

**Authentic Religion**  
**What We Devote Our Lives To**  
**By**  
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If you didn't have time to read the book, maybe you watched the 1956 Charlton Heston movie, *The Ten Commandments*, only to discover it's even longer than the book. If you managed to get very far into either, you're probably familiar with the story of the golden calf. The movie depicts hordes of people dancing wildly around the alter of a statue they're about to make a human sacrifice to, but Moses arrives in the nick-of-time with the newly minted Ten Commandments in his hands, warning them against idolatry, demanding they repent.

According to the book, Moses has been away in the mountains long enough that the Hebrews decide they should probably continue without him. So they melt all the gold earrings they can muster and fashion an idol to carry before them leading the way. Meanwhile, up on the mountain, Burning Bush is so angry by this that he wants to wipe them all out. "I have seen these people, and they are a stiff-necked people," Burning Bush says, "Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them."<sup>1</sup> Moses talks Burning Bush out of killing everyone, only to go down to them himself and find them dancing and singing to their new idol. If you were around in the 1950's, it was kind of like the reaction of your parents coming home to find you singing and dancing to Elvis Presley. Moses smashes his tablets to the ground and starts yelling at everyone. For those who weren't around in the 1950s, I'm talking about stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments, not an iPad.

It's actually much worse than this because Moses then orders those who've repented to start killing those who haven't. "Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other," he says, "each killing his brother and friend and neighbor,"<sup>2</sup> resulting in the massacre of about 3,000 people. Afterward, Moses tells those responsible for this genocide, "You have been set apart to the LORD today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day."<sup>3</sup> Burning Bush is satisfied with the outcome for the time being but warns he's still going to punish all of them someday when they least expect it. For now, he instructs them to continue their journey to the land flowing with milk and honey, but says, "I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way."<sup>4</sup> Those who survived the onslaught are grieved to hear this, but, for a 3<sup>rd</sup> time, Burning Bush tells them, "You are a stiff-necked people. If I were to go with you even for a moment, I might destroy you."<sup>5</sup>

I can appreciate the prohibition against idolatry, if, by *idolatry*, we mean worshipping the things we make up, treating our false ideas and lies as if they are real and true. If, by idolatry,

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 32:9-10

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 32:27

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 32:29

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 33:3

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 33:5

we mean adults still playing ancient make-believe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, then I hate it too. If, by idolatry, we mean treating our delusions, neuroses, and psychoses as if they are real, avoiding and ignoring what really *is* real in the process, then I hate it too. If, by idolatry, we mean mistaking our own subjective experiences for objective truth, then I hate it too.

When I think about the tornadoes of fire devastating our planet this summer, raging through California, Colorado, Alberta, British Columbia, Chile, Spain, Portugal, Croatia, Italy, France, Greece, and even in Greenland due to an unprecedented heatwave there, leaving hundreds of people dead, thousands of homes lost, millions of acres destroyed, and billions of dollars in damage, and realize it's because of idolatry, because too many prefer their made up truths—its only a hoax, scientists disagree about what's causing it, it's cyclic and there's nothing we can do about—then I hate idolatry too. When, while trying to reduce the flow of fossil fuels through my own community by sponsoring a new law, the railroad industry publicly accuses me of having a “narrow minded political agenda,” even as I look outside and see another smoke-filled summer, then I hate idolatry too! When I see Climate Change deniers appointed to run the EPA, or pull out of international Climate agreements, or reduce automobile emissions standards, or give coal and oil companies huge tax breaks, all because of some made up fiction in the mind of a delusional leader, then I hate idolatry too. When I think, just during my own lifetime, of all the pain and suffering caused by the idolatry of my insane society, by its devotion to all the ideological idols it makes up, by its devotion to make believe, to make believe borders, make believe divisions, make believe enemies, make believe evils—evil nonwhites, evil immigrants, evil Muslims, evil gays and lesbians, evil environmentalists, evil journalists, evil liberals—all in the name of ancient superstitions or conspiracy theories invented on a whim—then I hate idolatry too.

Even so, as troubled as I am by all this, as enraged as it makes me feel, I am not a homicidal maniac, nor moved to engage in war or mass murder against anyone. On the contrary, when I read this story from the Hebrew scriptures, I fully understand what biologist Richard Dawkins means when he says, “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, if you look at the story closely, Burning Bush isn't angry over their idolatry, but because, as he repeatedly says, they are a “stiff necked” people. It's a term that means “stubborn,” originally referring to those oxen farmers had trouble getting to turn while plowing their fields. So, it's about control, not idolatry. Burning Bush and Moses are murderously enraged because they can't control others. They'd rather see them dead than let them live free.

I began by making a quip about parents in the 1950s not liking Elvis, but this really is akin to what we're talking about here, an authoritarian figure afraid of losing control over others, afraid of others finding their own way, of choosing their own direction and values, choosing a new way for themselves and society. So the authority resorts to typical punitive authoritarian behavior. There's a similar story in Greek mythology when Prometheus steals

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<sup>6</sup> Dawkins, Richard, *The God Delusion*, Houghton Mifflin Company, New York, NY, 2006.

fire from the gods and gives it to humanity so people can find their own way, light their own path, with no further need to remain in the dark, obeying the thunderous commands of the gods. Zeus is so enraged that he chains Prometheus to a rock where he's tormented for all eternity. The name Prometheus means, "Forethinker," and his fire represents the power to think ahead and find our own way, free from the shackles of authoritarians and their idolatrous ideas, free from the voices of ancient gods.

Like finding teenagers dancing to Elvis, Moses is upset when he finds the Hebrews dancing and singing before the idol they've chosen for themselves. It's not that he doesn't like music. At first, he's glad to hear it, mistaking it for battle music, believing his people must be celebrating the violent destruction of some enemy. But he soon realizes, "It's not the sound of victory, it's not the sound of defeat, it is the sound of singing that I hear."<sup>7</sup> No problem if you're celebrating a violent battle, but if you're just having a good time, that's another story. If you stand against your brothers and sisters, your neighbors and your children, then no problem, "You have been set apart and the Lord has blessed you," but if you follow the beat of your own drum, if you dance and sing, if you are free, then you should be destroyed.

And this, to me, is the problem with traditional religion, that it has been set up to make sure people continue doing the same thing our ancestors did without question, and are made to feel ashamed, punished, and demonized if we don't. If you don't subscribe to the old way, to that old time religion, then those who do think there's something morally wrong with you. In the old days they condemned us as *heretics*, a word that means, "to choose." Heretics were simply those who chose their own religion. Today they condemn us as *liberals*, which pretty much means the same thing, those who believe in freedom of choice. The first definition of *liberal* in Webster's Dictionary says, "one who is open-minded or not strict in the observance of orthodox, traditional, or established forms or ways." Dictionary.com says being liberal means "being favorable to progress and reform, as in political and religious affairs," and advocating for, "the freedom of the individual and governmental guarantees of individual rights and liberties."

Yet, just this week, Vitaliy Maksimov explained his resignation from the Central Committee, of the Spokane County Republicans, that is, not from the Communist Party—not yet anyway—for his role in welcoming a white nationalist speaker to town, claiming he was the target of a "witch hunt" and "label lynching," while seizing the opportunity to demonize liberals, saying, "They are truly ruthless sharks who are set on destroying the Republican Party."<sup>8</sup> It reminds me of a disturbing letter to the editor I read in a local paper while visiting St. George, Utah last February in which the writer blamed liberals for "cultural decay," and all the "debt, crime, and deviance" in the nation. He also said their "tentacles reach into every corner of our society," that "liberal rule might be fatal," then warned, "I will be keeping my guns to protect my family against anarchy."

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<sup>7</sup> Exodus 32:18

<sup>8</sup> Spokesman-Review, "GOP chair just one of three to quit after Allsup imbroglio," by Chad Sokol, Saturday, August 4, 2018, Northwest, p. 5.

As a liberal myself, as one who is open-minded and not a strict observer of orthodox, traditional, or established ways, and advocates for individual freedom, rights, and liberties, these sort of dehumanizing comments and attacks against liberals, which have been mainstream since the 1980s, are chilling. Whether they are widely broadcast on Fox News or written as letters in local newspapers, referring to liberals as “sharks,” or as dangerous creatures with “tentacles reaching” everywhere, and blaming them for all the evils in the world, is reminiscent of what went on in Nazi Germany prior to the concentration camps and gas chambers. The idea of freedom, of choosing our own beliefs, of following our own paths, of moving, dancing, and singing to the beat of our own drums causes those within the status quo to hate us with a ferocious rage and murderous instinct. There’s no problem so long as we too are beating the drums of war against our own “brother and friend and neighbor,” as the Scripture says, practicing violence, and segregation, and oppression—intoxicated by our own uniqueness as a superior, special, chosen people with a manifest destiny—but support freedom, choice, progress, and human rights, and we are demonized and raged against.

In his book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, based on lectures he gave way back in 1901, which is still considered the seminal work on the topic of religion, psychologist, philosopher, theologian, William James said something in his introduction, just a couple of sentences, that are easy to miss but remarkable in scope, and central to his understanding of what it means to be religious. At the very start of his 500-plus page manuscript, we find the almost unassuming statement, “I speak not now of your ordinary religious believer who follows the conventional observances of his country, whether it be Buddhist, Christian, or Mohammedan. His religion has been made for him by others, communicated to him by tradition, determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit.”<sup>9</sup> Here’s the remarkable part, he refers to all of these as, “second-hand religious life,” saying, “it would profit us little to study [them].”<sup>10</sup>

I remain amazed by this, that this masterpiece, still considered vital to our understanding of religion, dismisses all we usually define as religion at the very start of a 500 page conversation! If we’re going to talk about religion, James says, it would be a waste of time considering Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, or any other traditional religion. Rather, instead of these, he says, “Religion shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual [persons] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.*”<sup>11</sup> To whatever we may consider divine? Whatever? In closing the conversation about traditional notions of religion, James has suddenly opened us up to so much more.

He believed that Jesus, and Buddha, and Mohammed had genuine religious experiences because they were unique to them, but they could not be repeated by others through imitation. The religious experience, for any of us, he said, must be authentically our own. In this sense, the meaning of idolatry has somehow been flipped on its head. Instead of referring

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<sup>9</sup> James, William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, forward by Jacques Barzun, A Mentor Book, New American Library, New York, NY, 1958, p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> James, *ibid.*, p. 42.

to the objectification of our ideas, to treating the things we make up as real then forcing our false reality on everyone and everything else around us, instead of projection, idolatry has come to mean individual freedom, expression, and authenticity. This is why Moses was enraged to find his people dancing and singing before a god other than his own, and why heretics were burned, and why some parents were troubled by Elvis in the Fifties, and why liberals are so despised and demonized today. Burning Bush was angry because he couldn't control the "stiff-necked" Hebrews. Moses was enraged because he came down from his own mountaintop experience, only to learn they'd found their own way and didn't need his guidance anymore. They discovered their own fire and light, their own passion and path, and no longer needed tradition to guide them.

I wouldn't go as far as William James by completely dismissing traditional religions from the conversation. Many have had their own authentic experiences within the context of Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and so on. This may be why there are so many different branches among them, because one person has an authentic experience, it becomes a school of thought, then others try to imitate it, hoping to discover their own authentic religious experience through it. Yet I would agree, at some point, religion must be an authentic experience for it to be genuine. Those ancient ways and beliefs forced upon us through socialization and intimidation in the name of religion are the true idolatry. Genuine religion should be our own and come from us. Genuine religion is a liberal experience. It happens when we are free—free to dance, and sing, and choose our own path.

The philosopher Bertrand Russell once said, "A complete philosopher will have a conception of the ends to which life should be devoted, and will be in this sense religious."<sup>12</sup> If he's correct, that our religion is that which we devote our lives to, and, as James says, is not confined to those traditions we usually think of as religions, then religion can be just about anything we choose, it can be "whatever." If one goes to Mass on Sundays but spends more time playing golf than anything else, it's fair to say golf is one's true religion. If one claims to be a Christian but is devoted more to accumulating wealth, or becoming a success, or raising one's children, or enjoying the great outdoors, then anyone of these can be one's true religion.

It's as Jesus is reported to have said, "You will know them by their fruits." Religion isn't what we say. It's not what we've been taught to believe. It's what we devote ourselves to. It's the result of what we do. Some like to say ours is a Christian nation, but where's the fruit? Is it a nation that, like Jesus, truly cares for the poor, feeds the hungry, heals the sick, liberates the oppressed, welcomes strangers, and includes the outcast? If it's devoted more to violence, and oppression, and conformity, and greed, and war, then these are its true religion, no matter what it's called.

I often describe myself as an atheist who is deeply religious. In the traditional sense of religion this makes no sense, but in terms of what William James and Bertrand Russell mean by religion it makes perfect sense, it makes the only sense. I am deeply religious, not because I believe in God, but because I devote my life to something. In my case my "whatever" are my

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<sup>12</sup> Russell, Bertrand, *The Art of Philosophizing*, Philosophical Library, New York, NY, 1968, p. 34.

liberal values, my devotion to freedom and human rights for all people, and to protecting our environment so we can live with it in harmony and health, and to establishing a world in which everyone is loved, meaning we are all respected, included, happy, and are free to fully unfold. I'll just call it Toddism because it is my own authentic religion. Sure, I discovered it by exploring the truths others stumbled upon, but I made it mine, not because it was forced upon me, but in spite of all my culture and country tried to force upon me. It is not a religion that has been handed down to me, but a religion I reached for and had to grasp and grapple with on my own.

That's what religion is for me. It is authentic. It is individual. It is that which we devote our lives to, no matter what else we say we believe. That's how we know what one's religion really is, by the fruit that it bears. May your *ism* be a religion that bears freedom, and love, and justice, and peace, and happiness in our world.