

Contemporary images of idolatry

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When God called Moses from within the burning bush and sent him to Pharaoh to bring out the children of Israel from Egypt, Moses was alert enough to say to God, “Here I am coming to the children of Israel, and I will say to them, ‘Your fathers’ God sent me to you.’ And if they say to me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God responded to Moses with a series of strange phrases: “I am who I am,” “I am.” He said further to Moses: “You shall say this to the children of Israel: YHWH, your fathers’ God, Abraham’s God, Isaac’s God, and Jacob’s God has sent me to you. This is my name forever, and this is how I am to be remembered for generation after generation” (Exod. 3:1–15).

Exegetes, both Jews and Christians, tell us that this strange series of four Hebrew letters, transliterated into Roman letters as

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YHWH, is actually a causative form of the verb “to be.” The verb tense, here, is imperfect and it cannot be limited to a past, present, or even future time. The nearest translation of the name YHWH to English would be “he causes to be.”¹

The God who causes to be is also the God who spoke these prohibitive words: “I am YHWH, your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt, from a house of slaves. You shall not have other gods before

my face. You shall not make a statue or any form that is in the skies above or that is in the earth below or that is in the water below the earth. You shall not bow to them, and you shall not serve them” (Exod. 20:1–5). Bowing to gods other than YHWH is what Jewish and Christian believers call idolatry. In *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris rightly writes, “Maybe God addresses the problem of idolatry at the outset of a new relationship with Israel

because human beings are incurable and remarkably inventive idol makers.”²

Idolatry today

Most of us, in the Western world, think of idolatry as something far away from our way of life. We know of golden calves and of fertility rites as mentioned in the Bible. We have read ethnological tales and heard missionaries’ narrations about “primitive” African, South American, or Asian tribal people who still make images or sculpt statues and dance to worship them.

Indeed, idolatry as a belief system still exists in many forms and many countries, mostly among sections of the population with less formal education. It is present, for instance, in the *brujería/hechicería*, *santería*, and *makumba*³ of South American people, and it is alive in the practices of the Bantu people of Central and Southern Africa who believe in and fear the vital forces and powers inherent in animism and other occult practices.⁴

But idolatry is also alive all around us in the Western world. Idolatry is alive in the resurgence of occult sciences all over the West. An ever-increasing number of people in North America and Europe consult psychics, tarot readers or other occult media before making any important decision. In “The Church of Everywhere,” Cole Moreton writes, “There are only about 240,000 practicing pagans in the UK at most, but the influence of their ideas on mainstream culture is far wider than that.”⁵ Moreton explains that a significant number of people in the UK admit that they sometimes go up a hill or down to the beach at dawn on May Day to tune in to the universe. Moreton also indicates that in the UK, the Pagan Federation includes all kind of believers, from Wiccans to worshipers of Norse gods, and all you have to do to belong is agree with three simple ideas: that there is a higher power, that the earth is sacred, and that everyone has the right to follow their own path, as long as they harm no one else.⁶

A second idolatrous practice of our time, the most pervasive, is manifest in the financial capitalism system. In fact, financial markets as embodied by modern banks, fiduciary institutions, and insurance companies have become the new idols of our time. In the past, the word *economy* (from the Greek *oikonomia*, referring to norms for house management) used to refer to all activities

related to the production of goods and services in a particular geographic area or region. This is how people such as Adam Smith, the eighteenth-century philosopher of capitalism, understood it, because Smith explained that “businesses exist to serve the general welfare. Profit is the means not the end. It is the reward a business receives for serving the general welfare.” According to Smith, “when business fails to serve the general welfare, it forfeits its right to existence.”⁷

For decades, market economy activities were mainly aimed at attracting money from customers and then channelling it in responsible ways to businesses that contributed to a sustainable society. Such institutions were disciplined and tightly regulated, so that they would use that money to invest in people’s productive capacity. In other words, these institutions only provided loans to people or companies that could prove they would use these loans to produce goods and services in a durable way. These companies offered products that stimulated sustainability in society, while reducing poverty and improving living standards.

Today’s financial markets mostly invest in controlled assets, where money can produce money. Financial market specialists teach that stocks are what offer people the best return over the long haul. In his article “The Church of Warren Buffett: Faith and Fundamentals in Omaha,” Mattathias Schwartz describes the

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philosophy of financial markets, as taught by Buffett, the most articulate exponent of American capitalism, who happens to be CEO and chairman of Berkshire Hathaway and one of the richest men in the world. Schwartz writes: “The [siren] song goes something like this: Common sense is worth more than inside information. Stocks offer the best returns over the long run. Follow a

few simple rules and your money can grow 10, even 20 percent annually.”⁸ The system is based on a buy-and-hold philosophy, and “the value investor is . . . a dedicated transcendentalist” who acts as though he sees the invisible. He ignores “the tumultuous swings in price and focuses on ‘intrinsic value,’ the present value of all future profits. . . . He believes the true value of a thing is definite, invisible, and knowable only through private reflection.”

The value investor believes in endless felicitous growth. What we all want is to be like Buffett, who no longer needs money to spend. Like him, we want to reach that point of simply sitting in our room, watching our money grow. Buffett encourages us to follow his example and continue to pour our money into stocks even in times of trouble. If a guru like Buffett says it, why wouldn't the majority of us lesser mortals want to follow suit?⁹

It is common sense to build some financial security against the unpredictable in these times. Financial security becomes problematic when money becomes an end in itself, when investors and capitalists are sitting on record stockpiles of cash instead of investing it in business to provide jobs for those who need them. That is when financial capitalism becomes an idolatrous system. As a matter of fact, many of us who participate even modestly in the system may be tempted to have a bottomless faith in financial

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capitalism, and the danger is that we can become obsessed by our financial security to the point of walling off our heart to the needs of people around us. Jesus diagnoses this problem as *sclerocardia*: the hardening, blocking, barricading, or shutting down of one's heart (see, for example, Mark 3:5; 6:52; 8:17).

A third idolatry of our time, a more subtle one, is in the realm of the family. Modern men—more than women—tend to depersonalize their partners, turning them into objects of devotion. As Kathleen Norris observes, “Young people grow up understanding that love means possessing and being possessed. It is a consumer model of love, an ‘If I can't have her, nobody will’ psychology that all too often turns deadly.” Norris notes that “nearly half the murders in North Dakota, for example, are ‘domestic’ in origin.”¹⁰ And other parts of the world are similarly affected. Today the latest common crime among male young adults in Botswana, a country until now known for its pacifism, is “passion killing.” Young men invest so much in their girlfriends that they can't bring themselves to let them go when things go sour. I can't help but conclude with Norris that “many men, and some women, cannot give up the illusion of possessing another person. The idea of that

person—and ‘idea’ is related etymologically to the word ‘idol’—becomes more important, more potent than the actual living creature. It is much safer to love an idol than a real person who is capable of surprising you, loving you and demanding love in return, and maybe one day leaving you.”¹¹

Idolatry within the family also manifests itself in our dreams for our children. Kahlil Gibran, Lebanese philosopher and poet, once wrote, “Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself. . . . You can give them your love but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts.”¹² Men and women of our time, in contrast, are prone to try to raise our children so that they will respond to our idea of how they should be. When they go out for sports, we push them to perform beyond their abilities, because we want them to be the best. Our devotion to them—our idolatry—is demonstrated in the passion with which we participate in their hockey, football, soccer, and other games from our the seats. The joy, the frustration, and the anger one sees in the stadium makes one wonder which are the real players—the parents or their children. Here again, Norris writes about where such devotion can lead. She tells the story of a Texas mother who hired two people to kill some competitors, so that her daughter could get a place on the high school cheerleading squad.¹³

How does the church address the issue of idolatry today?

All these examples illustrate what Walter Wink calls “soft materialism.” While “hard or philosophical materialism” sees the universe as devoid of spirit, the soft variety is associated with consumerism, self-gratification, and to some extent, the absence of spiritual values. As Wink notes, this type of materialism is also the dominant ethos in universities, the media, and our culture as a whole. Where this ethos predominates, the world seems to have no intrinsic meaning or purpose, and therefore no source of right or wrong values—beyond what people create and agree to for the sake of survival and tranquility. Wink also observes that “this materialistic worldview has penetrated deeply even into many religious persons, causing them to ignore the spiritual dimensions of systems or the spiritual resources of faith.”¹⁴ I believe this soft materialism is effectively banishing the divine from our society,

replacing the God of the Bible with idols of our creation. Thus this soft materialism is the practical equivalent to atheism, removing God and God's designs from our lives, without supplying a philosophical justification for doing so.

The question now is, how does the church address the issue of idolatry today? One can respond, without fear of being contradicted, that the history of the evangelization of people has at the same time been the history of the church's intervention in human affairs. The church sees its task as preaching a change of worldview (*metanoia*, commonly translated "conversion") not only to individuals but also to human institutions and cultures.

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materialism, they can't see that this very system and its structures have betrayed the church's divine vocation. Indeed, the church still issues pastoral letters and other statements to remind us of its social doctrine, when difficult and controversial questions arise. And the church, in all its denominational varieties, has always championed charitable work around the globe. But the church seems confused and unable to distinguish between charitable work, which by nature is in the present, and the building of a just society, which is prophetic and a foretaste of the kingdom to come. One is tempted to say that the church has simply not yet moved from the rural society where its teaching constituted the social fabric, to cities and towns where it unwittingly becomes a simple piece of the total social mechanism. It is urgent that we as church seriously engage in that move, and the key to doing so is knowledge of the worldview that governs our lives.

Wink writes that "understanding worldviews is key to breaking free from the ways the Powers—*understand here "idolatrous structures"*—control people's minds. . . . Naming the Powers identifies our experiences of these pervasive forces that dominate our lives. Unmasking the powers takes away their invisibility, and thus their

capacity to coerce us unconsciously into doing their bidding.”¹⁵ The truth is that the church has not yet seriously studied and understood the materialistic worldviews of the society in which we live; therefore the church is unable to refuse to do their bidding, or to engage them in order to bend them back to their divine purposes. Not so long ago, Latin American theologians of liberation, in a collective movement that had a strong following at the grassroots level among the Basic Ecclesial Communities, had begun a serious study of the capitalistic system and its impact on the lives of the poor and downtrodden. They showed us that the *idols of death*—another way of naming principalities and powers—should be regarded not as disembodied spirits inhabiting a metaphysical realm but as real forces that govern real human institutions, structures, and systems.¹⁶ Unfortunately, this theological framework was not in line with the mindset of the Vatican dignitaries, who strongly criticized the writings of these theologians, describing them as infiltrated by socialism. In my view, this discrediting deprived the church of an important tool for the

inculturation of the gospel message in society today.

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Apart from some attempts in South Africa during apartheid, and in the Philippines during the Marcos dictatorship, I know of no other ecclesial, intentional, and collective effort aimed at naming and unmasking the idols of our time. The churches as we know them, and many of their pastors, are simply ill equipped for ministry to the men and women in the present. Therefore, it can be unsettling for a pastor to consider that status and unbridled wealth are inappropriate for the followers of Christ. I still remember reading a

sentence written by an evangelical missionary pastor, when I was working as a missionary in Latin America some years ago. He put it simply: “It is not easy to be a prophet in evangelical denominations.” I have always wondered whether he wanted to say, “You do not bite the hand that feeds you.”

I believe that part of the church’s role is to spread the seeds of life where other institutions and systems have planted the idols of

death. I also believe that it is the church's vocation to accompany men and women as they struggle in difficult and demanding circumstances to build strong families that respond to God's vision. Church leaders must be convinced that the formation of character hinges more on religious and spiritual teaching than on any other training. Finally, I concur with Wink when he affirms that "it is part of the church's task to remind corporations and business that profit is *not* the 'bottom line,' that as creatures of God they have as their divine vocation the achievement of human well-being (Eph. 3:10). They do not exist for themselves. They were bought with a price (Col. 1:20). They belong to the God who ordains sufficiency for all."¹⁷

Our God is the "one who causes to be." And our God made us capable of creating institutions and systems that can serve God's humanizing purposes in the world. Alas! These structures willed by God are prone to corruption, because they often put their own interests above the interests of humanity as a whole. However, I agree with Walter Wink in his insistence that "they can be redeemed, because what fell in time can be redeemed in time. . . . God at one and the same time *upholds* a given political or economic system, since some such system is required to support human life; *condemns* that system insofar as it is destructive of fully human life; and *presses for its transformation* into a more humane order."¹⁸

Notes

¹ See Richard Elliot Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah: With a New English Translation and the Hebrew Text* (San Francisco: Harper, 2003), 178.

² Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 91–92.

³ These are Hispano-American, Cuban, and Brazilian words for witchcraft. Santería is somehow regarded as religious syncretism. So is the Haitian Voodoo.

⁴ These include *buloji/ubobushi/ubuloyi/buroyi/boloi/ubuthi/ubugqwira/donki*, Ciluba (DRC Congo), Cibemba (Zambia), Ndebele and Shona (Zimbabwe), Setswana (Botswana), Zulu and Xhosa (South Africa), and Lingala (DRC Congo) words for witchcraft. Though not always articulated in terms of power, witchcraft is all about vital force and power. Witchcraft is based on the appropriation of somebody's else vital force to increase one's own, in order to become successful or powerful. Destroying somebody else to get where you want to be is part of idolatry.

⁵ Cole Moreton, "The Church of Everywhere," *Third Way* 33, no. 3 (April 2010), 26.

⁶ This sentiment sounds benign, but if we were all to construct our own values, we might end up being even more incapable of agreeing on basic secular principles of law

and order. The result could lead us into chaos, which can make evil rampant.

⁷ Adam Smith, as paraphrased by Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 30.

⁸ Mattathias Schwartz, "The Church of Warren Buffett: Faith and Fundamentals in Omaha," *Harper's Magazine*, January 2010; <http://www.harpers.org/archive/2010/01/0082783>.

⁹ This is a judgment not so much against Warren Buffett as an individual as against the system he promotes. In July of 2010 alone, Buffett gave \$1.03 billion in shares to charity.

¹⁰ Norris, *Amazing Grace*, 89.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 89–90.

¹² Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 77.

¹³ Norris, *Amazing Grace*, 90.

¹⁴ Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be*, 17–18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 14 (my italics).

¹⁶ See *ibid.*, 23–24.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

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