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The gods are stupid

By Spengler

A man came to the caliph claiming to be a prophet, goes a 9th-century joke. "By Allah, you are a stupid prophet!" exclaimed the caliph. "That," the prophet replied, "is why I was sent to people like you." That God might send a stupid prophet to a stupid people is one thing. But what if the prophet were sent by a stupid god? Stupid is, as Forrest Gump said, as stupid does, and what I mean specifically by stupid is not getting the joke.

To avoid confusion, I want to make clear that I do not believe in stupid gods, but only in the one and unique God of the Bible. That is only a personal opinion, though, and a commentator must be fair to the billions of people who do in fact believe in stupid gods.

Isaiah (44:16 et Seq) has a stand-up theology routine about this: Man chops wood, and "Half of it he burnt with fire, on half of it he ate meat, he roasted a roast and became sated; he even warmed

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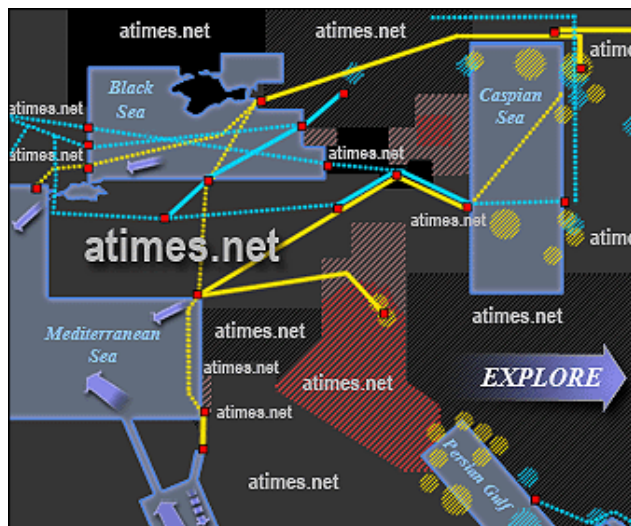
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himself and said, 'Aha, I am warm, I see fire.' And what is left over from it he made for a god, for his graven image; he kneels to it and prostrates himself and prays to it, and he says, 'Save me, for you are my god.'

Of course, we flatter ourselves that our idols are clever because they are not made out of wood, but silicon, for example, the universally worshiped god "Google", the new omniscient deity whose Mercury now is called "Gmail".

Google is a silly god, as borne out by the following true story. File this under "You can't make this stuff up:" A reader has sent me a transcript of an e-mail flirtation with a prospective paramour, in which cats - their stretching, purring, whimsicality, and so on - serve as the obvious sort of metaphor. After the exchange of several such messages, the god Google revealed himself to the amorous correspondents by sending them push-ads for cat food, cat-grooming products, cat enclosures, cat condos, cat acupuncture, pedigreed kittens, and so forth. The cat conversation, of course, was a joke, and Google did not get the joke. It is as if the Delphic Oracle had sent Oedipus a bunion remover, or commended aluminum siding to the Athenians before Salamis. Just like the Delphic Oracle, the great god Google has to make a living.

The god Google is not quite omniscient, but like Goethe's Mephistopheles, much is known to him, for example, the contents of an Internet flirtation on anonymous e-mail accounts. It is not that Google doesn't exist. We know perfectly well that he exists. The trouble is that he is stupid in precisely the way that the

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characters in the *Naked Gun* movies are stupid: everything is taken literally. Literal language is a failure, and that is why mankind communicates through metaphor. The Turing test for "strong" artificial intelligence asks us to have a conversation with a computer, and see whether we can distinguish its responses from those of a human interlocutor. Try telling jokes to a group including a computer, and see if the computer laughs at the right moment.

In fact, there is a small but persistent body of research that purports to teach jokes to computers. I suspect that the joke is in the effort, not the computers, however. A Russian physicist named Suslov recently published a monograph summarized as follows: "A computer model of a 'sense of humor' is proposed. The humorous effect is interpreted as a specific malfunction in the course of information processing due to the need for the rapid deletion of the false version transmitted into consciousness. The biological function of a sense of humor consists in speeding up the bringing of information into consciousness and in fuller use of the resources of the brain." In this case, Aristotle's self-referential problem, "is 'redness' red?" is a howling affirmative: analysis of computer humor is hilarious.

Although this paper is cited straight-faced by technical publications, I think it is a spoof and a hoax, for the jokes that Suslov wants his computer to get are stock jokes, but transcribed in his article in a stand-up comic's stage Russian accent. For example, Suslov quotes:

The marriage agent in the home of bride:

- *You can judge by these things, how rich are these people.*
- *But cannot they borrow these things to produce an impression?*
- *Oh, nuts! Who will trust even a thing to these people?*

That is one of a large list of canonical Jewish matchmaker jokes. The matchmaker tries to impress a prospective bridegroom with the value of the bride's family silver. "What if they borrowed it for the occasion?" the bridegroom asks. "Those thieves? No one would lend them so much as a teaspoon," the matchmaker replies. Think of Eddie Murphy made up in whiteface as an elderly Jew in the barbershop at the end of the film *Coming to America*, shouting, "Vat do you know from funny, you bastards?"

Intentionally (as I suspect) or not, the impression conveyed is of Jewish jokes told by a Russian who does not get them. All the

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less should we doubt that the Russian's computer will get the jokes. Nonetheless, I fell off my chair and rolled on the floor for a bit while reading his treatise. The fact that computers do not get jokes does not stop computer scientists from being hilarious.

The gods are stupid because we make them in our own silly image. We do this not because we are stupid - well, not necessarily - but because we are only capable of thinking of a God that has something in common with us; if God had nothing in common with us, how could we conceive of him? From that paradox comes the *via negativa*, the negative path of philosophy, in which we think of God as Wholly Other and restrict our attention to what God is not, rather than making the futile effort to ascertain what he is.

But the *via negativa*, for all its lofty provenance from great philosophers, has the terrible deficiency that we are not simply creatures of the mind, but also of flesh and blood: we have emotions, and we are mortal, and each day that takes us farther from the cradle and closer to the grave reminds of us our fragility. We cannot be content in our own skin, whose best-used-by-date is reached in late adolescence, and feel compelled to get out of it. That is called falling in love.

The stupidity of the gods is inconvenient as a purely intellectual matter, but falling in love with stupid gods takes us into another dimension of humiliation altogether. We love what we comprehend. "Lust was given to the worm, while the cherub stands before God," wrote Friedrich Schiller in a line emphasized by Beethoven in the finale of the 9th Symphony. Everyone loves; the only question is whom, and how.

Even the devil loves, according to his keenest observer, the great German poet J W Goethe. That is significant, for if the devil can fall in love, a *fortiori*, so can the rest of us. But the way in which the devil falls in love is hilarious. Lust for prepubescent angels paralyzes the devil in the penultimate scene of Goethe's *Faust*, as troops of angels and demons join battle over the soul of the just-deceased protagonist. For my money it is the funniest as well as the filthiest moment in the high literature of the West. A flight of cherubim arrives to claim Faust's soul, scattering flower-petals which burn the opposing devils like brimstone. Their chief Mephistopheles finds he cannot curse, and that he is overwhelmed with desire for the boy angels. "My head, my heart, my liver burn - a more-than-devilish element! That is why you moan so monstrously, you unhappy lovers, who spurned, twist their necks to stare at their beloved."

As lust overwhelms him, Mephistopheles remonstrates to one cherub, "You don't need to make a face like a priest, and in all decency you could get more naked - that long nightshirt you're wearing is an exaggeration. Oh, they're turning - just look at them from behind! - the little rogues are much too appetizing!" Love, Goethe shows, conquers all, but only according to the capacity of the conquered to love. Evil is the absence of good, and the will towards evil seeks to pervert the good. That is why the devil becomes a pathetic pedophile in response to divine beauty.

Goethe wants us to laugh at the perverse old devil whose hatred cuts him off from God, but who cannot help lusting after the cherubic exemplar of divine beauty. Isaiah wants us to laugh at the pagan who fashions an idol out of the wood left over from cooking his dinner. And if I may add my grain of sand in such august company, I want you to laugh at the god Google. It is much easier, though, to laugh at the wrong sort of love than to encounter the right sort.

We go looking for love in all the wrong places because it is terrifying to love the God of the Bible. Simply to evoke this fear is to put the fear God into us, as it were, and I found cold shivers shooting down my spine while reading the new English translation of a 20th-century classic of Hebrew literature, *From There You Shall Seek*, by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (Ktav Publishing: New York 2008).

Divine love, we flatter ourselves, is a comforting thing, a warm emanation of a beneficent presence in the universe. The Bible's lovely pastoral, the Song of Songs, teaches us divine love by a sort of *analogia amoris*, an analogy between the love between God and his congregation and the love of bridegroom and bride. That this love is interlaced with fear and withdrawal is the central theme of Soloveitchik's book. It is far beyond my competence to review it, although I recommend it - with trepidation. It is not hard to grasp even from a layman's reading why its author dominated the Modern Orthodox branch of Judaism for decades as the Rav of Yeshiva University in New York.

All of us in some sense are unhappy lovers, even God's congregation in pursuit of its union with God as in the Song of Songs, Soloveitchik argues.

The Song of Songs is not only an idyll but also a complaint, Soloveitchik observes. The bride and bridegroom cannot be united. Despite their love which is as strong as death, they hesitate or hide from each other at the crucial moment. A few excerpts from Rabbi Soloveitchik's summary:

"You are beautiful, my beloved, your eyes are doves," he sings (Song of Songs 1:15), hidden among the ancient, glorious hills. He sees her, but cannot be seen. He is very, very close to her, but also immeasurably distant ... their love cannot be realized, their yearning cannot be fulfilled completely. But why? Why must he flee from her at the moment that she pursues him? Why does he not look and see that she is made with longing and yearning? ...

"Where has my beloved gone?" Her entire self pleads, "If you meet my beloved, tell him this: that I am faint with love" (Song 5:8). She sobs in her agony, loneliness and suffering. Suddenly her lover appears from the obscurity of the dark night, knocking on his dear one's door ... Nevertheless the beloved refuses to rise from her bed and open the door to her lover (Song 5:3) ... Yet, after a moment the beloved leaps off her bed, her hands dripping myrrh on the handles of the bolt. She opens her abode to her lover The door opens - but the lover is not there. "I rose to let in my beloved But my beloved had turned and gone! (Song 5:5-6).

Soloveitchik's commentary on the Song of Songs helps explain why Jewish literature has no interest in romance in the usual sense of the word. One will ransack Jewish fiction without finding an Isolde, a Juliet, an Anna Karenina or an Emma Bovary. The canonical Jewish joke on the subject concerns an elderly Jewish couple. "Let's to go the theater!" says Sadie. "I don't want to go to the theater," counters Abe. "It's boring."

"What do you mean, 'It's boring'?" Sadie protests. "Theaters are for entertainment. Entertainment is the opposite of boring. If it was boring, why would they have theaters?"

"I don't care," Abe replies. "It's boring."

"Why is it boring?"

Abe sighs and explains: "When he wants, she doesn't want. When she wants, he doesn't want. And when they both want, it's over."

Like most Jewish jokes, this one works on several levels, but the truly esoteric level might be this: the cosmic drama of divine love is infinitely more absorbing than any earthly affair. The ruddy lad and the Shulamite maiden search for each other, leaping across hills like a hart, and wandering the streets of Jerusalem at night, but shun the moment of consummation. When he wants, she doesn't want; when she wants, he doesn't want.

In the Christian reading of the Song of Songs, eg, in the sermons of St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), the lover hides behind the lattice to gaze at the beloved because love remains trapped in the body. The lattice, explains St Bernard, represents corrupt and sinful flesh, in which love may dwell imperfectly. Only when the soul sheds the body can it find true union with God. Rabbi Soloveitchik's account, which draws on Jewish traditional sources, offers less comfort: union with God would annihilate the soul, which draws back from the divine presence, whereas as God himself must withdraw from the world in order to allow creation to exist.

There is a reason that there are stupid gods who send stupid prophets to people like us. We flatter ourselves with the stupid gods of our own creation, because such gods are far more manageable than the terrifying, all-consuming love of the God of Creation.

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