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WORSHIP AND VENERATION¹

Brandon Warmke
Bowling Green State University

Craig Warmke
Northern Illinois University

1 INTRODUCTION

Various strands of religious thought distinguish *veneration* from *worship*. According to these traditions, believers ought to worship God alone. To worship anything else, they say, is idolatry. And yet many of these same believers also claim to venerate—but not worship—saints, angels, images, relics, tombs, and even each other.

But what is the difference? How could we distinguish the veneration of a saint from the worship of her? Consider the fact that believers often worship God by bowing or perhaps even laying prostrate. Believers also venerate by bowing before icons, statues, or holy persons. How does bowing before God constitute an act of *worship*? And how does bowing before an icon or tomb constitute an act of *veneration*? What differentiates them if they outwardly look the same?

These are not easy questions to answer. Tim Bayne and Yujin Nagasawa rightly note that “it seems to be extremely difficult to distinguish veneration from worship.” Indeed, they see “no satisfactory answer to this challenge” (2006: 302).² It should come as no surprise, then, that throughout history, many have argued that veneration collapses into worship and that those who venerate saints or icons are guilty of idolatry.

¹ For comments and discussion, thanks to an anonymous referee, the editors, and participants of both the 2019 Philosophy of Worship Workshop at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the 2021 Princeton University Philosophy and Religion Conference.

² Also see Smart (1972: 48).

On its face, bowing down to things like icons, tombs, or even saints violates a clear and unequivocal command in Deuteronomy forbidding such actions:

Therefore watch yourselves very carefully, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman, or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air, or like any creature that moves along the ground or any fish in the waters below. And when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars—all the heavenly array—do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshiping things the Lord your God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven. (4:15-19)

Because of such prohibitions, religious uses of objects like icons have been controversial, particularly in the history of the Christian church. Byzantine Emperor Leo III (717-741 AD) issued an edict in 730 forbidding the use of icons in the Christian church, claiming “the making of icons is a craft of idolatry: they must not be worshiped” (Sarris 2015). In the sixteenth-century, Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli criticized the religious use of images as well as the veneration of saints. In a 1525 letter, he wrote that

The controversy is not about images which do not offend the faith and the honor of God, but about idols to which divine honors are paid. Where there is no danger of idolatry, the images may remain; but idols should not be tolerated.³

The ongoing worry has been that certain religious practices involving icons and saints lead to idolatry. In response, defenders of these practices have claimed that they do not *worship* these objects. Rather, they *venerate* them, and veneration is not necessarily worship.

A primary reason to distinguish veneration from worship is to answer the threat of idolatry. If veneration cannot be distinguished from worship, then many sincere religious believers may, unbeknownst to themselves, worship an icon or statue, even if they believe they merely “venerate” it. And worshiping an icon or statue, would, according to many traditions, count as idolatry. Unless we can distinguish veneration from worship, believers who “venerate” icons and statues cannot be confident they are not idolaters. Imagine being a faithful Roman Catholic or Orthodox Christian believer, one familiar both with the Iconoclast controversy and the general Protestant unease with veneration (more on these below), and finding yourself bowing down to an icon or statue, full of attitudes of admiration, awe,

³ In Schaff (1910: 59). Available at <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/hcc8/hcc8.iv.iii.x.html>.

gratitude, and so on. You might begin to wonder whether you are no better than the idolaters of the Old Testament.

We accept Bayne and Nagasawa's challenge and offer a way to distinguish veneration and worship. We begin by clarifying the puzzle and introducing some preliminaries.

2 THE PUZZLE AND PRELIMINARIES

Many religious traditions identify idolatry with the worship of anything other than one or more favored divine beings. Some of these same traditions also encourage followers to venerate non-divine persons, places, or things. In these traditions, followers conceive of their veneration of the non-divine as non-idolatrous.

In both outward behavior and inward experience, veneration and worship share much in common. Orthodox Christians, for example, look the same "from the outside" whether they bow down in worship of Christ or in veneration of the Virgin Mary. And whether Orthodox Christians bow down in worship or veneration, they may have similar thoughts, desires, attitudes, and feelings. Purported instances of veneration and worship share so much in common, it isn't clear whether veneration and worship differ at all.

One could distinguish worship from veneration by giving an account of each and then show how one can venerate something without worshiping it. But these accounts must capture more than just the differences between veneration and worship. They must also capture the similarities. The challenge, then, is to provide accounts of worship and veneration that capture the possibility of non-idolatrous worship, on the one hand, and explain their behavioral, affective, or cognitive similarities, on the other.

Before we assess possible solutions, we discuss some preliminaries. First, we limit our focus to *acts* of veneration and worship. So we will concentrate on accounts of worship and veneration which specify when something is an act of one or the other. In doing so, we will take a fairly wide view of what constitutes an act. Some acts are overt—they essentially involve moving one's body: raising one's hand, walking to the library, bowing before an icon. Other acts are mental, such as deciding where to eat dinner, solving a Sudoku puzzle, and praying.

Second, we limit our discussion to what we will call *personal veneration*—the veneration of persons. Now, many are said to venerate non-persons such as icons, statues, tombs, relics, and so on. Some may intend to venerate such an object without also intending to venerate any person who bears a close relationship to it.

One might, for example, kiss an icon merely because one believes it has miraculous healing powers. We will set this sort of *objectual veneration* to the side.

Others might interact with an object for the purpose of venerating some person or persons who bear a close relationship to it. One might, for example, kiss an icon so as to venerate the saint depicted thereon. This isn't objectual veneration but *indirect personal veneration*. Indirect personal veneration contrasts with *direct personal veneration*, a venerative act whose object is a person without a medium of veneration like an icon or tomb. I might venerate a living saint, for example, by bowing down in front of her or kissing her hand. The veneration is direct and doesn't involve an object as a funnel or springboard to transfer the veneration to its intended target. Some might also claim to directly venerate the physically alive but physically distant, the spiritually alive but physically dead, or beings like angels who have neither enjoyed physical life nor suffered physical death.

We must stress that our discussion will focus on personal veneration without taking a stand on the more controversial issues surrounding indirect personal veneration. Indirect personal veneration inspired a distinct set of philosophical puzzles that arose during the so-called Iconoclast controversy in eight- and ninth-century Byzantium. Two such issues concern the claim that we can worship Christ by venerating icons which depict or circumscribe Him: (i) whether this use of icons is idolatrous and (ii) whether Christ could be depicted at all.⁴ The history of these controversies has been provided elsewhere, and they fall outside our primary concern.

In the next section, we explore three strategies for differentiating worship and direct personal veneration (henceforth, just 'veneration'). While each strategy has something going for it, we argue that none is promising. We then turn to provide our own proposal. We develop our account in two stages. First, we give a formal account of the difference between veneration and worship. This account draws heavily from the writing of the eighth-century theologian, St. John Damascene. Second, we give substantive accounts of both veneration and worship, drawing attention to both their differences and similarities.

⁴ The first issue concerns whether an icon can serve successfully as an intermediary. If, in venerating Christ's icon, He receives all and only what an icon receives, then either Christ receives veneration but not worship (which is insufficient) or else both the icon and Christ receive worship (which is idolatrous). See Wolterstorff, N. (2015b). The second issue builds on the traditional teaching that since the divine nature has no shape or size, no image can legitimately represent or circumscribe it. Given that Christ has both a human nature, which is circumscribable, and a divine nature, which is not, how can an icon circumscribe Christ, the God-man, when one of His natures resists circumscription? See Tollefsen (2018).

3 DIFFERENT OBJECTS

One strategy for distinguishing veneration and worship points to their different *objects*. The thought goes something like this. Yes, from an outside observer's perspective, veneration and worship may look identical. Bowing, for example, can serve as a vehicle either for an act of worship or an act of veneration. However, the way to distinguish these action types is by reference to their object—i.e., by the different targets of worship or veneration. A certain act of bowing counts as worship when the bowing is done to or before God. Another act of bowing counts as veneration when the bowing is done to or before non-divine persons. Call this the object strategy.

However, we cannot distinguish veneration from worship so simply. There are two serious problems. First, the object strategy makes idolatrous worship impossible. The view locates the difference between worship and veneration in their respective objects and claims that one cannot worship anything other than the divine. But we can presumably worship non-divine persons (e.g. kings, angels) and non-divine objects (e.g. the sun). We can also presumably worship non-existent persons (e.g. Thor) or non-existent objects (e.g. unicorns). And, arguably, many people do worship something non-existent. (If no God or gods exist, has no one ever worshiped?) Although it's perhaps psychologically impossible for you to worship something whose existence you deny, you could quite easily worship something that you suppose exists but, in fact, does not. But the object strategy renders this impossible.

Second, the object strategy makes veneration of the divine impossible. Suppose you bow down before someone you consider very holy but whose divinity you've failed to grasp. Arguably, you haven't bowed in worship. If we take the Gospel stories at face value, Jesus's disciples would appear to have been similarly situated throughout much of Jesus's ministry. Because the disciples did not yet conceive of Jesus as the divine Logos, it would be strange to claim that they worshiped Him anyway.

4 DIFFERENT KINDS OF MENTAL STATE

Since acts of worship and veneration may appear the same "from the outside," perhaps they differ "on the inside" in virtue of some different kind of mental state. In this section, we explore the possibility that worship and veneration are distinguished by a general of kind of intention, attitude, or feeling.

4.1 *Different kind of intention*

Although we cannot distinguish veneration and worship solely by their objects, it might be that we can distinguish them by their *intended* objects. Suppose acts of worship involve the intention to direct the relevant act towards a being thought to be divine whereas acts of veneration involve the intention to direct the relevant act towards a being thought to be non-divine. Can we distinguish veneration from worship in this way?

Not if we construe divine beings as beings we worship and non-divine beings as those we venerate. Otherwise, an act of worship would involve the intention to direct the act towards a being thought to be worshiped, and an act of veneration would involve the intention to direct the act towards a being thought to be venerated. Thinking that something is worshiped may differ from thinking that something is venerated. But the current suggestion doesn't explain why they might differ. The suggestion simply re-locates a putative distinction between worship and veneration without specifying a difference.

Instead, suppose we construe divinity and non-divinity without recourse to whether we worship them or not. We might say, for example, that divine beings have a divine nature that non-divine beings lack. Then, perhaps each act of worship involves the intention to direct the act towards such a being whereas each act of veneration lacks this intention and instead involves the intention to direct the relevant act towards a non-divine being.

However, this proposal faces a serious challenge. Some ancient religious traditions were not quite monotheistic but instead practiced a form of *monolatry*, the worship of one god among many. Given such a religious cosmology, one might plausibly venerate a god without worshiping it. Suppose I worship Hedon alone but bow down in veneration to Thalassa before my treacherous voyages across the Mediterranean. I treat her like I would an extremely powerful foreign queen by showing her profound respect and asking for protection on my journey through her jurisdiction. In such a case, and contrary to the current proposal, I direct my act toward someone I think of as a divine being but do so without worshiping her. If it is possible to venerate but not worship a being one believes to be divine, this proposal fails.

4.2 *Different kinds of attitude*

Could worship and veneration differ in some general kind of attitude instead? By "general attitude" we mean attitudes like love, gratitude, adoration, admiration, or fear, broadly construed. There are many ways this strategy might proceed, but we will only mention a couple.

One way to draw a sharp distinction between veneration and worship is to identify a general attitude that belongs to all instances of worship but no instances of veneration. But we doubt it's possible to pinpoint a general kind of attitude that belongs to worship and not veneration. Consider gratitude. We can be grateful to a wide range of people in a wide range of circumstances. One may bow down in gratitude for God's provision or for a saint's wisdom, faithfulness, or assistance. So gratitude is not an attitude reserved exclusively for worship.

What about repentance? For some Christians, the idea of repenting before anyone other than God may sound strange and idolatrous. But the very strands of historic Christianity that distinguish veneration from worship also carry a strong tradition of repenting before others. For Orthodox Christians, Great Lent begins with Forgiveness Vespers, a service which ends with each person bowing in repentance before every other person. The service itself is described as early as St. Sophronius's seventh-century *Vita* of Saint Mary of Egypt, who lived in the fourth-century. The *Vita*, which is read in full during the fifth week of Great Lent, also recounts how an invisible force repeatedly blocks Saint Mary from entering the Church of the Holy Sepulchre until Saint Mary sees an icon of the Virgin Mary and weeps in repentance before her. So it seems that the religious attitudes of gratitude and repentance do not distinguish veneration from worship, at least not in some of the very religious traditions that differentiate veneration from worship. It is also worth pointing out that in non-religious discussions of forgiveness, it is not at all uncommon to claim that repentance is an important part of interpersonal human forgiveness (see, e.g., Haber 1991, Griswold 2007). We suspect similar arguments could be given against many other candidate attitudes.

A second way to draw a distinction between veneration and worship is to identify a general attitude that belongs to all instances of veneration but no instances of worship. Yet again, it is not clear we can pinpoint an attitude type that belongs to all cases veneration but not worship. Awe, love, admiration, respect, obedience, and affection are natural candidates for veneration-involving attitudes. And yet they each also seem to fit perfectly with an act of worship as well. We tentatively conclude, then, that general attitude figures in all cases of veneration but no cases of worship, or vice versa.

4.3 Different kinds of feeling

Perhaps we can distinguish veneration from worship in virtue of their phenomenality. Does veneration or worship have a general kind of feel that would allow us to distinguish them from each other? We can approach this proposal in a fashion similar to the previous section.

First, we may ask: do all acts of worship share a general kind of feeling not possessed by any acts of veneration? We doubt it. Some worship with fear. Some worship with love without fear. Some worship in joy. Some worship through grief. If acts of worship don't involve a common feeling, then there's no feeling that all acts of worship share but all acts of veneration lack.

However, it might turn out that all acts of worship involve a very generic kind of phenomenality: perhaps some "low level" feeling of love or happiness, or of an awareness of a transcendent "other." But now we reply: Even if there were a "low level" feeling common to all acts of worship, why couldn't some acts of veneration involve that same feeling? Generic feelings of love or happiness could be felt during both worship and veneration. The same goes for a feeling of a transcendent other. We can be sad or fearful or full of wonder or awe whether we bow down in worship of God or in veneration of a saint. A phenomenality common to all cases of worship will be weak enough to appear among cases of veneration as well. If so, then no single phenomenality occurs in all cases of worship without also occurring in some venerative act.

Second, perhaps all acts of veneration possess a distinctive phenomenality not possessed by any act of worship. Here, we can't do much more than register our skepticism and issue a challenge to find such a feeling for those readers attracted to such a strategy. Here's our reasoning. It's plausible that veneration is "worship-lite," a grade of *something* below worship. If so, then we find it highly unlikely that there is some feeling common to all acts of veneration but present in *no* acts of worship. If worship, as it were, builds upon veneration, then we would be surprised if there were a feeling that met the requisite qualifications. We have not shown the suggestion fails, of course, but we nonetheless have good reason to continue searching for a way to distinguish veneration and worship.

5 DIFFERENT MAGNITUDES

Thus far, we've seen that acts of worship and veneration may share similar general kinds of attitudes, thoughts, and feelings. Indeed, it is perhaps for this reason that philosophers like Nagasawa and Bayne find it so difficult to distinguish veneration from worship. Distinguishing veneration and worship in these ways looks unpromising. So perhaps worship and veneration differ not because one involves a general kind of mental state that the other lacks, but because veneration involves a weaker (or perhaps stronger) version of a kind of general mental state that worship also involves. On this proposal, what distinguishes worship from veneration is the strength or intensity of some general attitude or feeling. The basic idea is that there is some kind of attitude or feeling that can be instantiated with varying "strengths,"

falling on a spectrum. Along that spectrum, we pass from 'weak enough for veneration' to 'strong enough for worship' (or vice versa).

To get a sense for this strategy, it will be helpful to think of the relevant mental state as coming in degrees with, say, a maximal value of 100 representing the upper bound of the state's strength and a minimal value of 1 representing the lower bound of the state's weakness. The degrees could track, for example, the intensity of some feeling, or confidence or credence one has in some belief being true, or perhaps the strength of a commitment. For present purposes we will leave the details unspecified. We recognize this frame is crude, but it should do.

We can make sense of the proposal that worship and veneration require different ranges of values along a spectrum in at least two different ways, depending on whether the distinction requires a sharp cut-off along the spectrum. We find neither option promising, but let us explain.

If we suppose worship and veneration have a sharp distinguishing cut-off, a few complications arise in how we represent that cut-off. We'll make a few simplifying assumptions. Let's suppose that the whole veneration-to-worship number line crudely uses integers between 1 and 100 to represent the strength of an attitude or feeling involved in acts of worship and veneration. Then, suppose the cut-off is at some point so that acts of worship require a value at that point or above and that acts of veneration require a value at any point below. These choices are stipulative, of course. But little hangs on opting for this arbitrary setup rather than some other.

The sharp cut-off strategy has two main variants. The first says that acts of worship require a maximal 100-level magnitude and acts of veneration require 99 or below. This first variant places the bar for worship too high to square with our ordinary notion of worship or with accounts of religious experience. To bring the point into relief, let's suppose that the relevant magnitudes concern the strength of one's love. Even if a maximal level of love makes sense, we don't think that worship requires such high levels of love. Various strands of religious faith teach that one can learn to love God more through rituals like almsgiving, fasting, and prayer. We've never heard someone say that religious believers aren't *really* worshippers because they've yet to achieve the kind of perfect love for which these practices aim.

If worship requires nothing less than maximal love, few if any ever worship, including those often regarded as exemplars of various faiths. Some, like St. Anthony, have described how they grew from fearing to loving God.⁵ Since, on the current suggestion, acts do not count as worship unless one has maximal love, St. Anthony would not count as having worshiped God until he achieved maximal

⁵ Ward (1975: 8).

love much later in life, if he ever did. Similar remarks would seem to hold if we made the point with other attitudes or feelings. We might be tired, weak, or disappointed with God, and fearful instead of full of love. If nothing short of some maximal level of feeling or attitude qualifies as worship, acts of worship happen much less regularly than we ordinarily believe.

The second variant of the sharp cut-off strategy places it at some value between 2 and 98, inclusive. This second option unsurprisingly generates a series of puzzles familiar from the literature on vagueness. Even if there were a sharp cut-off in grains of sand between heaps and non-heaps, we would have no access to what that cut-off would be. As a result, we wouldn't know whether some collections of grains were heaps or not. For most, if not all of us, this is of no practical concern. Worship, however, is a different matter. For if there were a sharp cut-off between worship and veneration along the spectrum that measures some attitude or feeling, we would have no access to what that cut-off would be.⁶ As a result, believers will often lack access to whether they themselves were engaged in worship or veneration. This is for two reasons.

One, if it is unclear to philosophers like Bayne and Nagasawa how to distinguish veneration and worship, we guess that most lay persons will not be able to identify—along some attitude spectrum—where the dividing line is either. Second, even if lay persons knew exactly where the dividing line is, they would, in many cases, not be able to tell, say, by introspection, on which side of the line they fell (“Is my love currently strong enough to count as worship? I can't tell! Is my love currently too strong such that I'm risking falling into idolatry? I can't tell!”) Believers would not know whether they were venerating or worshipping. The point is not that it should always be clear to us by introspection whether we are worshipping or not (we may not be able to tell for lots of reasons). Rather, the point is that this proposal makes it especially difficult to do. We think this is an undesirable result, given the wrongness of idolatry and its harms. Believers should generally be able to tell if they are worshipping.

If we reject the idea of a sharp cut-off and insist that a difference in magnitude of some attitude or feeling explains the difference between worship and veneration, we could try to argue that the difference is vague. Let's suppose that worship requires great love, veneration requires lesser love, and that the difference between these two levels of love is vague. Here, again, we run into problematic cases like St. Anthony. Like St. Anthony at the beginning of his spiritual path, many worship from fear or with less-than-great levels of love. The current suggestion implies that this isn't possible. For although the suggestion implies that the difference between

⁶ On vagueness and related matters, see Williamson (2002).

great and non-great levels of love is vague, St. Anthony and others seem to worship with clearly non-great levels of love.

Perhaps we could explain the vague difference between worship and veneration with some other attitude or feeling or intention. But vagueness is one of the thorniest issues in all of philosophy. And we doubt that an appeal to such a disputed notion could clarify something like the distinction between worship and veneration. What's more, the appeal to vagueness, like every suggestion we've encountered in the last few sections, implies that acts of worship and veneration are mutually exclusive. But there are good reasons to believe that someone can worship and venerate the same person at the same time. In the next section, we look at a way to distinguish veneration from worship which also implies that all acts of worship are also acts of veneration.

6 A FORMAL PROPOSAL

Our challenge is to distinguish veneration from worship. We have argued that three strategies for doing so—identifying a difference in object, difference in general kind of mental state, and difference in magnitude—leave much to be desired. Our objections to these strategies aren't dispositive. But they help clear the way for a more promising strategy. We develop our proposal in two stages. In this section, we develop the first stage, and argue for a formal distinction between veneration from worship. At the first stage of the proposal, however, we remain silent about the substance of the distinction. We do not say what veneration and worship *are*. Nor do we say what their difference consists in. At the second stage of the proposal we forward an account of veneration and worship. And in doing so, we explain—or at least speculate—what their difference consists in.

In developing our formal proposal, we recruit aid from St. John of Damascus (c. 675-749 AD). St. John (also referred to as John Damascene) was a Byzantine monk and priest. He was involved in the greatest theological controversy of his day within the Christian church: the Iconoclast controversy. Byzantine emperor Leo III banned the veneration and exhibition of religious images. In a series of three essays (each subsequent essay building on the previous), Saint John defended the religious use of such images. His essays played a significant role when the issue of icons was decided in their favor at the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 AD. Here, we are not primarily interested in St. John's theological defense on the veneration of icons. Rather, we are interested in what he has to say about veneration itself, and how it differs from worship. We ask for your patience as we draw attention to five passages from St. John's essays:⁷

⁷ All passages quoted from St. John of Damascus (2003).

- (A) “Abraham venerated the sons of Emmor, godless men suffering from ignorance of God, when we acquired the cave as a double inheritance for a tomb. Jacob venerated Esau his brother and Pharaoh. They venerated, they did not worship, Jesus, son of Nave and Daniel venerated the angel of God, but they did not worship. The veneration of worship is one thing, veneration in honor to those who excel on account of something is another.” [I.8]
- (B) “Material things, on their own, are not worthy of veneration, but if the one depicted is full of grace, then they become participants in grace, on the analogy of faith” ...” I venerate what I see, not as God, but as an honorable image of those worthy of honor.” [I.36]
- (C) “Veneration (bowing down) is a symbol of submission and honor. And we know different forms of this. The first is as a form of worship, which we offer to God, alone by nature worthy of veneration. Then there is the veneration offered, on account of God who is naturally venerated, to his friends and servants, as Jesus the son of Nave and Daniel venerated the angel; or to the places of God, as David said, ‘Let us venerate in the place, where his feet stood’; or to things sacred to Him, as Israel venerated the tabernacle and the temple in Jerusalem standing in a circle around it, and then from everywhere bowing in veneration towards it, as they still do now, or to those rulers who had been ordained by Him, as Jacob venerated Esau, made by God the elder-born brother, or Pharaoh, appointed by God his ruler, and his brothers venerated Joseph.” [I.14]
- (D) “Veneration accordingly is a sign of submission, that is of subordination and humility. The kinds of veneration are several.” [III. 27]
- (E) The first kind of veneration is worship “...which we offer to God, who is alone venerable by nature, and this itself has several forms.” [III. 28].
1. The first kind of worship is “of service” “as servants do their master” [III.28]
 2. The second kind of worship is “of wonder and desire, in accordance with which we venerate God because of his natural glory.” [III.29]
 3. The third kind of worship is “of thanksgiving for the good things that have befallen us...” [III.30]
 4. The fourth kind “springs from our neediness and hope in his kindness.” [III.31]
 5. The fifth is that of “repentance and confession.” [III.32]

To begin, we note something that John makes explicit in (A) and suggests in (B) and (C): one can venerate a person without worshiping that person.

We can also infer a few claims from passages (C) and (D). First, from (C) and (D) we learn that St. John thinks there are several forms or ways of venerating. Veneration is not all of a piece. Further, in (C) (and others besides), St. John claims that worship itself is a form of veneration. This is an interesting claim: that worshiping is one way of venerating. This entails an additional claim: that the same act can be an instance of both veneration and worship.

And finally, from passage (E) we see that there are different forms or ways of worshiping, as well.

To summarize, then, here are the five claims we've distilled from St. John on veneration and worship :

- (1) It is possible to venerate without worshiping.
- (2) There are several ways of venerating.
- (3) Worshiping is a specific way of venerating.
- (4) The same act can be an instance of veneration and worship.
- (5) There are several ways of worshiping.⁸

St. John's three treatises, in virtue of expressing claims (1)-(5), suggest a formal proposal for distinguishing veneration and worship:

Formal Proposal. Worship is a determinate of the determinable veneration.

Much like a genus and its species, a determinable property admits of more specific determinate properties. The determinable property of being a mammal, for example, admits the more specific ways of being a mammal, such as the property of being a dog and the property of being a cat. The properties of being a dog and being a cat are more specific ways of being a mammal at the level of biological species. And the property of being a dog is itself a determinable since it admits the more specific ways of being a dog at the level of breeds like being a pug and being a mastiff. At the level of dog breed, being a pug and being a mastiff are also determinates of being a mammal. So the properties at the level of dog breed and

⁸ St. John is not the only one to make these kinds of claims. We find some of them in St. Theodore the Studite's defense of icons. For example, in the First Refutation of the Iconoclasts, St. Theodore considers the objection that "veneration would turn out to be of many kinds. But there is only one kind of veneration and not many." St. Theodore disagrees: "Worship is unique, and belongs to God alone; but other kinds of veneration belong to others." The response strongly suggests, if not implies, (1) through (4). See St. Theodore the Studite (1981: 38).

the properties at the level of dog species are all determinates of the property of being a mammal, but at different levels of specification.⁹

Following Wilson (2017), some of the features that theorists commonly attribute to the determinable-determinate relation include:¹⁰

Increased Specificity. If *being an F* is a determinate of *being a G*, then *being an F* is a more specific way of being a G. The property of being a dog is a determinate of *being a mammal*. So *being a dog* is a more specific way of being a mammal.

Relative Determination. Except for maximally general determinables and maximally specific determinates, a property can be a determinable to some more specific properties and a determinate to some more general property. Although the property of being a dog is a determinate of being a mammal, it is a determinable of the property of being a boxer.

Requisite Determination. If a determinable admits a level of specification, nothing can exemplify the determinable without exemplifying some determinate at that level of specification. For example, *being blue* admits different shades of blue. So if something is blue, it must be a particular shade of blue.

Determinable Inheritance. Any object which exemplifies a determinate must simultaneously exemplify all the determinate's determinables. So if an object exemplifies the property of being navy blue at some time, it must simultaneously exemplify the determinables *being blue* and *being colored*.

Multiple Determinates. No determinable admits a lone determinate at any level of specification. Consider the determinables *being blue* and *being a dog*. There isn't just one shade of blue, and there isn't just one breed of dog.

These features jointly capture claims (1) through (5). We can therefore frame St. John's claims about worship and veneration in terms of a determinate/determinable relationship. Let's therefore think of veneration as a determinable of worship. Veneration therefore has determinates other than worship, via Multiple Determinates. This secures claim (2). Additionally, since anything which is an act of veneration is an act of some particular kind of veneration, from Requisite Determination, it also follows that it is possible that some acts of veneration are not acts of worship. This secures (1).

⁹ Searle (1959: 149).

¹⁰ Wilson (2017).

Given that veneration is a determinate of worship, worshiping is a specific way of venerating, via Increased Specificity. This secures (3). And by Determinable Inheritance, all acts of worship are acts of veneration. This implies (4). Since a property can be a determinate and a determinable at the same time relative to different levels of specification, by Relative Determination, worship can itself be a determinable. If so, then there are several ways of worshiping, by Multiple Determinates—this provides claim (5). Overall, worship and veneration behave formally in the ways St. John describes if worship is both a determinate of veneration and a determinable which admits of more specific ways of worshiping.

Inspired partly by St. John, our formal proposal says that worship is a determinate of the determinable of veneration.¹¹ This proposal has several virtues. First, it explains the apparent similarities we find between acts of veneration and acts of worship. The proposal has two resources for explaining this. The first: the very same act can be both an act of veneration and worship. As we've noted, the proposal implies, via Determinable Inheritance, that all acts of worship are acts of veneration. It is no wonder, then, why it seems difficult to distinguish them. Some acts are both. The second: since worship is just one way of venerating, there will be other ways of venerating that will be similar to worship in virtue of them both being ways to venerate. This follows from Multiple Determinates and Determinable Inheritance.

Second, our proposal justifies or explains several religious practices we find in various religious traditions. Since the proposal allows for acts of veneration that are not acts of worship, it captures the non-idolatrous veneration of non-divine beings. As a result, the proposal justifies the practice in many faiths of venerating persons other than God. The proposal also allows for more than one mode of veneration. Even if there is some core to all venerative acts, we doubt that every act of veneration takes the same form. And we do find that people claim to venerate in various ways: bowing, kissing, crossing themselves, etc. Finally, the proposal permits more than one mode of worship. Even if there is some core to all worshipful acts, we doubt that every act of worship takes the same form. And many claim to worship in various ways: by prayer, thanksgiving, almsgiving, and so on.

Third, the proposal distinguishes veneration from worship. If worship is a determinate of veneration, then worship is not identical to veneration. The

¹¹ St. John's *Dialectica* is a logic text with a careful discussion on the distinction between genus and species, a distinction closely related to the determinable-determinate distinction. It's not clear whether the genus-species and determinable-determinate distinctions are the same, or whether St. John would have thought so. But, given St. John's philosophical background, it is almost certain that he had the genus-species distinction in mind when, in the treatises on images, he says that one may worship in several ways and that worship itself is one of several kinds of veneration. See John of Damascus (1999:29-40, 50-54).

determinable-determinable relation is commonly and rightly thought to be irreflexive (no property is a determinate of itself). If no property is a determinate of itself, and worship is a determinate of veneration, then worship and veneration must differ. To worship is not *merely* to venerate. To worship something involves more.

Our formal proposal, then, attributes to worship and veneration the features we sought in accounts of worship and veneration. It helps explain their great similarities. But it can also help explain why they are different. Since the proposal implies that all acts of worship are also acts of veneration, it also explains why distinguishing veneration from worship has proven so difficult.

7 A SUBSTANTIVE PROPOSAL

Suppose that veneration is a determinable of worship. Minimally, we have shown that veneration and worship *can* be distinguished. But there are some limitations to a mere formal proposal.

First, the formal proposal is plausible to the extent that there are also plausible accounts of worship and veneration that are related as determinate and determinable. If all such accounts of worship and veneration are implausible, the implausibility spreads to our formal solution, too.

Second, suppose you think the formal proposal is attractive. The mere fact that veneration and worship can be so distinguished is an interesting philosophical and theological suggestion (we think). But it is not practically helpful. The believer wants to know what worship and veneration are in order to, among other things, do his best to worship that which is worthy of worship and venerate that which is worthy of veneration. Without an account of what it means to worship or venerate, their mere difference provides no practical spiritual guidance. In what follows, we suggest a way of thinking about the nature of worship and veneration such that they relate to one another as determinate and determinable.

Contemporary analytic philosophers have paid relatively little attention to the nature of worship, and even less attention to veneration. Regarding worship, instead of discussing its nature, they have instead tended to focus on the nature of our putative obligations to worship and on the qualities that would make something worthy of worship. When philosophers have discussed the nature of worship, they have offered a diverse set of characterizations. Here is a sample:

Nicholas Wolterstorff:

I suggest that worship of God is a particular mode of Godward acknowledgement of God's unsurpassable greatness. Specifically, it is that mode of such acknowledgment whose attitudinal stance toward God is awed, reverential, and grateful adoration. (2015a: 26)

Richard Swinburne:

[To worship is] to show respect towards a person acknowledged as de facto and de jure lord of all (1993: 298)

In the second edition of *The Coherence of Theism*, Swinburne puts matters slightly differently:

What is it then to worship a being with the kind of worship that theists offer to God? To offer worship of this kind to some being is surely to show the greatest possible explicit respect towards that being. (2016: 285)

Mark Wynn:

In worship the believer relates herself to the marvel of existence, by placing herself in wonder and adoration before the one in whom all existence is contained... On this view, worship is not fundamentally a matter of expressing subservience before a particular individual who is our benefactor (though this is not to say that such images have no place). It is rather a way of celebrating, in wonder and reverence, the very existence of things. (1999: 151)

Aaron Smuts:

To worship is, at least in part, to feel respect, gratitude, and love. It is, perhaps, best described as a complex of attitudes that includes intense reverence. One cannot worship that which one does not highly revere. Further, on most accounts, to worship is to venerate, to honour, and to love, perhaps unquestioningly – to feel unworthy in the presence of awe-inspiring greatness. Most plausibly, worship is a species of love. (2012: 222)

Jason Lepojarvi:

Worship is obedient love or loving obedience to God and his good will. (2015: 550)

We find several ways of characterizing worship, as “awed, reverential, and grateful adoration,” “the greatest possible explicit respect,” “placing oneself in wonder and adoration,” “intense reverence,” “Godward acknowledgement of God’s

unsurpassable greatness,” “loving obedience to God,” and “a species of love.” To worship is “to venerate, to honour, and to love,” and “to feel unworthy in the presence of awe-inspiring greatness.”

So far as we can tell, there is nothing obviously mistaken about any of these characterizations or accounts of worship. They’re plausible enough. But we are struck by the lack of specificity in this list. Many of these characterizations involve compound constructions, such as saying that worship is “awed, reverential, and grateful adoration,” or that to worship is “to venerate, to honor, and to love” or to “place oneself in wonder and adoration.” These are all quite general claims and many phenomena fall under their descriptions. Can we be more specific about what worship is?

In what follows, we will not offer a comprehensive account of the nature of either veneration or worship. Rather, we will propose an account of the core features of both veneration and worship and we will try to be as specific as possible.

In St. John’s Three Treatises, behind practically every instance of the English ‘worship’ is the Greek word ‘λατρεία’ (*latreia*) and its cognates. And behind practically every instance of the English ‘veneration’ is the Greek word ‘προσκύνησις’ (*proskunesis*) and its cognates. The distinction between *λατρεία* and *προσκύνησις* is a common one, not only in St. John, but in earlier Church Fathers and in the Septuagint (LXX), an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament undertaken by Jewish scholars. *λατρεία* signifies a form of service. Originally, and in classical usage, it signified hired service. In religious texts, such as the LXX, the service is specifically performed for God, or for some god(s) or other. *προσκύνησις*, on the other hand, signifies the act of showing respect, often in the specific sense of bowing down before someone or something.

These etymological considerations do not settle what worship and veneration are. But they suggest a way to narrow the range of accounts of veneration and worship consistent with our formal proposal. Our substantive proposal involves the notion of subordination, and subordination is closely related to the notions of service that *λατρεία* signifies. When we serve others we subordinate ourselves to them, even if temporarily. Our substantive proposal below draws from St. John’s remark in Treatise III that veneration is “a sign of subordination” (ἐστὶ σημεῖον ὑποπτώσεως).¹² We subordinate ourselves to others when, relative to them, we act in such a way that elevates their rank over our own, or perhaps simply recognizes their higher rank. But what are these “signs” of subordination with which we elevate (or recognize) another’s rank over our own?

¹² Our translation.

We propose that the “signs” of subordination are acts of devotion. In an act of devotion, one offers a heartfelt gift to another. We will take an appropriately broad view of heartfelt gifts but won't provide an analysis here. Many activities can constitute a heartfelt gift, from giving a sum of money, to bowing, to a verbal expression of gratitude—as long as one intends the gift sincerely to benefit the recipient and their relationship. With an act of devotion, we can position ourselves as subordinates under both divine and non-divine beings. We may do this with family members, those in higher stations, and others we hold in high esteem, whether we do so because of their achievements, virtue, power, or whatever.

Yet worship involves more than just subordinating oneself to another with an act of devotion. In line with the etymological meaning of *λατρεία* as service offered for a superior, we propose that worship involves a form of unqualified or absolute submission. We'll say more about this momentarily.

Here, then, are the substantive proposals for worship and veneration:

Substantive Proposal 1. One venerates an intentional object *O* when one subordinates oneself to *O* in an act of devotion.

Substantive Proposal 2. One worships an intentional object *O* when one subordinates oneself absolutely to *O* in an act of devotion.

Some clarificatory remarks may help us assess the proposals. First, some understand the notion of an intentional object as the mental intermediary between the thinker and the object that is thought about, if that object exists. This is not the notion we have in mind. Here, an intentional object is simply the object that is thought about, whether that object exists or not. Since Barack Obama exists, the intentional object of my thought about Barack Obama, is the man, Barack Obama, not any idea or abstract object that represents Barack Obama. Although thoughts about non-existents do complicate matters, we hope to remain neutral about how to handle discourse about non-existent objects. So, for example, we understand Santa Claus to be the intentional object of a thought about Santa Claus, but we remain neutral about whether Santa Claus, the thing our thought is about, is really an abstract object or idea that stands in for him. On this line of thought, when someone worships God, God is the intentional object of that worship whether God exists or not. As a result, if God exists and you worship Him, God is the intentional object of your worship. But the proposal permits that we can worship non-existent deities.

There are many ways one may subordinate oneself absolutely to another in an act of devotion. Each way involves expressing that the object to which we subordinate ourselves sits at the highest rank along some dimension. For example, we may

thank God for creating and sustaining the universe and, in so doing, worship Him. Why? Expressing gratitude is an act of devotion. And we expressed that gratitude to a Being we think of as responsible for all being whatsoever. Using this rubric, other acts we would ordinarily identify as worshipful also qualify as acts of worship:

- a. One may express one's awe of God as the most wondrous being.
- b. One may pray, fast, give alms, or suffer in some way to express one's desire to be with God above all else.
- c. One may confess and repent to God in such a way that we value our relationship with Him and His opinion above all others.
- d. One may submit to one of God's commands while conceiving of Him as the highest authority who commands unqualified obedience.

In each of these examples, one subordinates oneself absolutely to something in some act of devotion. So, according to the substantive proposal, these acts qualify as worship. And this seems intuitively right. We should also note that subordinating oneself absolutely does not require that we do so perfectly. So, for example, I may submit to one of God's commands, as in (d), but do so hesitantly or with an impure heart. So the proposal does not imply that worshipful acts require any kind of perfection, or even excellence, on the part of the worshiper.

This account of worship has a number of virtues. First, we think that some have worshiped beings that turn out not to exist. Our proposed account of worship can explain this because the object of worship, according to the account, is an intentional object. And an intentional object may not exist.

Second, the account doesn't require that some particular feeling or emotion constitutes or accompanies worship. People can worship without feeling fearful, or admiration, or love, or joy, or as one writer claimed above, feelings of "unworthiness."

Third, since the substantive proposal is consistent with the formal proposal, it inherits the virtues of the formal proposal. So the substantive proposal explains both why veneration and worship differ and why their similarity has made it to distinguish one from the other.

Fourth, and unlike the formal proposal, the substantive proposal can provide some practical spiritual guidance. For example, have we ever followed the suggestions, requests, or commands from someone and let them trump all others, even God? If so, we are likely guilty of idolatry. And we are guilty of idolatry when we give our unqualified obedience to our own passions or urges. Perhaps this is close to what St. Paul has in mind when he says that their "god is their belly" (Phil. 3:19). The belly issues a command, as it were, and we often follow at the drop of a hat.

A number of questions about our proposal remain. They include:

What role does convention or culture play in deciding whether an act is one of absolute subordination or subordination in general?

How do our substantive accounts square with the possibility of polytheism?

Do the substantive accounts explain whether or not Christ could worship other members of the Trinity?

Can equals venerate each other? Relatedly, can one worship oneself?

We lack the space to answer these questions here in a satisfying way. So we leave them for further research—or, for the skeptical, as fodder for critical replies.

8 CONCLUSION

Notice that our formal solution doesn't entail our substantive proposal. Indeed, you might think that our formal solution is correct, but also think that our substantive proposal is wide of the mark. However, we do think that our substantive proposal, if close to correct, provides strong evidence for our formal proposal. In other words, if our substantive proposal sounds right to you, that is some evidence that the correct way to distinguish veneration and worship is along the lines of the determinate/determinable relation. On the other hand, if our formal proposal seems right to you, but you aren't a fan of our substantive proposal, we are pleased to have provided a map for distinguishing veneration and worship. We welcome further attempts to clarify the nature of worship.

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