

How to Make a God

Two years ago, the residents of New York City were surprised to see a new statue adorning the appellate courthouse. Next to statues of famous lawgivers like Moses, Alfred the Great, and Emperor Justinian stood an eight-foot tall, golden figure of a woman. Only this woman was like no woman you've ever seen. She had long braids that were curled up to look like rams' horns and, in the place of arms and feet, she bore a bundle of tentacles. While not exactly menacing, the figure was definitely creepy and vaguely demonic, like something out of a horror movie.

When modern people think of idols, something like this statue is what typically comes to mind—man-made effigies to strange gods that primitive peoples worship and make offerings to. Such idol worship still goes on in many parts of the world, but few of us have any personal experience with it. I mean, as creepy and disturbing as that statue in New York is, there's little danger that people are really going to start praying and making sacrifices to it.

That doesn't mean, though, that we in the modern West have gotten rid of our idols, that we've progressed out of "superstition." Rather, what it means is our idol worship has become more discreet and sophisticated. You won't find altars to Zeus or shrines to Norse goddesses dotting the landscape as they once did. Our altars have just gone underground, been internalized, set up in our hearts.

You see, idols don't always take the form of mythological deities with marble temples and priests and ritual sacrifices. Idols are anything that takes the place of God in our lives. Most Christians know you can make a god of money. And most of us know you can make a god out of sex or power. These are the "big three." But anything in life can serve as an idol, a counterfeit god. An idol can be a romantic relationship, peer approval, financial security, your brain or your beauty, individual freedom or career advancement, a social cause or political ideology, family or sports, success in ministry, even Star Wars. The old pagans weren't crazy for depicting just about everything as a god. For we can make anything into an idol if we give it enough importance. As John Calvin said, "the human heart is an idol-factory."

And so while we may not physically kneel before a statue of Aphrodite, many young women today are driven into depression and eating disorders by chasing after the goddess of beauty. And we may not actually burn incense to Hermes, but when money and career are raised to cosmic proportions, what is it we are doing but sacrificing our family, our community, even our health to the god of wealth and commerce? The point is, if something absorbs our heart and imagination more than God, if we seek from it what only God can give, then it's an idol.

But the thing about idols is that they always disappoint. Because we ask too much of them. It's not that the thing we worship is bad—be it love or money or a cause like freedom or justice. It's

that in making it our ultimate concern, we push it to its breaking point. We distort it into a demonic perversion of itself.

I heard an account of a field army officer who so assiduously pursued physical and military discipline with his troops that he broke their morale. That led to a communication breakdown during combat which resulted in fatalities. I know a woman who had experienced periods of poverty as she grew up. As an adult, she was so eager for financial security that she passed over many good prospective relationships in order to marry a wealthy man she did not really love. This led to an early divorce and to all the economic struggles she feared so much. Some major league baseball players, in a quest to make it in the Hall of Fame, take steroids and other drugs. As a result, their bodies are more broken and their reputations more sullied than if they had just been satisfied with being a “good” player. In each of these examples, the very thing upon which these people were building their happiness crumbled, turned to dust in their hands, because it could not support the weight.

So if idols always let us down, why do we make them? Why do we give them such power over us? Our first lesson, from Exodus, gives us a clue. This is the story of the Golden Calf, a quintessential idolatry story. To set the scene, God has delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt—the ten plagues, parting of the Red Sea, and all that. At God’s direction, Moses led them to Mount Sinai in the desert and had them camp at the base of the mountain while he went up the mountain to receive instruction from God. He’s come down periodically to deliver God’s Laws, including the Ten Commandments. But now Moses has gone up again, and hasn’t returned. So some of the Israelites get antsy, nervous. And that leads to the fateful event.

The Israelites come to Aaron, Moses’ brother and spokesman, and demand that he “make them gods who will lead them and protect them.” Aaron, in a bout of political weakness, complies with the peoples’ demand. He has them surrender their wealth, gold earrings, from their wives and children. The earrings are significant because they were given to them by the Egyptians to spur the Israelites to leave Egypt and leave them alone. Aaron, he takes the gold, melts it down, puts it in a mold, forms it into a calf and presents it to the mob: “Here are your gods, who brought you out of Egypt.” Then, to make matters worse, Aaron, in his official capacity as Moses’ spokesman, declares a feast to the Lord, further confusing the worship of God and that of the idol. The Israelites are all too eager to comply, offering sacrifices on an altar Aaron builds. And then to seal their apostasy, they take the celebration as an occasion for some “revelry.” Actually, a better translation would be...um...‘carousing.’

So, what they’re doing is all kinds of wrong. They’ve wasted their wealth, God’s provision. Then they used it to do something God had explicitly told them not to do, to make an idol to worship. And to top it all off, they gave themselves over to base, orgiastic hedonism.

Before we pile on the Israelites for their misbehavior, though, we should step back and remind ourselves how this all started, to see if we might gain any insight into what causes idolatry, why not just the Israelites but all of us worship that which should not be worshipped. Looking back at the first verse, the trouble all started because Moses was running late. He’d been up on Mount Sinai for longer than they expected, and the people were getting worried. Not so much about Moses but about themselves. They knew they were vulnerable, exposed here, and the journey

ahead of them would be hard, fraught with dangers, and likely opposition from the inhabitants of the land they were headed to. And they were anxious to know that they'd have divine protection, a god who would go before them, who would, like a full back or tight end, block any oncoming assaults. And since the Lord and his prophet, Moses, weren't available, they figured they'd make their own god, dress up some crude approximation of a cud-chewing animal and call it "God."

If they stopped for a moment and considered what they were doing—making a deity out of an inanimate chunk of metal—they'd likely realize how silly they are. Sure, gold is nice to have, but it's not going to protect you from attack or save you from plagues or feed you and give you water in the desert or be there for you in times of weakness. So it doesn't make much sense to invest such significance in this object, what for us would be a fancy mantle decoration.

But that's true for all idols, even the idols *we* worship. What is a career going to do for you when you are old and alone? What benefit is your beauty in attracting men's attention, if you never settle down to marry one of them? What good is it to win an election if you're just beholden to lobbyists for the rest of your political career? What good is pursuing a political cause, if you've alienated all your friends by your stridency? It doesn't make any sense to make any of these your ultimate concern, your source of meaning.

So why do we do it? Well, it's because, like the Israelites, we are scared, we are anxious. God, the *real* God, is hard to follow. His actions are inscrutable. He doesn't show up when you expect him to. And often when we call on him, he doesn't answer. Or he tells us to wait. Such a God is not easy to worship. Oh, sure, we can name times, instances when God came through for us, showed up in a miraculous way. But as soon as we are faced with hardship or uncertainty again, we get nervous. We want a god that's available, that we can see, that we can hold in our hands, that we can use. Ultimately, that's what we want. It's one thing to believe in God, but we want a god who serves our needs, that responds to desires, that gets us what we want, not a god that is above us, that refuses to be managed or controlled, that has his own agenda and expects us to follow his ways and not seek after immediate gratification.

When put that way, it makes a lot of sense why people would prefer an idol over God, the counterfeit over the real thing. An idol flatters our sense of importance and control. The God of Israel is sure to disabuse us of that illusion. He wants more for us than what we want because He knows what we want will be our undoing.

In the case of the idolatrous Israelites, God is eager to prevent their descent into decadence from spreading and endangering the whole group. So he announces he's going to clear the board and start over with Moses as the father of nations. But Moses isn't interested in that. He intercedes, pleading for his wayward people, and God relents. But before Moses can celebrate Israel's reprieve, he goes down and sees for himself the trouble that his people have been getting into, that his brother had allowed to happen. "I don't know how this happened." Aaron responds, "These people, you know how they are bent on evil. They demanded I do something. So when they shoved a basket of gold earrings into my arms, I threw it in the fire, and out popped this idol. It was the strangest thing." He actually says this a few verses later. When Moses sees the carousing idolaters, he is incensed. Steam is spewing from his ears. He throws down the stone tablets of the Law, shattering them. Then he takes the golden calf and incinerates it, grinds the

remains into dust, mixes it with water and forces the Israelites to drink it. Symbolically, making them swallow their shame and digest what they had done.

When we chase after idols, though, we don't always have someone like Moses to confront us with our idolatry. Indeed, we may actually be cheered on by others, fellow idolaters. But that doesn't stop what we're doing from being idolatry. Nor does it protect us from the consequences of getting our priorities wrong. Hospitals, prisons, and divorce courts are full of people who have given themselves over to the wrong god.

The way out of this begins when we acknowledge the idols of our hearts and our culture and stop sacrificing to them. But that is not enough. The only way to be freed from the destructive influences of counterfeit gods is to turn to the true one. The Living God, who revealed himself both at Mount Sinai and on the cross, is the only Lord who, if we find him, can truly fulfill us, and if we fail him, can truly forgive us.

This is why our God refuses to share the stage with idols—because He wants to be our God, to invest himself in us as our God. And He wants us to invest in the relationship too, to be devoted to him and not run after every “shiny god” that distracts us. And when we do stray, He seeks after us, like a shepherd searching for a lost sheep, to bring us back to him. No idol is going to do that for us. No made-up god is going to care about us like that. Which is why we are so blessed to have a God that does. Amen.