

Idolatry

The dictionary defines idolatry as the worship of idols, or as excessive or blind adoration or devotion. Idols are defined as:

i-dol n.¹

1. an image or other material object representing a deity and worshiped as such.
2. (in the Bible) a deity other than God.
3. a person or thing regarded with blind admiration, adoration, or devotion.
4. a mere image or semblance of something, visible but without substance.
5. a false notion; fallacy.

In the Bible, just prior to forbidding idol worship, God says, “Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.” (*Exodus* 20:3) This refers to the practice of worshipping idols of entities other than God, which was common practice among ancient Semitic people. The example that arose in the Bible is that of the golden calf (probably an image of Baal, the deity worshipped by agricultural Canaanites) that the Israelites fashioned to worship in Moses’ absence. After His initial proclamation, God then spells out His law; “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven, [carved] image, or any likeness of any thing that is in the sky above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.... Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: *for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God....*” (*Exodus* 20:45). These words have fuelled zealous Christians to condemn anyone who uses images in any way at all within worship. Fundamental Christians are often opposed to the high degree of imagery within Catholicism and Orthodoxy, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses even reject the cross, and Jesus’ divinity. Although divided by the degree of imagery they accept within their own worship, Christianity has traditionally been united in its condemnation of directly worshipping a form of God, considering it to be intrinsically idolatry.

Muslim opposition to the worship of images is the legacy of Judeo-Christian practice, which Muhammad traced back to Abraham. The Arab tribes of the pre-Islamic era worshiped many gods; among the objects of their worship were stones, trees, and statuettes. After the seizure of Mecca in 630, Muhammad had all the idols of the Kaaba² destroyed in his presence. The Koran contains many prohibitions against idols and idolatry

Modern theologians have mainly followed in the line of thought of Aristotle and Plato who both located the divine (that which is unchanging and undecaying) within the mental realm. Aristotle conceived of God as detached, disincarnate intellect, while Plato thought of the supreme as pure abstract intelligible essence. Western religious thought has continued this tendency to conceive of the spiritual in mind-oriented terms. In an address to Unitarian ministers, William James set out what he considered the “essential features” of the idea of God. One of the features was that God “must be conceived of as a mental personality.”

Someone educated in these traditions is likely to see the image of God as found within a Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava temple – formed as it is like a human being and even clothed and

¹ Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary, V 3.0, 1999 Random House Inc.

² Ka-‘ba, n.

1. A small, cubical building in the courtyard of the Great Mosque at Mecca containing a sacred black stone: regarded by Muslims as the House of God and the objective of their pilgrimages.
2. One of several replicas of this building, sacred to pre-Islamic Arabs.

decorated with flowers and jewels – as the product of an blasphemous or unsophisticated mentality, as the object of a primitive form of worship by a people whose development of a properly spiritual idea of God was somehow arrested or retarded and who have no due regard for the divine transcendence. William Crooke, for example, writing for Hastings's Encyclopaedia on "The future of idolatry" in India, credits Christianity and Islam for having "done much to suggest purer conceptions of Godhead" to Hindus

Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas consider deity worship an important aspect of devotional service. The great Vaiṣṇava teacher Rūpa Gosvāmī has enumerated sixty-four activities by which a devotee in the beginning stage of devotional service can engage all his senses in the service of the Lord. Among these he has selected five as principal:

1. Hearing Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam.
2. Association with advanced devotees.
3. Living in a sacred place, such as Mathurā.
4. Chanting the holy name of the Lord.
5. Serving the Deity form of the Lord with great faith.

Practicing these items assures rapid advancement in devotional service, culminating in pure love for Kṛṣṇa.

The power of these five principles is very wonderful and difficult to reconcile. Even without faith in them, a person who is offenseless can experience dormant love of Kṛṣṇa simply by being a little connected with them.

(Caitanya-caritāmṛta, Madhya-līlā 22.133, quoting Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu)

Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas consider the form of Kṛṣṇa (or one of His incarnations) that they worship to be God Himself. We shall explore this concept in more depth in the next lesson.

ACTIVITY

Do you see the Judeo-Christian and Islamic opposition to idol worship to be reconcilable with the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava insistence on the importance of deity worship (explain your answer)?

Read through the following excerpt, and note down the main arguments given to support the idea that Allah has a form.

Saying that Allah has spiritual form is as good as saying that Allah is formless, because Allah has nothing to do with forms of this temporary illusory world. That Allah is formless means that He has no form which resembles the temporary forms of this world subjected to birth, disease, old age and death. Since Allah is eternal, unlimited, has neither beginning nor end, was never born and is deathless, how can He have a material form? Therefore Allah has a spiritual form which is perfect, unmanifest, unseen and inconceivable. The understanding that Allah has a spiritual form is a better understanding. Considering Allah formless is, to say the least, an inferior thought. Since the statement that Allah has no form deprives Him of something which even the lower creatures have, such a statement is offensive. Therefore the most perfect understanding is that Allah has a form which is absolutely spiritual and has little to do with any material form whatsoever.

(From *The Hidden Treasure of Al-Qur'an*, by Doctor Jabir Akif Manaf)

How convinced were you by these arguments?

Read through the following excerpt, and note down the main arguments given to support the idea that Christianity prohibits idol worship, but the worship of an actual form of God, is not prohibited. N.B. The article also gives evidence that deities worshipped within the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition fit within scriptural definitions as being authentic forms of God – we shall discuss the details of this authenticity in the next lesson.

In the Bible, God says, “Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.” (*Exodus* 20:3) This is the Lord's preface to His famous proscription of idol worship. And a significant preface it is. The implication is that the people of Israel were fashioning idols of entities other than God and worshipping those idols. The classic example is the golden calf. But there is no restriction on worshipping His image, only on making idols of “other gods.” The Supreme Lord says something similar in the *Bhagavad-gītā* (9.23): “Those who are devotees of other gods and who worship them with faith actually worship only Me, O son of Kunti, but they do so in a wrong way.”

Now let us continue with the biblical statement against idol worship. “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven, [carved] image, or any likeness of any thing that is in the sky above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.... Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: *for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God....*” (*Exodus* 20:45)

Taking into account the Lord's preface and the last sentence of this verse, we can only conclude that the Lord's restriction is against making an image of “a lesser god,” for “He is a jealous God.” We do ourselves an injustice when we take biblical verses out of context. The Lord evidently did not want the people of Israel to carve a form of some lesser god, which seemed to be their tendency (e.g., the golden calf). But the Lord never says, “Do not carve a form of Me.”

... the Bible clearly asserts that God has a form but only the most qualified will ever get to see it. “Ye have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His shape.... Not that any man hath seen the Father, *save he which is of God, he hath seen the Father*” (*John* 5:37, 6:46)

Ezekiel (1:26) describes God as having “the semblance of a human form.” In *Genesis*, chapters 18 and 19, God appeared before Abraham, the father of the nation of Israel. Here God appeared in a human like form, although the form is not elaborately described. In verse one of chapter eighteen, the Lord appeared to Abraham. In verse two, we are told that Abraham looked upon Him. In verse fourteen, while addressing Abraham the Lord said of Himself, “Is anything too hard for the Lord?”³

How convinced were you by these arguments?

Assuming that the form of God worshiped by the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas is authentic, does the evidence in the above articles provide grounds for reconciliation between these three traditions?

³ Excerpts from *Idol Worship and the Form of God* by Satyaraja Dasa, from *Back to Godhead* magazine, May 1 issue, 1994

Satyarāja Dāsa considers the mystics of various religions, do you agree with his conclusion (please give reasons)?

Although mystics of the Western religious traditions acknowledge that God does indeed have some spiritual form, even they are at a loss in describing just what that form is. The Jewish mystics, for instance, say that God, in His heavenly kingdom, complies with the commandments, wraps tfillin “around His arm,” and wears a prayer shawl. (*Rosh Hashanah* 17b, *Talmud*) They say that He even studies Torah three hours a day to set an example (*Aboda Zara* 3b, *Talmud*). Although most Jews are aware of these statements, they tend to make light of them or, once again, to relegate them to the realm of metaphor. But the *Shi'ur Komah* and other Cabbalistic literature develop these ideas further, clearly indicating that God does indeed have a transcendental bodily form.

Christians are certainly aware of God as a person. Jesus referred to God as *Abba*, Father, in a disarmingly personal way, so much so that the Jews of his time openly ridiculed him for it. The mystics of Islam also declare that the form of God exists, while orthodox Muslims, like members of other Occidental religions, deny it altogether. Still, one champion of orthodoxy, AlAshari (ninth century A.D.), declared in his creeds, “We confess that God has a countenance, without asking how... We confess that God has two hands, without asking why.”

So the mystics of all religious traditions acknowledge the form of God, albeit without detailed information.⁴

⁴ Excerpts from *Idol Worship and the Form of God* by Satyaraja Dasa, from *Back to Godhead* magazine, May 1 issue, 1994