not a mere "distraction"...like reading tabloid rags, playing video games, carousing bars in search of a tryst, shopping for haut couture, browsing on social media, and watching Reality TV. And supplying the body with crucial nutrients is hardly an excursion into hedonism. There is nothing indulgent about nourishment.

It should be obvious that basic nutrition is not recreation. Yet oodles of misinformation proliferates about how marvelous fasting can be for one's intellectual and/or spiritual acumen. One is reminded of tobacco companies persuading smokers that smoking might actually be GOOD for you.

For some people, this ancient practice may seem to (sometimes) work because the nutrient-deprived brain/body experiences a delirium that can be misconstrued as an ENHANCEMENT—rather than deterioration—of one's mental faculties. This misapprehension is due to the fact that the reverie is often experienced as some kind of exultation, as if one is being transported. For those seeking to manipulate followers, this is all the more reason to encourage the practice.

The ILLUSION OF focus is all that's needed to sustain this psychical boondoggle. Similarly, during an acid trip, there is the illusion of perceiving the cosmos at some dazzling "higher" level. By hijacking one's

neural network, one can be tricked into thinking it is accessing wonderful things. That's why it's called a "trip". (The catch: It's a round-trip flight that often lands back on lower ground.) Such misperception is comparable to the illusion that alcohol consumption "warms you up"—causing a sensation the tricks one into thinking that imbibing has a beneficial effect in cold weather. The thing with intoxication is that DURING the intoxication, one cannot tell that one has been disconnected with Reality. Such is the nature of hampered judgement: It doesn't see itself as hampered.

This mesmerizing cognitive handicap is the same reason some mystics resort to drugs in order to facilitate their purportedly "elevated" states. They interpret the chemically-induced high as an augmentation of their ability to perceive things. It's as if the intoxication were an indication of sublimity. "WOW. It's WORKING," says the junkie after his next hit. {18}

When it comes to RELIGIOUS fasting, the abstention is communal. The shared sacrifice—as a routine—is a way of fostering tribalism (read: immersion in the group) as well as a way to prove one's loyalty to fellow travelers. The message is essentially: "We've all gone through this together, so now we have a common bond." By enduring tribulation, participants formed a brotherhood. Shared sacrifice—and shared aspiration—is, after all, a basic vehicle for human connection. Hence it is a surefire way to foster BOTH fidelity to the cause and AND communal solidarity.

Asceticism in general is a demonstration of commitment (as well as devotion): "I'm so dedicated to [insert cause here] that I'm willing to [insert burden here]." It's the same logic employed in frat-house hazing rituals on college campuses.

In his book, "The Folly Of Fools", Robert Trivers explains that "the more costly the requirements imposed on group members in a [religious] commune (regarding food, tobacco, clothing, hairstyle, sex, communication with outsiders, fasts, and mutual criticism), the longer the survival of a religious commune; though there is no association between cost and survival in the non-religious." How does this work? "According to cognitive dissonance theory, greater cost needs to be rationalized, leading to greater self-deception (in this case, in the direction of group identity and solidarity). Why do religions provide more fertile ground for this process [of self-deception] than secular communes? Perhaps because religions provide a much more comprehensive logic for justifying [otherwise unfounded] beliefs and actions" (p. 281-282). The cognitive debilitation that is concomitant with nutrient deprivation enables this all to work well.

In light of this, "sawm" (fasting) during the lunar month of Ramadan makes perfect sense—IF, that is, the purpose is conformity (coordinated supplication) and mental docility. After all, "we're all in this together" facilitates communal solidarity. Meanwhile, each evening (during "iftar"), everyone gets to gather together and thank god as they revel in the breaking of the fast. The satisfaction derived from finally eating (after a day of forced deprivation) can then be attributed to the deity's good grace.

The more outlandish the claims, the more appeal they have for the True Believer (a feature noted by evolutionary psychologist, Scott Atran in his "In Gods We Trust"). Robert Trivers adds that "self-deception deforms human cognitive functions" and that "systems of knowledge" are thereby "systematically deformed". Consequently, we should expect "knowledge to be more deformed the more deformation is advantageous to those in control" (p. 303). Thus, one can control people without them noticing that you are, indeed, trying to control them. The illusion of autonomy is maintained. One persuades people to "play along", thereby getting them to RENDER THEMSELVES more manipulatable.

For Muslims, "sawm" is sunrise to sundown for a full lunar month—and includes abstention from hydration. The Baha'i opted to do a daylight fast, but for only 19 days (during the month of "Ala" instead

of for the full lunar month of Ramadan). In both cases, the participants see their abstention as an opportunity for spiritual purification. Forthwith, we will evaluate the Islamic version of fasting, as it is the most well-known illustration.

Ramadan is the most auspicious month of the Ishmaelite lunar calendar (the ninth). It is purported to be the approximate time that the first “revelation” was delivered to Mohammed of Mecca in the cave on Gar Hira c. 610...on the so-called “Night of Destiny / Power” [“Laylat al-Qadr”]. As a commemoration of this event, Mohammedans opted to engage in a month of “sawm” [fasting; derived from the Syriac term for “abstinence”] as a demonstration of fealty, and as a means of spiritual purification.

Well, that was the idea, anyway. All it really was, though, was a continuation—or, rather, appropriation—of the pagan ritual of fasting for one month each year...according to the lunar calendar used by the Nabateans and other Syriac peoples. The practice was also cribbed from the Mandaeans of al-Jazira—who had this sacrament long before Mohammed undertook his ministry. The Sahabah merely sought to preserve the antecedent traditions of fasting that their forebears had been engaging in for centuries.

The idea of fasting for a month (according to the lunar calendar) dates back THOUSANDS of years. Indeed, Hindu fasting could be said to be the original fasting. Fasting during the Vedic month of “Shravan[a]” involves a much more enlightened approach than the debilitating—nay, dictatorial—nature of Islamic fasting during Ramadan. Water is permitted during this fast; and one chooses the one time each day that one eats.

As with the oldest (Vedic) version of fasting, the pre-Islamic Hijazi version allowed people to drink water during the fast. The Islamic version, repackaged as a novel idea, demanded that supplicants even deprive themselves of hydration. Rather than selecting one time to eat, it enjoins one to feast before sunrise and after sunset...while enduring dehydration during daylight hours. {17} Due to daily pre-dawn and post-dusk binges, food-consumption during Ramadan actually INCREASES amongst participants.

It comes as no surprise, then, that hospitalizations in Muslim-majority countries skyrocket during this period. In addition to dehydration, gluttony becomes a widespread problem, as those who engage in daytime fasting often end up hastily engorging themselves prior to sunrise and after sunset—thereby nullifying the point of abstinence: relating to those who are ACTUALLY deprived of food. Empathizing with those who are enduring privation—and thus chronically malnourished—is difficult when one can look forward to “iftar” each evening.

Fictions about the health benefits of fasting are only a recent development. Traditionally, the most common rationale for fasting is that it helps one cultivate self-discipline (as a way to enhance one’s will-power), as with “shravan[a]” in Hinduism. (Again: In the original fasting traditions, hydration was permitted; and it is one’s prerogative when one has the allotted single meal). Indeed, the Koran says that the point of fasting is to procure “self-restraint” (2:183)...even as “iftar” (the nightly breaking of the fast) typically involves participants suddenly engorging on food—a reprieve for those with desperate, empty stomachs. The irony would be comic if it weren’t taken so seriously by so many.

But does this REALLY help one to appreciate food more—and thus empathize with the poor? To reiterate: Even when sincere, the gesture often backfires, as eating (after sunset and before sunrise) INCREASES for many of those who participate in this sacrament. Due to the errant eating schedule, people end up oscillating between deprivation and gluttony—as hunger pangs are rendered erratic and extreme. Thus overall food consumption actually goes UP in most places where “sawm” honored.

There are other problems. In casting the time-frame for fasting in terms of sunlight, the Creator of the

Universe also seemed unaware of (fatal) problems that would arise for Muslims living at higher latitudes. Clearly, god did not foresee Nordic Muslims...nor did he even seem to be aware that the Earth was a spherical body rotating on a tilted axis.

The irony is that Ramadan is characterized by over-eating (pre-dawn and post-dusk bingeing, separated by bouts of privation) and a drastic increase in sickness (due to weakened immune systems).

Across the Muslim world, there is a surge in hospital visits—a predictable result when dehydration and malnourishment are enforced over several weeks.

But why fast? We are told that the primary purpose of “sawm” is to cultivate “taqwa”. But what is that? The term is telling, as it conflates two ideations: piety and fear of god. Piety, then, is a function of god-fear, both of which are necessary if one is to fare well on Judgement Day. In a sense, piety is a way of securing PROTECTION (from damnation) on the day of the Last Judgment: “Qiyamah”. As with the Torah, one is exhorted to FEAR god in order to be protected from his wrath. Hence Ramadan affords one an opportunity to remind oneself of the urgent need to procure “taqwa”; as THAT is the means by which one can protect oneself. From what? From god’s judgement.

Note that none of this has anything to do with philanthropy. One is enjoined to be entirely self-involved. Indeed, the entire point of “taqwa” is to save one’s own hide when the appointed hour arrives. In sum: The idea is not to promote good will toward one’s fellow man; it’s to avoid hellfire...and to secure one’s ticket to Paradise (see Appendix 2).

The Mohammedan fixation on the crescent moon (which was originally associated with the Bedouin god, Hubal) is evident in MoM’s command: “When you see the crescent moon [at the beginning of the 9th month of the lunar calendar], start fasting; and when you see [the next] crescent moon, stop fasting” (Bukhari 3/31/124). This is another reminder that MoM and his audience were under the impression that the entire world experienced the same daylight hours, as well as the same moon phases in concurrence. It is also a reminder that Mohammedan traditions were adapted from antecedent pagan traditions. For during MoM’s lifetime, Hubal was worshipped from Petra in Nabataea, down through the Hijaz, to Sana’a in Yemen. Hubal’s icon was an upward-turned crescent moon. {23} (Sound familiar?) And yes: Each year, the pagan Bedouins of the region fasted for a lunar month.

Let’s review the reasoning behind this practice.

The Islamic ritual is based on verse 183 of surah 2. The idea is that one month of “sawm” helps everyone to be more empathetic toward those who are destitute. At first blush, this sounds reasonable; until one thinks about it for more than a minute.

It is worth noting that the FOLLOWING verse (2:184) proposes an ALTERNATIVE to fasting: feeding those in need. Charity and temperance are, of course, to be encouraged. Such things do not require behavior that is deleterious to one’s own (mental or physical) health.

Islamic apologists insist that “sawm” confers some kind of benefit to one’s physiology—as with, say, holistic “cleanses” in the modern day. This is hokum. Gratuitously imposing malnourishment / dehydration on oneself does not enable one to more adeptly help the impoverished. It merely takes attention away from others and puts it on oneself. Simply RESCHEDULING bouts of gluttony each day is not the same as avoiding gluttony altogether; it is a hollow gesture that helps no one.

The notion that self-inflicted privation is the best way to cultivate empathy is myopic. “You’re starving? Well, then I’ll kinda-sorta starve myself too; but just during daylight hours, and just for a month. Then,

perhaps I'll appreciate your dire straits during the other eleven months of the year. Let me know if that helps." {19}

Is this really the best way to grasp the plight of those in need? Is it a prudent way to alleviate the tribulation of those who aren't allowed to indulge in feasts each morning and evening? As mentioned, Ramadan entails pre-dawn and twilight binge-eating: two feasts per day, separated by daytime abstinence. This precludes the chance to experience what it might be like to be **CHRONICALLY** impoverished—nullifying the purported purpose: cultivating empathy.

Rather than deprive oneself of sustenance, it is prudent to attend to one's own well-being—and thereby one's capacity to help; taking care not to slip into self-absorption while doing so. After all, one is better equipped to contribute to the commonweal when one's own weal has been attended to. (This is the logic behind the "oxygen mask" rule for parents on airliners.)

One of the rationals for fasting is that it is somehow healthy. But depriving one's body of sustenance—including hydration—does not, in any way, bolster one's health.

Fasting is a form of asceticism. That is to say, it is a way of broadcasting that one is sincerely committed. Self-abnegation is a common display of piety, as it makes a statement: "I'm so dedicated, look what I'm willing to do!" (We find the same obtuse thinking with votaries' discretionary sacrifice during "lent" in the Roman Catholic tradition.) The idea is to prove oneself by showing that one is willing to endure discomfort, deprivation, or even (self-inflicted) pain. By showcasing one's dedication, one is deemed a loyal member of the tribe (and a disciplined votary). When Christians do this, it is about empathizing with the Passion of Jesus; when Jews do it, it is in commemoration of the Hebrews' (fabled) forty years in the desert. The message is essentially: "I'm willing to do this; so you can see that I'm serious about my commitment to the cause". The expectation is that others will observe: "He's willing to do THAT. Gosh-golly! He **MUST** be a True Believer." (This is the rational behind arduous initiation rites when determining who is worthy of being inducted into an exclusive organization.) Thus fasting is taken as an exhibition of one's fealty to a deity who, it is supposed, is appeased by such gestures. Ergo 2:183-187 in the Koran.

The key is that people do this with others; as **COMMUNAL** fasting is a way to forge fraternal bonds. The point is that supplicants go through a shared experience. (Again: A sense of camaraderie is formed when enduring an ordeal with fellow travelers—as with "hazing" by college fraternities.)

The "catch" is that collective asceticism tends to also engender dysfunctional proclivities—servility, group-think, parochialism, etc. That is to say: It tends to stymie independent thought while fostering tribalism. It is where neurosis meets a tribalistic mindset. Rites of passage are, after all, demonstrations of obeisance. Asceticism is thus a facilitator of conformity. (One might say that collective asceticism **FETISHIZES** conformity.) This is another case where hubris is passed off as a kind of humility. (Self-abnegation often involves a kind of conceit, as one needs to be self-absorbed in order for it to make sense.)

The exhortation to fast in 2:183-187 is nothing new. Leaders of cult movements that encourage asceticism have, of course, figured out that those who participate are more prone to submission, and thus to compliance. (People are far more open to suggestibility when they are bereft.) Moreover, forced deprivation leads to dependency. Hence "sawm" is an effective way to keep the flock subdued...and to keep participants "in line".

It should go without saying that there are much healthier ways to foster communal solidarity than to engage in prolonged fasting. More generally: There are far better ways to forge human bonds and/or to show

devotion than to partake in self-inflicted deprivation.

Needless to say, there are much, much better ways to bolster self-discipline. Moreover, there are far less dysfunctional ways to eschew extraneous distractions (in order to focus one's mind). It's one thing to reject superficial "worldly" pleasures (i.e. gratuitous indulgences which—invariably—are unedifying diversions from the cultivation of well-being); it's quite another thing to deprive oneself of vital nutrients for a long period of time. As discussed earlier, famished / dehydrated people have difficulty focusing.

If the point was to show devotion or to encourage self-discipline, we now know that there are other means by which one can realize such an admirable goal—none of which involve engaging in unhealthy practices. Making oneself more prone to suggestion (that is: more susceptible to thought control) is not a prerequisite for self-discipline. Prudence, born of autonomy, is not the same thing as privation. Judicious-ness is not born of self-imposed destitution.

So why the ninth lunar month?

This was supposedly the month that Mohammedan brigands slaughtered the Qurayshi merchant caravan at the wells of Badr in 624: the opening salvo of what would become a hegemonic movement. According to Islamic lore, it is also the month that the Torah was given to Moses, the Psalms were given to David, and the Gospel was given to Jesus of Nazareth. Unsurprisingly, it is ALSO the month that Mohammed is purported to have received HIS first revelation in 610. Gee-wiz. And to top it off, it is—so the story goes—the month that Mohammed seized Mecca at the beginning of 630. {20}

What other fantastical things do we hear about this particular month? There is a raft of outlandish superstitions regarding the occasion—notably: temporary demonic sequestration. According to this theological tid-bit, the Creator Of The Universe decided to enchain all the world's evil genies for the month. Consequently, Ramadan is the one time each year that the Abrahamic deity decides to lock up all the "djinn" on Earth...for one lunar cycle. This annual observance implies three rather peculiar things:

God can, at will—at any time—simply gather up all of Satan's minions and quarantine them. Yet he chooses not to do so eleven months of the year.

There is a day—ironically, on Eid al-Fitr—that god opts to UN-chain all of these evil genies, thus deliberately unleashing them upon mankind on an annual basis. It would seem that this is not an occasion for revelry.

There exist hordes of evil genies; and they populate the world at god's pleasure.

Unsurprisingly, while celebrating the "breaking of the fast" (Eid al-Fitr is fashioned as a festive occasion), few supplicants are wary of the fact that, that very evening, the world's demons are about to be discharged. (Before doing so, we might assume god waits until everyone is finished desert.) In fact, we are told that the "djinn" are relegated back to hell, and that god closes the gates of hell—to keep them penned up inside for the duration of the month.

That the Abrahamic deity deliberately ensures the world will be plagued by demonic forces for 11 out of 12 (lunar) months would seem to indicate that he uses the world as a staging ground. For what? Well, life is a test; and nefarious forces are intentionally loosed upon the Earth as means of vetting us.

Why, then, do the vast majority of Muslims treat Eid al-Fitr as a convivial affair (other than the fact that they finally get to eat regularly again)? The answer can only be that they are not pre-occupied with the ORIGINAL *raison d'être* of the holiday. Rather than dreading the alleged dire events afoot (the unleashing of djinn upon the world from their temporary incarceration), the focus is on coming together to enjoy each

other's company; and to count one's blessings ("birkat" in the Semitic vernacular). {21}

When the majority of Muslims celebrate Eid al-Fitr, exactly what time of year the "Seal of the Prophets" may or may not have received a purported revelation is entirely beside the point.

Bottom line: Fasting is not a salubrious practice. Malnourishment is not a kind of "purification" (especially when it involves lack of hydration all day long, day after day, in hot weather); and it is certainly not the best way to cultivate self-discipline. Not taking food and water for granted is a laudable endeavor. Doing something that is detrimental to one's well-being is an altogether different matter. Temperance doesn't require impoverishment. But privation sure comes in handy when one is trying to keep people compliant. That's why authorities since time immemorial have always made a concerted effort to ensure the rabble remained somewhat needy.

In the final analysis, spirituality is about tapping into the divine—something that not only pervades the universe (pantheism), but suffuses everything within it (panentheism). To wit: The divine is in each one of us. Consequently, it is not a matter of what we do, but of who we are. Ritual has no bearing on character.

Footnotes:

{1 This involves "epieikeia": a spirituality informed by reason, moderated by temperance. Note that none of this omits the more existentially salient features of healthy prayer: hope and appreciation—both of which enable prayer to enhance life. In its most estimable form, contemplation is a way of empowering oneself—marshaling the gusto to rise above, to flourish, to become a better person (more wise, more virtuous), to endure / overcome tribulation, etc. By stark contrast, in its crudest form, prayer is treated as the celestial version of the home shopping network (as an articulation of a wish-list). In its loftier versions, one prays that a loved one will recover from an ailment or that one will fare well in an upcoming trial, proving oneself up to the task. Praying for good fortune seems to be the most elementary form of prayer. Meanwhile, prayer-as-appreciation is its most existentially profound form. In this way, prayer is reflective / introspective: stopping to take stock, inhale life, and experience the full exhilaration of—and gratefulness for—being alive. In this way, prayer is an opportunity to count one's blessings, to marvel at existence, to experience wonder. Both aspects—hope and appreciation—are about getting in touch with oneself as well as with the divine. Both are in keeping with the sort of contemplative activity described at present. In sum: Hope (so long it is not selfish or delusive) and appreciation (of the sort that goes beyond quotidian gratitude) imbue life with meaning; and are often best realized through prayer. }

{2 This exalted state is generally referred to as "enlightenment". In Eastern traditions, it is alternately dubbed "vipassana", "panna", and "bodhi" ("satori" / "ken-sho" in Japanese). It is comparable to what the Ancient Greeks dubbed "arete", Zoroastrians dubbed "ushta", Hindus / Buddhists dubbed "bodhi", Jains dubbed "kevala jnana", those in the Talmudic tradition dubbed "bahir", and the Germans dubbed "aufklärung". }

{3 By "erudition" here, we might reference what the ancient Greeks dubbed "episteme" (in the more scientific sense) or "gnosis" (in the more spiritual sense); and what the ancient Hindus dubbed "abhijna" / "jnana" / "yukti". }

{4 Such routine cannot help but create cognitive scotoma (i.e. mental blind spots)—the analysis of which is explored in Barbara Tuchman's "The March of Folly". (This condition is sometimes referred to as "introspective neglect".) A handy rule of thumb: If everyone in a space is saying and doing the exact same thing, then individual autonomy is probably not involved. Coordinated chanting has about as much to do

with genuine spirituality as obeying orders has to do with genuine probity. Anyone can follow instructions. Insofar as prayer is scripted, it can not possibly involve an authentic spiritual experience. The idea of repetitious chanting seems to be as follows: In vocalizing a scripted sequence of phonemes over and over and over, supplicants might be able to tap into an imagined magical cosmic force, invoke some divine power, or have their petitions heeded by a presiding super-being (who is presumably awaiting their next, properly-articulated utterance). In some Eastern traditions, such invocations work ONLY if the supplicants manage to achieve just the right syncopation. In traditions where the deity is far more authoritarian (as with the Abrahamic religions), propitiation is largely a matter of pleading—as a slave would a master.}

{5 Ref. Daniel Kahneman’s “Thinking Fast & Slow” p. 41.}

{6 Note: By “mind” here, I mean the brain’s capacity for careful analysis and critical reflection (i.e. meticulous deliberation). Analytical / critical thinking—insofar as it is logically rigorous and methodical—is precisely what scripted prayer is NOT about. Genuine prayer is primarily about contemplation; so one’s autonomy needn’t be compromised to do it.}

{7 The weekly “jumu’ah” is also part of this regimen.}

{8 Other analogies for the pantomime include: Hearing without listening; looking without seeing; inhaling without smelling. Another possible analogue is the distinction between fucking and love-making.}

{9 The ostensive aim is to achieve “hesykhia” (inner stillness), in which contemplative prayer silences the mind—enabling it to progress along the path of “theosis” (the divine path toward unity with god).}

{10 This description may sound harsh, but it is accurate. The repetitive, jerky bowing motion (“shuckling”) is creepy for any sane bystander to observe. Such spasmodic propitiation is especially pronounced when performed by the most neurotic supplicants. Haredim engage in this bizarre ritual with cloying affectation—as if acting like a spastic buffoon were somehow a great way to commune with the divine. These awkward gesticulations are illustrative of the present point: If we were to observe a disheveled hobo, drenched in his own urine, doing such a thing ALONE on a street corner (whilst uttering inanities to himself), we would rightly deem him to be off his rocker. Yet when a GROUP of people do it in unison, we simply call it “religion”. In countenancing such an inconsistent taxonomy, the idea is that one is magically conferring upon (what is, in reality) sanctified rigamarole immunity from any / all frank critical analysis. Exemption from honest critique is seen as dialectically impenetrable simply because it has been SACRALIZED by a cadre of True Believers. The more fanatical Jewish men wrap “tefillin” around their heads and arms during morning prayers. They are used to affix two small black boxes (one above the forehead, one on the upper arm) containing bits of parchment on which key verses are printed. (The term was Aramaic for talisman; yet has come to refer to black leather straps and the accompanying boxes.) The fact that anyone can be convinced that someone is better situated to get in touch with—or flatter—the divine by engaging in such Tom-foolery is a disconcerting testament to the zany proclivities of the human mind. The use of “tefillin”—as with, say, the “metzitzah b’peh” for the “brit milah”—is a striking commentary on the potential foibles of human psychology (read: how harebrained people can behave when they’re thoroughly deluded); yet we are exhorted to NOT NOTICE this...and begrudged if we DO notice it. Think about the logic here: If a lone weirdo does something equally silly, we are at liberty to call it bonkers; but when numerous people do it in a coordinated manner (as a sacrament), it becomes taboo to say anything negative about it...even though it is EFFECTIVELY the same behavior. Such duplicity warrants a query: What other mechanism could persuade an otherwise sane person to behave in such a daffy manner? And what other pretext could succeed in rendering such loopy behavior off-limits for candid assessment?}

{11 Insofar as one is afflicted with epistemic narcissism, one's own take on things becomes THE ONLY CONCEIVABLE—and thus, the only acceptable—take on things. A pathological obduracy is the inevitable result. This explains why it is so difficult to extricate a True Believer from his dogmatic quagmire: he has rendered himself almost incapable of thinking outside the gilded box he has created for himself.}

{12 This is why pet theories are often misconstrued as incontrovertible truths. Indeed, we ALL gravitate toward suppositions—however groundless—that seem to confirm what we already believe. This can go far beyond run-of-the-mill confirmation bias, turning into outright delusion.}

{13 For CPR (circadian propitiation routine) here, I use the qualification “penta-partite” because it is FIVE daily prayers for most Muslims (though most Shiites feel obliged to perform “only” three). The most important propitiation of the week is the afternoon Friday prayer, known as “salat al-jum’ah” [alt. “jumu’ah salat”], per 62:9-10 in the Koran (and referenced in Bukhari’s Hadith 2/13/51).}

{14 According to Islamic lore, this number is based on a negotiation with the Abrahamic deity undertaken by MoM on his so-called “Night Journey”, recounted in the Hadith.}

{15 The entire idea is fatuous in any case: Propitiations as a sop to the Creator of the Universe, who demands to be placated by groveling supplicants. (After all, supplication is primarily about placation...in ANY context.) It's like a timorous slave pleading before a vainglorious master in an effort to appease him. “I'll shower him with praise, for fear that if I don't flatter him incessantly, I may fall out of favor.” Imagine a child that found the need to constantly placate an overbearing parent to avoid punishment. We'd consider such a parent tyrannical. This is no exaggeration: In 7:10, the Koran's temperamental protagonist whines about not being sufficiently appreciated. His ire infuses the rest of the book.}

{16 The Islamic “qibla” began with facing either Jerusalem, which is what the Jews did for “Amidah”. Which direction is a Muslim to pray from 48 kilometers northwest of the Polynesian island of Timata[n]gi in the South Pacific (the point on the Earth that is antipodal to Mecca)? This was not a problem, as the Sabahah (and, later, the authors of the Koran) thought the world was flat; and so assumed one needed only follow the “rhumb” line.}

{17 For those in hot climes who also opt to deprive themselves of water (something not required in most fasting traditions), dehydration invariably becomes a problem. Hunger is neither physiologically nor psychologically salubrious. It does not “cleanse” one's body; and it engender augmented empathy for the destitute (and thus ROUTINELY starving). Handicapping oneself renders one LESS capable to help those in need.}

{18 In this sense, religionism / mysticism and political correct-ness involve the same fundamental error: One mistakes a subjective state for evidence for objective reality (a.k.a. Reality). A mystical experience—which, by definition, occurs within one's own mind—is not an indication of what REALLY EXISTS. That is: an indication of how the cosmos really is, independently of one's own psychical activity (i.e. personal impressions / sensations). The mis-step is to treat the phenomenological (an exclusively internal experience) as epistemic bedrock; and thus construe it as a mark of the ONTOLOGICAL. Intoxication is a DEPARTURE FROM Reality; not a means to intuit it. A pharmacologically-facilitated “trip” reveals nothing about the cosmos; yet mysticism mandates that one pretend that it is THE ONLY WAY to reveal how the cosmos “really is”. (Psychedelics, for instance, reveal how the neuro-biology of the homo sapiens brain works; but THAT'S IT.) Meanwhile, those afflicted with the p.c. bug see their own sentiments as a benchmark for a moral obligation to which all others should be subject—thus treating the personal as a basis for the universal. Both cases stem from epistemic narcissism. What is sometimes

called “lived experience” says more about the person experiencing than it does about the world being experienced. “My lived experience” only reveals something about ME. However, the world is not all about ME; so it does nothing to inform us about, well, ANYTHING ELSE. }

{19 And while I’m at it, shall I punch myself in the face on a daily basis in a gambit to care more about battered housewives?}

{20 Fittingly, it was also during the month of Ramadan (c. 641) that the Great Library at Alexandria was razed, with all its books burned at the instruction of the caliph. }

{21 The same can be said of Seder and Rosh Hashanah for most Jews; Christmas for most Christians and secular Westerners; Diwali for most Hindus; Songkran for most Thai Buddhists; and Kwanza for most African Americans. Such holidays are not exactly the same; but the spirit behind them (i.e. the role they play in each culture) is analogous. Sanctified dogmas aside, the point of such auspicious occasions is to show appreciation for what one has. Each is a celebration of life and good fortune...in its own fashion. }

{22 However, in many Filipino masses, the Lord’s Prayer is sung. }

{23 The crescent was also associated with the goddess, Atarathē / Astarte / Atargatis / Ishtar / Al-lat. It was used from the Levant (esp. Petra), through Mesopotamia (esp. Ctesiphon), to the Zagros mountains (as on the Sassanian “Taq-i Bostan”). It should come as no surprise, then, that the crescent moon was used on pre-Islamic Arabian coins. Where such iconography came from is, therefore, no big mystery. }

APPENDIX 1:

Justitia Fiat, Ruat Coelum

The more Progressive Judeo-Christian portrayal of the Abrahamic deity is that of a super-being that loves everyone unconditionally—and genuinely wants to help everyone. However, in Islam’s holy book, we encounter an altogether different portrayal of the Abrahamic deity. Instead of an ALL-loving entity, the Koran’s protagonist is an overtly sadistic, astoundingly petty, self-absorbed dictator...who, we are told, is actively seeking to damn a large portion of humanity.

Those of us who are intellectually curious might ask: What sort of super-being can have such contempt for a large portion of his own Creation? Are we to spend a lifetime cowering in the presence of a pathologically vindictive, preening deity...with rather peculiar fixations? Are we to devote our lives to groveling before a despotic overlord who moonlights as the manager of a celestial luxury resort? Are we to be wary of a fallen angel who doubles as the proprietor of an afterlife concentration camp? Is that REALLY what life is all about?

“Pay me tribute!” says the overlord, “Or I will be very displeased.” Is this REALLY the scheme that drives the entire universe?

Such a stunted worldview is a sure recipe for living a life in which one misses everything that is truly wonderful...and then dies afraid. Lulled into a comfy—yet false—sense of security, votaries can remain smug in their hyper-dogmatism...even as their consolation is intertwined with chronic trepidation about an impending judgement.

An illustration of this scenario was Donald Trump’s ridiculously condescending television series, “The

Apprentice”. The show’s “set-up” is as old as human civilization: Contestants scramble to appease a temperamental, navel-gazing despot in order to avoid being vanquished. The proceedings are a test of their dedication to the cause. Life, then, is primarily about groveling before a vindictive (cosmic) impresario.

The “hope” is that, if the supplicants pander obsessively enough to an impetuous dictator, they might avoid the dire fate of being “fired”, and—if they play their cards right—end up “winning” (i.e. securing the prize at the end). Film at 11.

This is the program that religious fundamentalists—both Christian and Muslim—deign to make, commercial free, without the constraints of Reality TV. Indeed, the central conceit of this scheme doesn’t change when we map the presiding overlord from corporate executive to, well, a loftier station (that is: to cosmic proportions). We’re still dealing with a petty, capricious tyrant (or, to be more specific: a smug, not-very-bright-yet-thinks-he’s-brilliant BULLY).

A contorted morality can’t help but ensue from this mental posture. Under such conditions, the impression one is left with is: The worst thing that one can do is not—say—harm another person; rather, the worst thing one can do is displease the authorities (read: stray from the assigned path).

I once heard a devout Muslim ask (rhetorically), “How can you believe in god if you do not pray?” Such a Kafka-esque query is enough to make one wince. (That question was just as confounding as its converse: “How can you pray if you do not believe in [the Abrahamic deity]?” —a question I receive regularly from Abrahamic theists when it is brought to their attention that spiritual secularists like myself often pray.)

And so it goes: Prayer is seen as not only something one must do IF one believes in god, but something one must do IN ORDER TO believe in god. This fundamental misconception is both a pre-requisite and inevitably consequence of theism (mono- or poly-).

In reality, every “salat” is an instance of idolatry in that it is a profession of fealty to the deified object. The incessant recitation of the assigned script can’t help but have long-term effects on one’s psyche. That is, after all, the point of obligatory (“fard”) prostration. Regular prayer (especially when highly choreographed) is an optimal program of conditioning.

Relentless glorification of ANYTHING can only ever delude the human mind, fostering obsession (and begetting some sort of fetishization of the implements used). Yet, according to passages like 16:52, we OWE the Abrahamic deity “constant worship”. In other words: You must worship him constantly because it is his “due”. He demands that you show him appreciation by exalting him day and night (11:114, 17:78-79, 24:36/58, 52:49, and 73:20). A super-being that demands to be placated more resembles a petulant child than a sagacious overseer.

APPENDIX 2:

Fear & Love In Abrahamic Lore

There is a queer relationship between love and fear in Islamic theology. It stems from the notion that piety is a function of fear—as articulated by “taqwa”. This peculiar term appears—in one form or another—over a hundred times throughout the Koran. The ideation equates piety with fear (as in the imperative: “ittaquallah”). Piety is important, we’re told, because it protects the supplicant from god’s wrath. Thus Faith is primarily about PROTECTION FROM that which one worships.

Verse 76 in Surah 3 explains that god “loves” those who “fear” him. This trope permeates Islamic theology. After all, the intertwining of fear and love (under the auspices of “taqwa”) has a certain utility. The trick is to instill trepidation, using anxiety as a tool of manipulation. Those who are cowering are much easier to control. When people are nervous, their critical faculties are attenuated; which is precisely what authoritarians count on. *

Here, adoration and unease are intertwined in a kind of neurotic exaltation. By unifying awe and neurosis, votaries can be kept perpetually “on edge”; and thus “in line”. The message is simple: “Cower and revere!” This makes sense, as supplication and timidity are symbiotic. And so it stands to reason that so much Abrahamic scripture is strewn with threats. The theme of “Fire and Brimstone” is timeless; as proselytization is often made more potent by fear. Note, for instance, Hawthorne’s tale about the obstreperous Puritan cleric getting young Goodman Brown to quaver.

No source that legitimately seeks to empower people operates in this manner; as intimidation is not consummate with liberation.

The Koran tells us that Mohammed of Mecca (as god’s messenger) was sent as “a mercy for mankind”; but—of course—this assumes that mankind was in need of mercy in the first place. Redemption? Redeemed from what? Absolution? For what, exactly, must we atone? Some kind of reprieve? From what? From life’s travails? Which ones? In what ways? From disease? Nope. From socio-economic injustice? Nope. From “jahiliyah” (a protracted state of ignorance)? Perhaps; but most Abrahamic scripture only served to exacerbate that problem. So that can’t be it either. (Revelation is often passed off as a special kind of edification; but it has proven not to be anything of the sort.)

The answer, then, must be: From perdition. Yet that begs the question: If god did not deign to damn people to begin with, then there would be no need for him to grant special dispensation. (Such an arrangement only makes sense if damnation is the default condition of mankind.) When it comes to promises of salvation, the broader question is: What is it to be saved? Saved from what? To what end?

The rules of the game here are relatively straight-forward: God is merciful; but one needs to plead for it! And he needs to be placated. To the degree one manages to appease him (by meeting his demands), one can save one’s own hide.

God offers grace, you say? Sounds nice. Yet the pressing question remains: Mercy to for what purpose? Mercy based on what? There is no “original sin” in Islam—so there is no tribunal in which humans are effectively indicted for the crime of being human (as in Christianity). Yet we are thrown into this crucible of obloquy nevertheless. Once thoroughly immersed in stupefaction, the godhead can then come to the rescue.

The gimmick is as old as time: Create the (impression of) a sickness; then offer the (purported) cure.

According to the theology proffered in the Koran, though mankind may not be afflicted with the stain of “original sin” (at least, not in the sense that it is posited in Christian cosmogony), we are—as it were—on furlough. To wit: We are living a life of probation. In this sense, the entire point of life is to be vetted for which fantastical destination each person shall be routed in the (imaged) hereafter. Life is a test. The test is based entirely on piety (rather than on probity). Efficacy is a function of the degree to which the supplicant gives a vainglorious cosmic overlord his due. (Mandates for worship mean that the godhead’s due is a continuous supply of unctuous praise.)

Essentially, the Koran prescribes a program of forced adoration—an odd directive if there ever was one.

The notion of *compulsory love* is a peculiar notion, indeed. Sure, it's still our CHOICE whether or not to give the Koran's protagonist the devotion he demands; but this is true only in the myopic sense that opting not to revere Kim Il Sung is an available option in North Korea. Of course, a North Korean citizen is free to NOT do so. The issue concerns the CONSEQUENCES OF that choice.

Here, we might bear in mind that it is not freedom OF speech that characterizes a democratic society; it is freedom AFTER speech. With a proverbial gun pointed at one's head, there is—in the narrowest of senses—still a choice. Prerogative only matters if it is exercised without severe consequences. One is free to rob a bank; but that is a decidedly obtuse way of thinking about freedom.

It is in the same sense that one is free to choose whether or not to be Muslim. In any case, compulsory love (as articulated in passages like 53:62) is, by definition, not love.

So what of amity between human beings? In what way does what the Greeks called “agape” (love for all one's fellow man BECAUSE he is one's fellow man) play a role in the “din” prescribed by the Koran? None. It is not devotion for one another that bonds “nas” (mankind)...or, at least, denizens of Dar al-Islam. Rather, it is a shared devotion to the Koran's navel-gazing protagonist that bonds them into an “ummah”.

In NOT EVEN ONE of the thousands of verses in Islam's holy book did the Abrahamic deity see fit to urge good will toward all human beings. Instead, the authors of Islam's holy book focused on threats of hellfire...with some Earthly pleasures to tantalize the target audience. (After all, the last message to mankind is sold—above all else—as a WARNING.) Rather than appeals to love, they opted for fear.

The use of fear to control people en masse was nothing new when the “Recitations” were composed. Nor was the glorification of those who instill fear. The practice goes back to the Hebrew Bible (most famously, Psalm 11:6). Shortly after 100 A.D., John of Patmos composed the phantasmagorical “Book of Revelation”, a tract brimming with “fire and brimstone”. By the time puritan fanatic, Jonathan Edwards composed his lurid jeremiad, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (in 1741), the schtick was all-too-familiar.

Fearing the object of devotion is indicative of a commonplace dysfunction. Psychologists often refer to it as “traumatic bonding”—operative in battered-housewife syndrome. In such scenarios, one ends up revering an authority figure not IN SPITE OF an abusive relationship, but BECAUSE of it. (Says the abusive husband to his cowering spouse: It's for your own good!) We thus encounter the theological version of Stockholm Syndrome.

The lexeme for “fear” in the Koran is “kha[w]f” / “kh[a]if”, with “-attaq-” / “-ittaq-” often appended as a suffix. (The Semitic root is K-F.) FEAR is used 283 times throughout the book—primarily pertaining to the godhead. Beyond that tally, TERROR (“ruba” / “faza”) is used 9 times. This is in keeping with the incessant use of the motif “god's wrath” throughout the Torah and Book of Revelation.

Variations on the lexeme for “love” in the Koran include “habb[a]” / “habb[u]” / “hibb[a]” / “hibb[u]” / “hubb”. (The Semitic root is H-B.) Love is used 53 times in the book. Almost all instances of the lexeme pertain to god loving certain people (e.g. Sabirun, Muhsinun, Muttaqun, the pious, those who pray, those who fight in his cause; i.e. Muslims) and certain people loving god (i.e. Muslims). The enjoinder for love in the Koran is almost entirely about reverence for—and devotion to—the Koran's protagonist. Other uses of the lexeme connote being enamored by some THING (e.g. food, wealth, etc.) Love between people is only mentioned ONCE (19:25); and even then it is referred to contemptuously.

This is downright bizarre, if not tremendously disconcerting. One would think that the final message to mankind would be, if not ALL ABOUT love, then PRIMARILY CONCERNED WITH love. No such luck. There is not a single exhortation for all people—regardless of Faith—to love one another...or even to have compassion for each other. The closest get is mention that helping the poor / sick / orphan / wayfarer is to be encouraged...even as we are told not to make friends with non-Muslims...and even to FIGHT them.

Thus: In only one instance does Koranic verse—obliquely—broach the topic of affection between people. Yet none of this resembles the Ancient Greek “agape” (universal love of fellow humans qua fellow humans); what the ancient Chinese referred to as “ren” (Confucius) and “jian-ai” (Mozi). The notion of universal love is distinct in several religious traditions around the world. This stands in stark contrast to the Koranic notion of “love”: devotion to a particular object, be it the Abrahamic deity or anything else OTHER THAN a fellow human.

If the Koran’s protagonist intended to be as clear as possible in his message to mankind, he did a horrendous job of it. Meanwhile, if different humans authored different parts of the book at different places at different times under different circumstances, this is EXACTLY the sort of convoluted vocabulary we’d expect to find.

The bottom line is that votaries are supposed to both love and fear the Koran’s protagonist, thereby achieving submission via intimidation. (Subservience via coercion takes many forms, but the basic psychological apparatus involved is the same. It is invariably a function of the master-slave relationship—as the Koran makes explicit.)

For a point of reference, let’s contrast the Koran’s incessant repetition of its myopic conception of “love” (devotion, strictly in the pious sense) to the more conventional conception of love found in the New Testament. One of the better-known passages on the matter is in the fourth chapter of John’s first letter (verses 7-8): **“Let us love one another because love is from god; everyone who loves is born of god and knows god. Whoever does not love [each other] does not know god, for god is love”** and then (11-12): **“Since god loves us so much, we also should love one another... If we love one another, god lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.”** Verse 16 reiterates: **“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in god, and god abides in them.”** God is the engine of man’s love for his fellow man.

The salient contrast comes in verse 18: **“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.”** This is the antithesis of the Koran’s message, as it divorces fear from love rather than unifying them. The passage concludes: **“We love because [god] first loved us. Those who say, ‘I love god’ and hate their brothers are liars. For those who do not love a brother whom they have seen cannot love god whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from [god] is this: Those who love god must love their brothers also”** (verses 19-21).

There is nothing anywhere in the Koran that resembles this. It is not for nothing that the (Mohammedan) Last Revelation announces itself as A WARNING, whereas the Gospels announces themselves—quite literally—as GOOD NEWS. The distinction here is very telling. The Koran is based primarily on an INDICTMENT (and thus a threat) whereas the Gospel is based primarily on ABSOLUTION (and thus a promise). In a nutshell: The former is a function of fear; the latter a function of (ACTUAL) grace. Shorn of the incessant wrath propounded in the Book Of Revelation, the New Testament is inviting rather than intimidatory. **

We find that in both Christianity and Islam, supplicants are expected to approach the Faith-on-offer with

some queer combination of terror and awe (thereby infusing compulsory exaltation with chronic anxiety). Such an attitude melds worry with wonder—like a battered wife who reveres her abusive husband. Thus: trepidation and devotion become two sides of the same coin—a sure recipe for dysfunction. In such a situation, the battered wife’s abiding adulation of her spouse is in no way compromised by his constant undermining of every good reason for her misguided devotion.

One might refer to this condition as the spiritual equivalent of Stockholm Syndrome. When Stockholm syndrome becomes communal, and engenders a kind of mass-delusion, it is sometimes referred to as “Oslo Syndrome”. Theologically, this amounts to a kind of existential extortion. In any case, it is a gratuitously-induced, pseudo-spiritual neurosis that so many demagogues are eager to promulgate.

{* The use of fear to cow people into submission is also found in Bukhari’s Hadith (4/52/220). Mohammed of Mecca is famous for having said: “I am made victorious through terror.” For more on the use of fear to control people, see my essays, “Nemesis” and “The Siege Mentality”. I discuss the use of (false) hope to control people in “The Island”.}

{** Bear in mind that I am no fan of the New Testament. This is not apologia for Christian scripture, which has its own serious problems. Rather it is a juxtaposition presented for didactic purposes. Unfortunately, an auspicious Palestinian Jew’s message (the “Good News”) was eventually perverted by much of what came to become “Christianity” qua institution—a topic I explore in “Genesis Of A Church”. This grotesque distortion rendered the Faith—more than anything else—a blueprint for escaping hellfire and gaining admission into paradise (a motif put into overdrive in the Koran). Indeed, Nicene Christianity ended up being based more on the Book of Revelation than on anything Jesus of Nazareth actually said; thereby making piety [“taqwa”] primarily a matter of fire and brimstone (like the Koran) rather than about an exhortation to agape (universal love; i.e. what Jesus taught). Just as Marx would not have been a Marxist, Jesus would probably not endorse most of what operates under the aegis, “Christianity”.}

APPENDIX 3:

Empowerment Via Subservience

Written on the gates of Auschwitz and other Nazi concentration camps was: “Arbeit macht frei” [Work sets you free]. What in heaven’s name could this possibly have meant? Was it some Orwellian shibboleth that was unique to Nazism; or was it indicative of a larger theme?

Some concepts are awkward simply because they are not just ill-defined, but ill-conceived. This is not to be confused with concepts that are perfectly coherent, yet are awkward simply because they are unfamiliar to us (e.g. vertical horizon). Especially deranged is the notion that one can achieve spiritual emancipation by way of worldly subjugation; as this trope has been put in the service of many an odious cause. This obtuse (one might say, harebrained) conception of civility can be found in all authoritarian apologia—from Hobbes’ “Leviathan” to Edmund Burke’s polemic against revolution.

According to conventional Islamic theology, supplicants are to be thought of as slaves to god (“abd-ullah”). What, exactly, is this supposed to mean? The paradoxical notion of enslavement AS emancipation is not unique to the Abrahamic Faiths. It is, after all, the standard mentality of those who are seeking a master to obey. Take, for instance, the primary Aztec god, “Tezcatlipoca” (“Smoking Mirror”), who was colloquially referred to as “Titlacauan” (roughly translated as “we are his slaves”).* The idea, of course, was to propose a means of empowerment by expressing fealty to the deity-in-question.

The queer notion of emancipation via enslavement is flabbergasting to level-headed observers; as it amounts to: “We shall empower you by putting you in an existential prison.” This is not uncommon when Reactionary thinking is afoot; and is especially prominent in fascistic / theocratic contexts. One might even say that the modus operandi of any authoritarian regime is to propound subordination disguised as liberation. Insofar as leaders are deemed proxies for the divine will, putting oneself at the mercy of “god” translates to putting oneself at the mercy of the figures who claim to act with his imprimatur. The ruse plays right into the hands of those in power.

Both Nicene Christianity and Islam are predicated on the supposition that complete submission is the best way to “liberate” and/or “empower” oneself—presumably: by putting oneself in the good graces of the godhead (who would be remiss to doll out grace to those who fail to submit to his demands). According to this contorted logic, subordinating one’s mind—nay, one’s very identity—to an authority is the optimal path to well-being....to wisdom....to righteousness....and ultimately to some kind of “salvation”.

The astonishing thing about this claim is not how obviously false it is; it’s that so many people have been bamboozled by it...all over the world...for centuries upon centuries. Such dupes have generally misconstrued the actual effects (which are invariably dysfunctional) to be the sought-after virtues. Hence the ILLUSION OF wisdom / probity / transcendence so often found amongst committed votaries in highly religious communities.

The prospect of being spared the burden of having to think for themselves is enticing to certain people. Many eagerly jump at the opportunity to simply follow instructions...and simply call THAT “morality”. “Right” is synonymous with “obeying commands”—what Nietzsche dubbed the “slave mentality”. Only with this mentality could one see a symbol of oppression and subservience (the burka / niqab) and construe it as some kind of exaltation. And only someone who is thoroughly indoctrinated can be convinced that such a woman has “freely chosen” her own degradation. **

Indeed, the abdication of (autonomy-based) responsibility can FEEL liberating...even exhilarating. WHY? As it turns out, the rapturous sensations that a religionist sometimes experiences when putting himself entirely “in the hands of” his deity is similar to that of an insecure toddler who allows himself to be swept up in his parent’s reassuring arms. The same psychological mechanisms are at work in either case.

Presumably, the authors of the Koran adopted this delusive gimmick in an attempt to fashion a new-fangled Abrahamic religion that would “stick”...and serve their purposes. Tragically, it DID stick; and so ended up serving their purposes staggeringly well. Caliphates, as it turned out, were NOT a shining model of democracy.

Inculcation of the command-and-obey motif is a stratagem to keep people cowed / compliant—which means: disinclined to attempt disrupting the established order. Such a ploy is as old as time. The Roman Catholic Church has been using it with stellar success since the 4th century. Failing to adhere to social norms (that is: refusing to stay “in line”) was deemed “heresy”; as it was a threat to incumbent power structures.

The “empowerment through subservience” sales-pitch was (and, unfortunately, continues to be) nothing but a ruse for engendering widespread obeisance. It is a scheme to engender a chronic yearning to comply with diktats and conform to the prescribed “din”.

Note the timeless formula, used by con-men since time immemorial: Create (the impression of) the

sickness, then offer the (alleged) cure. The universal human predisposition for credulity makes us all ripe for being hoodwinked by this enthralling scam.

Consequently, people can often be persuaded that their enslavement is really a FAVOR being bestowed upon them from the powers that be. We should recall the prostration is a mental as well as physical act. This is especially so with Islam, wherein propitiation is entirely about a show of supplication (“ibadah”). The ensuing flood of serotonin (or rush of dopamine, as the case may be) is like an anesthetic for any cognitive dissonance that might be involved. (Dopamine, we should bear in mind, plays a key role in gratification and reinforcement. So it is the neuro-chemical basis for CONDITIONING.)

Sycophancy is not just submission of one’s station; it is a submission of one’s mind. Think of the groveling, brainwashed lackey who gushes to his despotic master, “I am HONORED by the opportunity to serve you.” Says the ruler: “I am doing you a FAVOR by enslaving you. You should be grateful. You’re all the better off for it. TRUST me.” Hence: subordination seen as a kind of liberation.

This peculiar inversion of logic actually has a long history, as it undergirds the rational behind authoritarianism. The most well-known philosophical exponent of authoritarianism in modern times was the ardent monarchist, Thomas Hobbes—who, in the 17th century, argued that submission to a sovereign’s power is the best guarantee of personal freedom. The more absolute the submission, the more powerful the sovereign is made, and so the freer the polis becomes. Subjugation as emancipation. A person’s “liberty”, then, can only be ensured through an authoritarian regime, which exercises power for—the contention goes—everyone’s own good.

The notion that there is dignity in religio-political self-abnegation is born of a kind of existential masochism. Self-abnegation is not required for a prudent amount of humility. Obsequiousness is certainly not required for the (measured) degree of humble-ness necessary to attenuate avarice and self-absorption). Servility plays no role in transcendence. The supposition that the human race is inherently degenerate, and can only be “redeemed” via supplication to a cosmic overlord, is inane. Self-effacement is not a prerequisite for agape or to avert conceit. The divine no more demands that we be a slave to it than that we be a slave to ANYTHING or ANYONE. Slavery is inherently degenerate, not mankind. We need to be redeemed from our own misdeeds, not from our shared humanity.

The Koran defines our ideal relationship with the divine as one of “ubudiyah” (bondage / subjugation) rather than as one of communion. This is not only wrong, but deranged. It is not through submission that we “get in touch with” the divine; it is through engagement. We might also note the term, “ibadah” (colloquially used as “worship”) which is associated with the term for “slavery” (“abd”) and has connotations of obedience / submission...as if the relationship with the divine were primarily achieved via a disposition of obeisance / subservience.

It is not uncommon for Islamic apologists to attempt to make the (patently absurd) case that to ENSLAVE oneself to the Abrahamic deity is to LIBERATE oneself (that true freedom can only be found through admitting that one is god’s slave). That such a preposterous statement is taken seriously by so many members of the Ummah is testament to how utterly deluded votaries can become. (The argument often goes: You have to be a slave to SOMETHING, so it may as well be to the protagonist of this book.) Recall that the relationship of human to the Koran’s protagonist is explicitly one of slave to master. All things are thought of in these terms (which is, of course, unsurprising; as this was a standard mindset for the Dark Ages).

The perversity of compulsory adoration aside, if the Koran does not beseech its audience to spend their lives cowering in submission, groveling for approval, tripping over each other to placate an overlord that

demands constant praise, scrambling in desperation to appease a pathologically vindictive deity, then what in heaven's name DOES it beseech? After we get past the repeated threats to torture large swaths of mankind for eternity (for the unforgivable infraction of insufficient supplication) and the incessant reminders of how awesome the book's protagonist is, what are we to think?

Of ALL the horrific things the deity could have chosen to condemn, why such a bizarre choice of petty transgressions? It is a rather peculiar thing when, in his purported final memo to all mankind, of all the pressing matters with which the human race was contending, the Creator of the Universe was so inordinately fixated on such things as slave-holding protocols, choreography for worship, and dietary habits. (Keep slaves and conduct pogroms, he declares, but whatever you do, don't eat the meat of an animal that died from falling on its head. Meanwhile, ensure that you pay me tribute on a daily basis, lest I become extremely displeased.)

It is sycophancy the Koran's protagonist demands, not what Kant called "maturity". Instead of "Saper Aude!" he says, "Be frightened enough to submit!" Per the Koran, the most noble thing a person can do is cower in the face of their cosmic overlord while remaining wary of those who are outsiders. It's as if subservience were the natural state of a man, and divisive tribalism were the magical elixir that will make the world a better place.

What are those who "sign on" to this program thinking?

This effectively amounts to a textbook case of eleutherophobia (fear of freedom). The phobia operates under the auspices of a noble aspiration to become empowered. (It is how so many women in the Muslim world can be duped into covering their faces because "it's for their own good"...even though the Koran instructs them to do nothing of the sort.) Here, the thinking goes: "Well, we MUST submit to SOMETHING. Therefore, we may as well submit to THIS." ***

The ONLY alternatives for submission, the argument goes, are as follows: Whatever prevailing social norms happen to impinge upon us, an arbitrary human master, our own whims, or the protagonist of the Koran. Pick one. This false choice is as unscrupulous as it is self-serving, as it omits the other—and most obvious—option: no submission. (Ref. Spinoza, Kant, Paine, Nietzsche, et. al.)

Put another way, the perfidious ultimatum offered here proceeds from the premise: It is inevitable that we are all going to be slaves to SOMETHING; so we may as well opt to be slaves to THIS (a super-being representing every positive quality extrapolated to infinity) rather than to, well, anything else. This leads to a splendidly simple solution: Submission to said super-being is the only answer; and through submission we can be empowered. Thus one can be a coward while at the same time enjoying the illusion of empowerment. It's a sweetheart deal that's tough to turn down.

The stratagem of a scam like this is to persuade participants that surrendering to its demands is "for your own good" and the only viable alternative. "So get with the program...or you'll be sorry." Translation: KNOW YOUR PLACE...and do as your told.

The sales-pitch proceeds accordingly: "It's inevitable that we're going to be slaves to SOMETHING, so we may as well make it to the purportedly BEST thing." This theological scam is compelling. The upshot is a romanticized "abd-ullah": enslavement to the Abrahamic deity.

The credulous and insecure are easy targets for this semiotic swindle. After all, when someone feels cornered (and the stakes are so high), what other recourse might they consider than that of acquiescence to the prevailing narrative?

It should be noted that the misapprehension of construing subservience as a form of empowerment is commonplace in contexts other than religion. Indeed, we find this ruse operative in most systems based on top-down control—and, for that matter, characterized by systematic manipulation / exploitation. It is, after all, a (deviously) effective way of getting people to SURRENDER...and thank you for the pleasure of doing it.

Viewing subordination as some kind of emancipation is a dysfunction if there ever was one. The tragic psychic phenomenon could be accurately labeled, “Theological Stockholm Syndrome”. It is a diabolically brilliant way to persuade people that servility is the best way to have dignity; and that daring to think for oneself is a capital crime.

In reality, transcendence is realized by COMMUNING with the divine, not by “surrendering” to it—as if an inferior power to a conqueror hellbent on domination. It is not a master over us, it is a life-force that infuses us. Subservience only makes sense in an authoritarian context; not in a spiritual one. It demeans us; it does not uplift us. Servility doesn’t abet our connectedness to the divine; it attenuates it.

{* Another moniker for “Tezcatlipoca” was “Ilhuicahua Tlalticpaque”, meaning “possessor of the heavens and the earth”. }

{** We find that the “empowerment through subservience” meme is the rationalization often used by women who are brainwashed into believing that wearing a burka / niqab is somehow GOOD for them. Alas, the vulgar idea that one can garner dignity by being overtly demeaned is commonplace in cults of all stripes. Pace masochism, no mentally stable human—male or female—would freely choose to routinely cover his/her face. (Nowhere in the Koran does it actually direct women to garb themselves in such a preposterous manner.) In any case, the degree to which women in much of the Muslim world are subjected to this depraved practice is proportional to the degree to which domestic abuse increases—an irony that is usually entirely lost on Islamic apologists. It is no wonder that in the more theocratic regions of the world, incidence of harassment, rape, and abuse SKYROCKET (whilst reporting of such things is heavily discouraged), regardless of the brand of theocracy. The doctrine of “veiling” thus has the exact opposite effect of the one used to rationalize it. (It’s like mandating cigarette smoking in order to mitigate lung cancer.) One would think that an omniscient super-being would have foreseen this. }

{*** How else to persuade women that covering their faces is “for their own good”? It’s the same way tens of millions of otherwise sensible people can be persuaded that they must engage in a highly-choreographed “salat” five times each day in order to curry favor with a cosmic overlord. Keeping a vengeful deity placated is evidently what life is all about. }