**Fideism, Idolatry, and Autocracy: The Ascendancy of Blind-Faith Politics**

We can see that religion has so often been a troublemaker in political affairs, especially in its all-too-common connection to autocracy and anti-democratic movements. This is an attempt to explain that the troublemaking does not originate in religious faith itself, but in fideist faith, and perhaps in “fideist unfaith” as well.

Fideism is a term with which most of us are unfamiliar, and I suspect that the principal motivation for the unfamiliarity is itself fideist. It can be spoken of as a confessed religious teaching, in which form it has been clearly condemned by some religions, most notably by the First Vatican Council (1869-1870). My use of the term here is as a manner of worship, whether self-acknowledged or not. It can be expressed by the dictum:

Faith is opposed to reason; so much the worse for reason!

In other words, faith is to be upheld against all possible rational scrutiny, i.e., blind faith.

Interestingly, its contrary opposite, sometimes labelled “rationalism” – but only in this restricted context – and which can be expressed by the dictum:

Faith is opposed to reason; so much the worse for faith!

Interestingly this attitude can be seen to conspire with fideism in its common tenet: faith is opposed to reason, in various ways, and so perhaps deserves to be considered as a form of “blind unfaith”. This conspiracy most notably is directed against non-fideism, which can be expressed by the following dictum:

Faith is not opposed to reason; so much the better for both!

In other words, faith is to be held in full collaboration with reason.

It should be well understood that a non-fideist approach does not force faith assent; that, of course, would be fideist! So, for example, a non-fideist non-theist is someone who simply does not accept that God exists, or that one should have faith, but simply does not assume that all such considerations are absurd.

It is hard to say how many operant fideists there are, but the political results prove there are many. Given the human penchant for contradiction, we may have to speak of fideism at least in some cases as a quality exemplified more or less.

Idolatry is the promoting and maintaining of some value as above or exempt from all possible rational scrutiny, such that no bad news about it can diminish its status, while no value competing with it can ever make gains but can only lose status with respect to it.

Another word for idolatry is blind faith, or fideism. But it is not as if we can simply go through the list of religions and say which is fideist and which is not. It is, rather the case that all of us must decide in our own minds how we will worship – blindly or not? - if we choose to worship, and how we will decline to worship – blindly or not? - if we choose to decline.

Although some may dismiss all faith as blind, it is clear that Abrahamic teaching from both the Tanach (the Old Testament) and the New Testament warn against idolatry as the main form of moral corruption we can ever face.

In Exodus it is made clear that God does not want to be worshipped by us in this way. If we do, we are turning God into just another idol. Chapter 32 of Exodus depicts the impatience of the Israelites waiting for Moses to come down from the mountain, who in their lust for relief from their anxieties press upon Aaron, the second in religious command, to give them some physical item on which to focus their religious attention. In response, Aaron collects all the gold he can and melts it down into the form of a calf, which they proceeded to worship as the God that brought them up out of Egypt. Although this description was in fact true of the God of Moses, the act was held against them and they were punished severely, for in their rashness they had turned aside from the way of truth that had been pointed out to them, to the point where they were out of control. It is noteworthy that Aaron himself, whom his people had bullied into making the calf, was not punished, since he had not participated in the worship. This is early evidence that idolatry is defined not by the object but by the manner of worship. Even the true God worshipped as an idol is a form of idolatry. Note also that the worshippers of the idol had gone into a frenzy and could no longer be controlled; they were out of touch with reality. This was the evidence of their idolatry by which it was easy to select them out from the rest, for not all participated in the idolatry.

The way, of course, that God had indicated to his people, was given in the name he had instructed Moses by which to refer to him: I Am; i.e., existence and truth itself, the turning of which into an idol should be thought as the worst form of idolatry of all.

This point about true vs. false worship as pertaining not only to the object chosen but the manner of worship itself is reiterated by Jesus in the New Testament at John 4:24 who urges that those who worship God must worship in truth, that is, with the aid of full rational scrutiny, for only then can we know or commune with God. Note that Jesus does not say: everyone must worship God, but simply that all those who worship God must worship God in truth, that is, in the fullness of rational scrutiny, which is the definition of good conscience.

No good can come from forcing people to worship if they do not feel ready to do so in good conscience. And remaining in good conscience is the only reliable way for us to knowledgably discover the truth.

Blind faith leaves our minds prone to enslavement by demagogues and cult leaders, causing divisions among us as our leaders, whom by our idolatry we have placed above the law and all accountability, lord it over us at our own expense.

Again, the message from the Tanakh and the New Testament is that God did not want his people to be led along by monarchs and despots but wants leaders who serve their people

and are accountable to them. I Samuel 8 reports that when Samuel had grown old, the people assembled at Ramah to complain that they were tired of the system of government by Judges that God had established; that they wanted a king to reign over them, so they could do great things. God accedes to their request only reluctantly, enjoying upon Samuel to make it clear that they were setting themselves up for exploitation without redress.

At Matthew, 20:25-28, Jesus returns to the issue: “Those who exercise authority among the Gentiles lord it over them; their great ones make their importance felt. It cannot be like that with you. Anyone among you who aspires to greatness must serve the rest, and whoever wants to rank first among you must serve the needs of all”. It is important to reflect on these passages because in the minds of many, Abrahamic religion has come to be conceived as all about kingdoms and kings, in a way many wrongheadedly take to be incompatible with democratic culture. But democratic culture is a culture of universal ownership. How, then can any culture be blessed that is not democratic? To be sure, it is technically possible for a king to cultivate a culture of universal ownership, but such a king would have to be incorruptible in order for the arrangement to make sense. The hallmark of incorruptibility in leadership is to be held accountable to one’s own people, as Jesus himself makes clear at John, 15:15: I do not speak of you as slaves, for a slave does not know what his master is about. Instead, I call you friends, since I have made know to you all that I have heard from my Father.”

There is only one way to be blessed on the earth, and that is by our whole-hearted cultivation and maintenance of democratic culture. For democratic culture leads to universal community, while its opposite, alienation, leads to division and the breakdown of community in all its forms.

Those of us who count ourselves as religious must make sure that we are worshipping in truth – in fact, truth itself – whatever it may be – should be the ultimate object of our faith. This is what defines non-fideist religion: that we worship in subjection to full rational scrutiny, in good conscience, and in a manner accountable to all, in ultimate subjugation to the truth, whatever it may be.

Here’s the kicker: those of us who do not count ourselves as religious must do largely the same thing as prescribed above: worship the truth, whatever it may be, in subjection to full rational scrutiny, in good conscience, and in a manner accountable to all. For idolatry also has an equally pernicious non-theistic form, which is blind unbelief. This form of idolatry just as easily will set us up to be manipulated and exploited by demagogues who set themselves up as false idols at our own expense. For the choice of blind unfaith, just as the choice of blind faith, inures us to promoting and maintaining a value exempt from all possible rational scrutiny. Once we do this, we become slaves and are no longer free, since in holding any value beyond all possible rational scrutiny - – something that if God exists God surely does *not* want us to do with him – is a case of locking the prison door and throwing away the key.