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# INTRODUCTION THE IDOL FACTORY

*There are more idols in the world than there are realities.*

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*

## A Strange Melancholy

**A**fter the global economic crisis began in mid-2008, there followed a tragic string of suicides of formerly wealthy and well-connected individuals. The acting chief financial officer of Freddie Mac, the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation, hanged himself in his basement. The chief executive of Sheldon Good, a leading U.S. real estate auction firm, shot himself in the head behind the wheel of his red Jaguar. A French money manager who invested the wealth of many of Europe's royal and leading families, and who had lost \$1.4 billion of his clients' money in Bernard Madoff's Ponzi scheme, slit his wrists and died in his

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Madison Avenue office. A Danish senior executive with HSBC Bank hanged himself in the wardrobe of his £500-a-night suite in Knightsbridge, London. When a Bear Stearns executive learned that he would not be hired by JPMorgan Chase, which had bought his collapsed firm, he took a drug overdose and leapt from the twenty-ninth floor of his office building. A friend said, “This Bear Stearns thing . . . broke his spirit.”<sup>1</sup> It was grimly reminiscent of the suicides in the wake of the 1929 stock market crash.

In the 1830s, when Alexis de Tocqueville recorded his famous observations on America, he noted a “strange melancholy that haunts the inhabitants . . . in the midst of abundance.”<sup>2</sup> Americans believed that prosperity could quench their yearning for happiness, but such a hope was illusory, because, de Tocqueville added, “the incomplete joys of this world will never satisfy [the human] heart.”<sup>3</sup> This strange melancholy manifests itself in many ways, but always leads to the same despair of not finding what is sought.

There is a difference between sorrow and despair. Sorrow is pain for which there are sources of consolation. Sorrow comes from losing one good thing among others, so that, if you experience a career reversal, you can find comfort in your family to get you through it. Despair, however, is inconsolable, because it comes from losing an *ultimate* thing. When you lose the ul-

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timate source of your meaning or hope, there are no alternative sources to turn to. It breaks your spirit.

What is the cause of this “strange melancholy” that permeates our society even during boom times of frenetic activity, and which turns to outright despair when prosperity diminishes? De Tocqueville says it comes from taking some “incomplete joy of this world” and building your entire life on it. That is the definition of idolatry.

### **A Culture Filled with Idols**

To contemporary people the word *idolatry* conjures up pictures of primitive people bowing down before statues. The biblical book of Acts in the New Testament contains vivid descriptions of the cultures of the ancient Greco-Roman world. Each city worshipped its favorite deities and built shrines around their images for worship. When Paul went to Athens he saw that it was literally filled with images of these divinities (Acts 17:16). The Parthenon of Athena overshadowed everything, but other deities were represented in every public space. There was Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty; Ares, the god of war; Artemis, the goddess of fertility and wealth; Hephaestus, the god of craftsmanship.

Our contemporary society is not fundamentally different from these ancient ones. Each culture

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is dominated by its own set of idols. Each has its “priesthoods,” its totems and rituals. Each one has its shrines—whether office towers, spas and gyms, studios, or stadiums—where sacrifices must be made in order to procure the blessings of the good life and ward off disaster. What are the gods of beauty, power, money, and achievement but these same things that have assumed mythic proportions in our individual lives and in our society? We may not physically kneel before the statue of Aphrodite, but many young women today are driven into depression and eating disorders by an obsessive concern over their body image. We may not actually burn incense to Artemis, but when money and career are raised to cosmic proportions, we perform a kind of child sacrifice, neglecting family and community to achieve a higher place in business and gain more wealth and prestige.

After New York’s governor Eliot Spitzer destroyed his career because of his involvement in a high-priced prostitution ring, David Brooks noted how our culture has produced a class of high achievers with “rank-link imbalances.” They have social skills for vertical relationships, for improving their rank with mentors and bosses, but none for genuine bonding in horizontal relationships with spouses, friends, and family. “Countless presidential candidates say they are running on behalf of their families, even though their entire lives

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have been spent on the campaign trail away from their families.” As the years go by they come to the sickening realization that “their grandeur is not enough and that they are lonely.”<sup>4</sup> Many of their children and spouses are alienated from them. They seek to heal the hurt. They get into affairs or take other desperate measures to medicate the inner emptiness. Then comes family breakdown or scandal or both.

They had sacrificed everything to the god of success, but it wasn't enough. In ancient times, the deities were bloodthirsty and hard to appease. They still are.

## **Idols of the Heart**

It would have been hard to make this case convincingly during the era of the dot-com boom and of the real estate and stock bubble of the last twenty years. However, the great economic meltdown of 2008–2009 has laid bare what is now being called “the culture of greed.” Long ago, Saint Paul wrote that greed was not just bad behavior. “Greed is idolatry,” he wrote. (Colossians 3:5) Money, he advised, can take on divine attributes, and our relationship to it then approximates worship and obeisance.

Money can become a spiritual addiction, and like all addictions it hides its true proportions from its victims. We take more and greater risks to get an ever diminishing

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satisfaction from the thing we crave, until a breakdown occurs. When we begin to recover, we ask, “What were we thinking? How could we have been so blind?” We wake up like people with a hangover who can hardly remember the night before. But why? Why did we act so irrationally? Why did we completely lose sight of what is right?

The Bible’s answer is that the human heart is an “idol factory.”<sup>5</sup>

When most people think of “idols” they have in mind literal statues—or the next pop star anointed by Simon Cowell. Yet while traditional idol worship still occurs in many places of the world, internal idol worship, within the heart, is universal. In Ezekiel 14:3, God says about elders of Israel, “These men have set up their idols in their *hearts*.” Like us, the elders must have responded to this charge, “Idols? What idols? I don’t see any idols.” God was saying that the human heart takes good things like a successful career, love, material possessions, even family, and turns them into ultimate things. Our hearts deify them as the center of our lives, because, we think, they can give us significance and security, safety and fulfillment, if we attain them.<sup>6</sup>

The central plot device of *The Lord of the Rings* is the Dark Lord Sauron’s Ring of Power, which corrupts anyone who tries to use it, however good his or her in-

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tentions. The Ring is what Professor Tom Shippey calls “a psychic amplifier,” which takes the heart’s fondest desires and magnifies them to idolatrous proportions.<sup>7</sup> Some good characters in the book want to liberate slaves, or preserve their people’s land, or visit wrongdoers with just punishment. These are all good objectives. But the Ring makes them willing to do *anything* to achieve them, anything at all. It turns the good thing into an absolute that overturns every other allegiance or value. The wearer of the Ring becomes increasingly enslaved and addicted to it, for an idol is something we cannot live without. We must have it, and therefore it drives us to break rules we once honored, to harm others and even ourselves in order to get it. Idols are spiritual addictions that lead to terrible evil, in Tolkien’s novel and real life.

### **Anything Can Be an Idol**

Cultural moments like the one we are in provide us with an opportunity. Many people are now more open to the Bible’s warning that money can become much more than money. It can become a powerful life-altering, culture-shaping god, an idol that breaks the hearts of its worshippers. The bad news is that we are so fixated on the problem of greed, which we tend to see in “those rich people over there,” that we don’t

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realize the most fundamental truth. Anything can be an idol, and everything has been an idol.

The most famous moral code in the world is the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. The very first commandment is “I am the Lord your God . . . you shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). That leads to the natural question—“What do you mean, ‘other gods’?” An answer comes immediately. “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them. . . .” (Exodus 20:4–5) That includes everything in the world! Most people know you can make a god out of money. Most know you can make god out of sex. However, *anything* in life can serve as an idol, a God-alternative, a counterfeit god.

I recently heard the account of a field army officer who so exorbitantly pursued physical and military discipline with his troops that he broke their morale. That led to a communication breakdown during combat that resulted in fatalities. I knew 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. It appears that some major league

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baseball players, in a quest to play not just well but at a Hall of Fame level, took steroids and other drugs. As a result, their bodies are more broken and their reputations more sullied than if they had been willing to be good rather than great. The very things upon which these people were building all their happiness turned to dust in their hands *because* they had built all their happiness upon them. In each case, a good thing among many was turned into a supreme thing, so that its demands overrode all competing values.<sup>8</sup> But counterfeit gods always disappoint, and often destructively so.

Is it wrong to want disciplined troops, or financial security, or athletic prowess? Not at all. But these stories point to a common mistake people make when they hear about the biblical concept of idolatry. We think that idols are bad things, but that is almost never the case. The greater the good, the more likely we are to expect that it can satisfy our deepest needs and hopes. Anything can serve as a counterfeit god, especially the very best things in life.

### **How to Make a God**

What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.<sup>9</sup>

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A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living. An idol has such a controlling position in your heart that you can spend most of your passion and energy, your emotional and financial resources, on it without a second thought. It can be family and children, or career and making money, or achievement and critical acclaim, or saving “face” and social standing. It can be a romantic relationship, peer approval, competence and skill, secure and comfortable circumstances, your beauty or your brains, a great political or social cause, your morality and virtue, or even success in the Christian ministry. When your meaning in life is to fix someone else’s life, we may call it “co-dependency” but it is really idolatry. An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, “If I have that, then I’ll feel my life has meaning, then I’ll know I have value, then I’ll feel significant and secure.” There are many ways to describe that kind of relationship to something, but perhaps the best one is *worship*.

The old pagans were not fanciful when they depicted virtually everything as a god. They had sex gods, work gods, war gods, money gods, nation gods—for the simple fact that anything can be a god that rules and serves as a deity in the heart of a person or in the life of a people. For example, physical beauty is a pleasant thing, but if you “deify” it, if you make it the most

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important thing in a person's life or a culture's life, then you have Aphrodite, not just beauty. You have people, and an entire culture, constantly agonizing over appearance, spending inordinate amounts of time and money on it, and foolishly evaluating character on the basis of it. If anything becomes more fundamental than God to your happiness, meaning in life, and identity, then it is an idol.

The biblical concept of idolatry is an extremely sophisticated idea, integrating intellectual, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual categories. There are personal idols, such as romantic love and family; or money, power, and achievement; or access to particular social circles; or the emotional dependence of others on you; or health, fitness, and physical beauty. Many look to these things for the hope, meaning, and fulfillment that only God can provide.

There are cultural idols, such as military power, technological progress, and economic prosperity. The idols of traditional societies include family, hard work, duty, and moral virtue, while those of Western cultures are individual freedom, self-discovery, personal affluence, and fulfillment. All these good things can and do take on disproportionate size and power within a society. They promise us safety, peace, and happiness if only we base our lives on them.

There can also be intellectual idols, often called

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*ideologies*. For example, European intellectuals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries became largely convinced of Rousseau's view of the innate goodness of human nature, that all of our social problems were the result of poor education and socialization. World War II shattered this illusion. Beatrice Webb, whom many consider the architect of Britain's modern welfare state, wrote:

Somewhere in my diary—1890?—I wrote “I have staked all on the essential goodness of human nature. . . .” [Now thirty-five years later I realize] how permanent are the evil impulses and instincts in man—how little you can count on changing some of these—for instance the appeal of wealth and power—by any change in the [social] machinery. . . . No amount of knowledge or science will be of any avail unless we can curb the bad impulse.<sup>10</sup>

In 1920, in his book *Outline of History*, H. G. Wells praised belief in human progress. In 1933, in *The Shape of Things to Come*, appalled by the selfishness and violence of European nations, Wells believed the only hope was for intellectuals to seize control and run a compulsory educational program stressing peace and justice and equity. In 1945, in *A Mind at the End*

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*of Its Tether*, he wrote, “*Homo sapiens*, as he has been pleased to call himself, is . . . played out.” What happened to Wells and Webb? They had taken a partial truth and made it into an all-encompassing truth, by which everything could be explained and improved. To “stake everything” on human goodness was to put it in the place of God.

There are also idols, nonnegotiable absolute values, in every vocational field. In the business world, self-expression is suppressed for the ultimate value, profit. In the art world, however, it is the other way around. Everything is sacrificed to self-expression, and it is done in the name of redemption. This, it is thought, is what the human race needs above all. There are idols everywhere.

## Love, Trust, and Obey

The Bible uses three basic metaphors to describe how people relate to the idols of their hearts. They *love* idols, *trust* idols, and *obey* idols.<sup>11</sup>

The Bible sometimes speaks of idols using a marital metaphor. God should be our true Spouse, but when we desire and delight in other things more than God we commit spiritual adultery.<sup>12</sup> Romance or success can become “false lovers” that promise to make us feel loved and valued. Idols capture our imagination, and

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we can locate them by looking at our daydreams. What do we enjoy imagining? What are our fondest dreams? We look to our idols to love us, to provide us with value and a sense of beauty, significance, and worth.

The Bible often speaks of idols using the religious metaphor. God should be our true Savior, but we look to personal achievement or financial prosperity to give us the peace and security we need.<sup>13</sup> Idols give us a sense of being in control, and we can locate them by looking at our nightmares. What do we fear the most? What, if we lost it, would make life not worth living? We make “sacrifices” to appease and please our gods, who we believe will protect us. We look to our idols to provide us with a sense of confidence and safety.

The Bible also speaks of idols using a political metaphor. God should be our only Lord and Master, but whatever we love and trust we also serve. Anything that becomes more important and nonnegotiable to us than God becomes an enslaving idol.<sup>14</sup> In this paradigm, we can locate idols by looking at our most unyielding emotions. What makes us uncontrollably angry, anxious, or despondent? What racks us with a guilt we can't shake? Idols control us, since we feel we must have them or life is meaningless.

Whatever controls us is our lord. The person who seeks power is controlled by power. The person

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who seeks acceptance is controlled by the people he or she wants to please. We do not control ourselves. We are controlled by the lord of our lives.<sup>15</sup>

What many people call “psychological problems” are simple issues of idolatry. Perfectionism, workaholicism, chronic indecisiveness, the need to control the lives of others—all of these stem from making good things into idols that then drive us into the ground as we try to appease them. Idols dominate our lives.

### **The Opportunity of Disenchantment**

As we have seen, there is a big difference between sorrow and despair, since despair is unbearable sorrow. In most cases, the difference between the two is idolatry. A Korean businessman killed himself after losing most of a \$370 million investment. “When the nation’s stock market index fell below 1,000, he stopped eating and went on a drinking binge for days and finally decided to kill himself,” his wife told police.<sup>16</sup> In the midst of the great financial crisis of 2008–2009 I heard a man named Bill recount that three years before he had become a Christian and his ultimate security had shifted from money to his relationship with God through Christ.<sup>17</sup> “If this economic meltdown had happened

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more than three years ago, well, I don't know how I could have faced it, how I would have even kept going. Today, I can tell you honestly, I've never been happier in my life."

Though we think we live in a secular world, idols, the glittering gods of our age, hold title to the functional trust of our hearts. With the global economy in shambles, many of those idols that we have worshipped for years have come crashing down around us. This is a great opportunity. We are briefly experiencing "disenchantment." In the old stories, that meant that the spell cast by the evil sorcerer was broken and there was the chance to escape. Such times come to us as individuals, when some great enterprise, pursuit, or person on which we have built our hopes fails to deliver what (we thought) was promised. It very rarely comes to an entire society.

The way forward, out of despair, is to discern the idols of our hearts and our culture. But that will not be enough. The only way to free ourselves from the destructive influence of counterfeit gods is to turn back to the true one. The living God, who revealed himself both at Mount Sinai and on the Cross, is the only Lord who, if you find him, can truly fulfill you, and, if you fail him, can truly forgive you.