



Faust and the new idolaters: Reflections on shirk

Shabbir Akhtar

To cite this article: Shabbir Akhtar (1990) Faust and the new idolaters: Reflections on shirk, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 1:2, 252-260

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09596419008720938>



Published online: 18 Apr 2007.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 19



View related articles [↗](#)

FAUST AND THE NEW IDOLATERS: REFLECTIONS ON SHIRK

By SHABBIR AKHTAR

We are accustomed to hearing that modern secularized humanity rejects the sovereignty of God in favour of inferior, purely human powers and realities. Yet this new idolatory (*shirk*) is typically unintentional. It is not identical in character to the intentional idolatry of a Faust who consciously repudiates God for the sake of a purely natural or human ideal. There are minimal conditions for (successfully) committing the sin of idolatry; and the central one is potentially conscious belief in the true divinity. Can one meaningfully accuse the modern rejector of idolatry, given that he rejects the very outlook presupposed by the accusation?

The charge that modern man is idolatrous is one that is frequently made by Muslim and Christian writers.¹ That it is made by Muslims is unsurprising; that it is also made by Christian writers touched by modernity is *prima facie* rather odd.² For surely this accusation is rendered problematic by our currently failing attempt to rehabilitate the transcendent categories of reflection into the fabric of a modern intellectual culture that is self-consciously naturalistic in its dominant assumptions. At any rate, as I shall now show, the accusation of idolatry cannot be *straightforwardly* levelled against an increasingly secularized contemporary humanity.

Although the theme of idolatry is of common relevance to all of us within the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic religious complex, I shall here generally restrict my attention to the subject of idolatry in Islamic thought. What I say about it also applies, however, *mutatis mutandis* to Christian and Jewish concerns.

I

It is a characteristic feature of an irreligious age that it takes humanity more seriously than divinity: 'Glory be to man' is its motto. We can well imagine such an orthodox religious reaction to the crisis of modernity. There is a whole specifically religious vocabulary for expressing one's rejection of any excessive concern with the human world at the expense of the supernatural. The orthodox religionist will piously distance himself from the current obsession with man — the purely human rational heritage, the autonomy of the secular intellect, and the whole of the kudos that now attaches to enlightened man. Contemporary man's excessive respect for the human and the natural, it will be said, is the reason for his alienation from the divine. Modern man is an idolater: in making himself a god, he naturally cannot tolerate another.³

To be sure, it is said, our idolatry (*shirk*) in the contemporary mood is different from the ancient varieties: it is subtler. The modern pagan does not lose sight of Allāh's sovereignty in a whirl of false divinities carved out of wood and stone.⁴ Rather he loses it in the proud secular sense of his own self-sufficiency as a human being in possession of supremacy over Nature and destiny — without any help from Heaven. What are the mechanics of this new idolatry? Men, the apologists claim, can suppress but not destroy their knowledge of God. This, we are told, is evidenced by their desire to both reject God and yet to invent a substitute deity to take his place. In this way, men allow purely human realities to exhaust an allegiance properly owed to the divine ruler alone. Now, the void created by dethroning God is filled with a variety of realities, all human, the subtlety of the replacement varying considerably. "Wine, women, and song" (in Johann Strauss' memorable title) are enough to ruin the majority of mankind. For others — notably the Sufis and mystics in other religious traditions — it is the egocentric predicament that is the ultimate locus of inveterate idolatry; the idolatry of the self-centred sinner persists as long as God is second in the queue. Between these extremes are all the varied deceptions of our condition: the perversity of a jingoism that can boast "My country, right or wrong, left or right", the desire for wealth and the privileges it brings in its train, the error of trusting in the deliverances of human reason and the efficacy of secular education and technique, the illusory and transient charms of a romantic love that culminates in the heavy burden of marriage and progeny, the misplaced trust in political power as providing panaceas for social ills, and finally, yet other temptations that plague the labours of the righteous will.⁵

Notwithstanding all this, however, the religionists conclude, the reality of God and the associated divine imprint on human nature cannot be removed. False absolutes can at best temporarily attempt to usurp it. But, at the end of the chapter, "God is greater" (*Allāhu akbar*), in the words of Islam's battle-cry.

II

Now, the term *shirk*, often translated idolatry for want of a better expression, means "to associate the true unique divinity — Allāh — with one or more false ones" thereby compromising Allāh's uniqueness. Strictly speaking, therefore, an idolater (*mushrik*) is an associationist, not a polytheist although typically he is both. But a person who believed in a plurality of false gods without also believing in the one genuine God would not, in Islam, be classed as an idolater. Thus, for example, it is controversial whether or not a modern Hindu polytheist is a *mushrik*. (Is the Arabian paganism condemned by the Qur'ān essentially equivalent to Hinduism?) To get over this fence, of course, we have the basic religious assumption that all men instinctively believe in Allāh, which implies that it is impossible to be human and yet believe solely in a plurality of false deities. At any rate, the Jews and Christians could sometimes uncontroversially be accused of idolatry. The Christians are taken to task for 'associating' Christ with Allāh — although Christians legitimately dispute this interpretation of their creed; the Jews are rarely accused of doctrinal errors — they are, like Muslims, strict monotheists — but one isolated passage (Q. 9:30) implies that they commit *shirk* in 'associating' Uzayr (Ezra) with Allāh.

The point to note here is that the Qur'ān is on safe ground in accusing certain groups of committing idolatry since the outlook and background that makes that charge a meaningful one is largely available: the Arab pagans knew about Allāh and the Jews and Christians were monotheists if, according to Islam, errant ones. Such presuppositions are not, in any uncontroversial fashion, available in the case of non-theistic faiths and, to take up our present concern, in the case of western atheistic humanism. I take it that in order to commit the sin or crime of *shirk*, a man must

consciously or otherwise believe in both the true God, at least in some moods, and also believe in one or more divinities that he, by religious persuasion, could be made to recognize as being, in a significant sense, illusory. This admittedly (and in fact appropriately) vague definition captures, I would argue, the original religious significance of the term. The question on our agenda is simple: Can one meaningfully accuse the modern rejector of idolatry (*shirk*), given that a necessary condition for committing this one “unforgivable sin” — as the Qur’ān has it (Q. 4:48) — is belief, no matter how casual or intermittent, in the existence of God?

In order to see clearly the issues here, consider the nature of the Qur’ānic world-view. The sacred scripture of Islam presupposes the existence of a realm of supernatural beings — with Allāh as the true divinity. Muhammad’s mission is to show his Meccan detractors that Allāh tolerates no partners in his divinity. Hence the iconoclastic refrain from cover to cover: “There is no god but God”. Presupposed by this claim is the fact, hardly in need of elaborate demonstration, that the original recipients of the message were, like many ancient peoples, pagans in the proper sense of the word. They were deeply religious in outlook and wished to placate and worship some supernatural (or at any rate super-human) being or beings. As it happens, according to the Islamic verdict, they made the wrong choice. The Qur’ān is concerned to alter their loyalties, indeed the priorities in the matter of allegiance: though there may be other gods, Allāh is at the top of the list, Allāh alone deserves human worship.

It is important to note that the pagan Arabs believed in the existence of Allāh; the Qur’ān does not invent the name “Allāh” but merely expatiates on the supreme beings’ utter uniqueness and majesty. The central concern of scripture is to advise men in detail against the dangers of entertaining an irreverent attitude towards the supernatural. The attempt to argue for the very existence of the supernatural world is seen as unnecessary. Thus, for example, the idolater — particularly in the role of magician — deliberately develops a profane relationship with the supernatural, manipulating the sacred for profane ends, and thereby earning the wrath of God. The prophetic figure, be it Moses or Muhammad, is shown as providing the model for a truly reverent relationship to the sacred forces.⁶

To demonstrate the existence of God, indeed the very coherence of such a concept, is today no superfluous task. To modern man, whether

rightly or wrongly, the very notion of a world populated with gods is foreign if not entirely suspect. His total outlook — which prescribes a specific course for his loyalties — differs from that of ancient man. How disheartening an irony that the first part of the Muslim creed is today very much accepted: “There is no god”. But its revolutionary continuation (“... but God”) would today presuppose not so much a dethronement of a few false divinities, as it did in the past, but rather an acceptance of a concept which conscious atheists have for at least a century been vehemently denouncing as empty.

Explicit and total atheism as the denial of the existence of all supernatural realities is a relatively recent phenomenon. The tradition of radical rejection was forged mainly in the West during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The whole notion of a supernatural realm populated with angels, gods, demons and so on, was declared a figment of the religious imagination. Now, to the extent that this new radical denial of the transcendent can be justified, the accusation of *shirk* becomes difficult to sustain. For surely, to accuse atheists of committing *shirk* when they consciously and proudly wish to place themselves outside the very parameters of religion requires an elaborate justification. At any rate, the religionist cannot, in this secular age, accuse rejectors of idolatry without due recognition of the fact that he is making assumptions characteristic of earlier, more religious, epochs.

There are, I believe, minimal conditions for (successfully) committing the sin of idolatry; and the central one is potentially conscious belief in the true divinity. It follows that there is something apparently odd about accusing someone of *shirk* when he refuses to believe that there is, or even could be, any supernatural reality such as God. An important presupposition is being rejected. Think here, for comparison, of how the totalitarian party, in George Orwell's political masterpiece *1984*, intends to remove the possibility of certain crimes being committed by eliminating the very outlook they presuppose. Thus, for example, the party hopes to prune language so that creatively variable associations and implications of fertile words are systematically removed; in this way, indulgence in private heretical thought is not so much made discoverable but rather, more radically, rendered impossible, deviations from orthodoxy are actually unthinkable: one cannot commit ‘thoughtcrime’ unless one can think. Is it even possible, then, to get back to our issue, for modern man can commit the sin of idolatry?

III

I have argued that, in the past, the unbeliever was really just a misbeliever who devoted himself to what he recognised, in many moods, to be unworthy of unconditional respect. At the same time, he ignored or devalued, whether wilfully or through *akrasia* (weakness of will) what he recognised, in some moods, to be worthy of allegiance. My contention is simply that the modern rejector cannot be taken uncritically to be in the same boat.

The Muslim apologist may retort that he can be said to be in the same boat: contemporary rejection is of the same vintage as ancient paganism. Men need, he may insist, ultimate ideals, whether secular or religious, to exhaust their allegiance. Man is by nature, he may continue, a worshipper; if he does not worship the truth, he will certainly worship falsehood. When irreligious ideas seek to usurp the *de jure* sovereignty of Allāh, they are the new gods that the creed condemns as illusory.

This line of reasoning is not unfamiliar. It has indeed long been a favourite motif of argumentative apologetics that the restless craving of human hearts and minds for one ideal or another is itself evidence of a universal basis for the desire for God. But this view is, particularly today, remarkably unconvincing. For one thing, not every ideal is 'religious' in the standard or normal sense of the term. Some ideals are explicitly and consciously irreligious or even areligious: they have purely mundane referents. Indeed the religious ideal itself presupposes the possibility of espousing irreligious, even anti-religious, ideals; if no ideal could be authentically irreligious, the contrast between the sacred and the profane — a contrast essential to religious faith — could neither be drawn nor, *a fortiori*, transcended. The idea, then, that any and every ultimate norm for human allegiance is essentially religious implies the impossibility or at least the trivialization of a contrast fundamental to the religious outlook. In view of these considerations, we should be cautioned against labelling as religious certain purely humanistic or purely naturalistic belief-systems (such as Marxist humanism). It is impressively plausible to argue that we should reserve the term 'religious' for describing ideals that have or presuppose a transcendent reference.

IV

We are not yet at the bottom of this pit. "Have you considered the case of the one who took his own fancy", asks Q. 45:23, "to be his god

(*ilāh*) ...?” The next verse offers a description of the pagan Arab conception of humanism: men live and die all within the parameters of this world and the ravages of time (*dahr*). We know from the evidence of the Qur’ān itself that the ideas of resurrection and eternal life were received with sincere disbelief and scorn by the pagan contemporaries of the Prophet (Q. 75:3ff). The religionist may not unreasonably wonder whether we have in all this something close enough to our modern paganism. Is it not possible to recruit the quoted qur’ānic passage in the service of a distinction between the intentional (or manifest) idolatry (*shirk jalī*), so dominant in the past, on the one hand, and the unintentional (or concealed) idolatry (*shirk khafī*), so dominant today, on the other.

The answer is, I would suggest, in the negative. Why? There are at least three reasons. Firstly, the passage could reasonably be interpreted to mean that men’s conception of the true divinity (Allāh) is fashioned in accordance with their own human, all too human fancy — not that human fancies are themselves elevated to the status of divinity. Secondly, even if we adopt the interpretation that human fancies become gods, we must recognize that such a reading is unusual and the resulting emphasis incidental. Thirdly, and most importantly, the idolatrous attitude implicit here amounts to an intentional (as opposed to accidental) preference for irreligion. We see this clearly when we note that *shirk* is often discussed in the larger context of Allāh’s oft-repeated warnings about Satan’s enmity to man and the dangers of befriending or seeking guidance from diabolic sources (Q. 36:60). This is an extremely significant point that must be in the forefront of our minds when discussing modern idolatry. The Qur’ān presupposes the existence not only of Allāh but also of Allāh’s supreme opponent, the Devil, who is an active agent in human history (Q. 12:5, 12:42, 18:63).

The third point needs explanation. This explanation is best given by citing an example from western Christian thought, although the lesson is for all theists. Goethe’s epic *Faust* records the legendary pact between Dr. Faust and Mephistopheles. Faust sells his soul to the Devil in exchange for knowledge, a bargain expressly condemned by Christ: “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and to lose his soul?”. This is a paradigmatic case of idolatry: an inferior reality is deliberately made to replace what one knows and admits to be superior. It is as though, to shift quickly to the Muslim outlook, a Muslim were to say expressly, “Allāh is not greater (*akbar*) than all else”, thereby openly defying the ubiquitous sentiment of Muslim piety expressed in the short formula “God is greater”

(*Allāhu akbar*). But such clear idolatry is a far cry indeed from the idolatry of the worldly or weak-willed man addicted to wine, women, and song. To enthrone a lesser reality on the pedestal of allegiance is not necessarily tantamount to a deliberate decision to dethrone a higher one. Most of us at the church or the mosque or the synagogue are not like Faust who, in the manner of a modern satanist,⁷ intentionally made an explicitly irreligious choice.⁸

V

I have argued that our modern alienation from God may well be different in character from the ancient alienation of the pagan. Idolatry is, in the first instance, a religious term; it is only by a massive, perhaps illegitimate, extension of meaning that we can appropriate it for purposes of accusation in the modern world. The whole notion of the misguided deification of the natural and human world — a notion presupposed by the religious concept of idolatry — needs to be re-assessed.

While we can no longer employ the concept of idolatry in its fully traditional role, we cannot and should not abandon it altogether. It is a powerful concept which is as central to the religious lexicon as, say, power is to the political one. Within Islam the centrality of the concept of *shirk* is entirely undeniable. The iconoclastic conscience feeds on it; the creed cannot be formulated without presupposing the integrity of this concept. The concern with *shirk* is at root an ideological concern *par excellence* (if 'ideological' be understood without its usual pejorative connotations); the creed of Islam is in effect a warning against placing a disproportionate trust in the efficacy of profane forces. To say, with emphasis and understanding, that "There is no god but God" is to impose an operative veto on oneself from attributing any ultimate reality or power to those ideals that enslave individuals and societies.

The re-interpretation and proper use of the concept of *shirk* are central, difficult and important tasks for Muslim writers. The importance of *shirk* is clear once we note that it is the only recognizable form of rejection in the qur'ānic world and, in consequence, provides the only substantial link with the modern debate on faith and unfaith, a debate that centrally involves that characteristically modern notion of speculative atheism. The task is delicate and difficult for we must formulate the notion of *shirk* in conscious awareness of the fact that the outlook it once presupposed is now largely unavailable. The notion of idolatry has lost its

original iconoclastic impulse and dwindled at best into a merely metaphorical usage. It remains to be seen whether or not we can preserve the essentially religious role of the concept of *shirk* as a tool of revolutionary accusation.⁹

NOTES

1. There are countless examples both from the Christian and from the Muslim camp. A prominent instance is Muhammad Iqbal in his *Khizr-e-Rah* (Lahore: Pan-Islamic Publications, 1965), translated into English by Abdur-Rahman Tariq and Aziz Ahmad Sheikh as *The Guide*. This short book is in the form of imaginary questions put to the unnamed personality of Q. 18:60–82, referred to simply as “one of our servants whom we had taught”, to whom Moses applies for apprenticeship in esoteric learning. Commenting on the chaos in the human world, this personality, identified as the wandering mystic Khizr by most commentators, attributes it to the implicit idolatry of our modern age.
2. I have in mind here not orthodox or neo-orthodox Christian writers (like Karl Barth or Reinhold Niebuhr) but rather secularized Christians and those concerned to come to terms with modernity. One of the discrepant weaknesses of so much writing by Christian writers immersed in the ethos of modernity is the lack of awareness of the fact that the accusation of idolatry cannot be made without great reservation in this increasingly secular age. Thus, to take just one example, Kenneth Cragg in his insightful *The Mind of the Qur’ān: Chapters in Reflection* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973) seems unaware of the need for this reservation.
3. Compare here Reinhold Niebuhr’s strikingly Islamic sentiment in the famous passage in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1949), vol. 1, 165–6: “... the reason which asks the question whether the God of religious faith is plausible has already implied a negative answer to the question because it has made itself God and naturally cannot tolerate another”.
4. It is worth noting, in this context, the sheer crudity and literalness of paganism during the age of revelation. Āzar, Abraham’s father sold idols made of wood and stone; part of the Meccans’ prosperity in pre-Islamic days derived from their guardianship of the central sanctuary housing many famous idols — a fact which partly explains incidentally the Qureish’s hostility to Muhammad’s iconoclasm.
5. Cf. Colossians 3:5 and Ephesians 5:5.
6. This must surely be the reason for the amazingly frequent discussion of the clash between Moses and the sorcerers (Q. 7:103–26, 10:75–81, 20:56–76, 26:10–51). Note particularly Moses’ condemnation of the behaviour of the magician-idolater al-Sāmirī (Q. 20:85–97), probably an Egyptian immigrant who had sought to mislead the Children of Israel.
7. I assume that the satanist in question believes in the existence of God — and of the Devil, presumably — but merely refuses to worship God.
8. Other paradigm cases of idolatry include the famously tragic case of the two lovers Layla and Majnūn — the Romeo and Juliet of the East — one of whom, in his passion, took his lover, in preference to Allāh, to be the referent of the Muslim prayer. See Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II scene ii, l. 100ff, where Juliet explicitly declares
 “Swear by thy gracious self
 Which is the god of my idolatry.”
9. Some of the ideas in this paper were originally presented in 1987 to an audience at the Selly Oak Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Birmingham, England.