

MODERN IDOLATRY

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An idol in the Bible is always a representation of something real that people take for God. They may offer it love, worship, prayers, offerings; they may hope for answers to prayer or protection . . . In other words, idolatry is the tendency in humanity to assign a religious or sacred value and power to something natural.

It is not wrong to make a statue of a person or an animal, any more than it is wrong to have a love for things, or for animals, or for nature. What is evil, the Bible tells us, is to confuse two different realities. Isaiah tells us that an idol is only a piece of wood. But for the one who worships it an idol is not prized for itself. It is the symbol of a religious reality, of a god.

People today are generally of the opinion that these idolatrous, pagan cults have gone from our lives. No longer do we worship animal images, and in the Catholic Church they draw a careful distinction between what is offered to a saint or to the Virgin and worship given to God.

Yet, without being aware of it, our developed world is filled with idols. They are not the same as those in, say, African religions. We have our own. A text from the Bible may be a pointer to what they are. Paul writes that 'Covetousness is idolatry'. In other words, love of money, the desire to have more and more of it, trust in money – this is idolatry.

Ultimate security

We need to ask some precise questions:

● In whom, or in what, do we place our trust (our faith)?

● Where do we look for security and happiness?

● Whom do we expect to guarantee our future?

● What do we think can guard our liberty?

● Whom do we believe on the subject of truth?

● How do we explain our origins?

If we are honest we will see very quickly that, even if we are Christians, even if we pray, in reality we are looking to other certainties and other truths. And this is where our idolatry lies.

● We believe that **money** is our best guarantee. It is this which gives us confidence for our latter years, or allows us to be happy – money together with insurance.

● We believe that **the state** is the agent of our security. From it we expect justice, good organization, even truth. This is true of various types of state: there is an idolatry of liberal democracies as well as of communist states. But it must be said that communism is a whole system of idolatry. Many studies have shown how communism is a real religion, with its holy books (Marx); its clergy, (the party); its paradise (the promise of world communism coming soon); its criteria for orthodoxy and heresy and its worship, (the cult of personality, as of Stalin, Mao, Tito . . .). We are looking at a highly effective idolatry – although capitalism makes a strong rival.

● Again we make an idol of science. Here is the road to

truth, we believe. And we look to science to resolve all our problems. We expect it to lead us to our destiny, to account for our origins, and to explain everything else. And this idolatry (the attitude of the man-in-the-street rather than of most scientists) replaces love for the God of Jesus Christ.

These are, I believe, the three great, modern idolatries: money, the state, science. None of them, of course, is evil in itself, any more than were the bulls and eagles of earlier times. What makes them idols is our idolatrous attitude towards them, which renders them totally opposed to God, radically evil.

Alongside these three fundamental idolatries there are plenty of others. People idolize race (racialism did not disappear with the Nazis). We have an idolatry of homeland or nation, a very fierce one which can let loose wars, as well as economic confrontation and hatred of foreigners. There is an idolatry of social class (especially in the working class under the influence of Marxism).

Finally we must include some popular modern beliefs; the idolatry of the guru, the prophet, the modern myth-maker, all mushrooming in an amazing way. It has to be clearly stated that all these without exception fall under God's condemnation on all idolatry and false religion. There cannot be room in the human heart both for the God of Jesus Christ and for the love of any of these powers.