

Editorial

Gordon Matties

In “Worshipping Mr. Loh,” Steve Wilson perfectly captures the spirit of our age.¹ He writes, “Since my wife and I both rejected the religions we were brought up with; since faith is now a matter of convenience rather than calling: Cathy and I have decided to ignore the existing religions altogether and worship our own personal deity. His name is Mr. Loh,” and he is “a 76-year-old Chinese guy.” They came to thank Mr. Loh for all manner of good fortune: finding a parking spot, purchasing a home, getting into graduate school, conceiving a child. Wilson confesses, “Mr. Loh provided a focal point for hope and decision, gave us a receptacle for anxieties, and, ultimately, got results.” Although the real Mr. Loh and the Mr. Loh they worship are not identical, the author affirms: “Whatever he is, he serves our purpose and helps us through times of stress.” Whether the actual source of these results is an “astral deity or . . . improved attitude or just good luck,” Wilson confesses, “I don’t care. What we’ve got works for us, and that is what counts.”

Idolatry today has as many names as it did in the ancient world. And for the most part we make up our idols. All—from private gun idolatry to militaristic nationalism, from the ubiquitous claw of the market to *American Idol*—echo the King of Babylon, whom Isaiah quotes as saying, “I will make myself like the Most High” (14:14). Every one of them, like Mr. Loh, “serves our purpose.” We know that in spite of Isaiah’s insistence that idols are nothing (44:6-8; 45:20-22), and Paul’s assertion that “no idol in the world really exists” (1 Cor. 8:4; NRSV), the persistent command to reject idolatry echoes throughout scripture. Deuteronomy calls Israel to serve God alone and to repudiate all other allegiances. Paul asserts that the Corinthian believers ought to “flee from the worship of idols” (1 Cor. 10:14). The first letter of John ends with this appeal: “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols” (5:21).

Ironically, the call to reject idolatry is mostly addressed to Israel, and to the church. The Lord proclaims, “I am, and there is no one besides me,” to Israelites who have fallen victim to Babylonian power and might (Isa. 47:8, 10) and who might well be tempted to substitute power for truth and wealth for the beauty of the Lord. Oddly, Isaiah’s polemic against the gods is grounded in the fact that the gods cannot save. They tend to benefit those who already have power and wealth. But for the poor, the weak, the needy, and the exiled, they can do nothing. They are great pretenders whose gifts dissipate into disillusionment.

The promises of the gods are nothing but the ultimate domestication of the divine. Such gods, religious though they may be, end up being—as the Metallica song puts it—“the god that failed.” Still, Bob Dylan had it right; no matter who you are, “you’re gonna have to serve somebody.” Or as Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon suggest, “We appear to have been created to worship, and worship something we will.”² Moreover, the biblical writers assume that “we become what we worship,”³ or as James K. A. Smith puts it, “we are what we love.”⁴ In the book of Exodus the same Hebrew word can be translated “serve” or “worship.” Whom we worship shapes both identity and vocation.

To flee idolatry, then, is to discover our hearts becoming rightly oriented and our loves reordered. The articles and poetry in this issue of *Vision* are bound to encourage us to let go of counterfeit allegiances, misplaced desires, quick-fix solutions, and the illusions of market demands, and to empower us to pledge allegiance only to the kingdom of God, where we find true freedom and life abundant.

Notes

¹ Steve Wilson, “Worshipping Mr. Loh,” *Utne Reader*, May/June, 2004; <http://www.utne.com/2004-05-01/WorshippingMrLoh.aspx>.

² Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *The Truth about God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 36.

³ G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

⁴ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 25.

About the issue editor

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