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# Idolatry and spiritual parody: counterfeit faiths

*by Michael Ovey*

## Summary

This paper describes three major objections to using idolatry for analysing the modern world, and examines the concept of idolatry in their light. Reviewing biblical material indicates just how foundational a concept idolatry is, closely linked to the relation of uncreated Creator and created cosmos. The paper discusses areas where this tool applies inside and outside the Church. It concludes that idolatry parodies the true relationship of humanity and God with intense, binding, but ultimately counterfeit relationships.

## Introduction

Your man has been accustomed, ever since he was a boy, to have a dozen incompatible philosophies dancing about together inside his head. He doesn't think of doctrines as primarily 'true' or 'false', but as 'academic' or 'practical', 'outworn' or 'contemporary', 'conventional' or 'ruthless'. Jargon, not argument, is your best ally in keeping him from the church.

So writes C. S. Lewis as the experienced demonic tempter Screwtape.<sup>1</sup> He is chronicling the difficulties of discussing spiritual matters in terms of truth. Many Christians have indeed tried to speak in terms of truth as against falsehood, sometimes employing the biblical vocabulary of idolatry for this. An idol lies about God in some way. Thus idolatry has been a very significant tool in attempting to witness faithfully to God. But currently several reasons are urged for discarding this archaic-sounding tool.

- 1 *The tool of idolatry seems irrelevant.* If idolatry is merely the worship of a physical object, most westernised people do not bow down to such physical objects.
- 2 *The tool of idolatry breeds spiritual blindness.* Some inter-faith advocates fear that the tool of idolatry dismisses religious experiences outside Christianity. This, the argument runs, excludes spiritual insights, engendering godlessness, not godliness.
- 3 *The tool of idolatry breeds bigotry and arrogance.* Dubbing something as an 'idol' can demean the idol worshipper, thereby facilitating religious intolerance and discrimination.<sup>2</sup> Our cosmopolitan world cannot afford such divisions or the tools that create them.

Such reasons, the argument suggests, mean that idolatry has rightly had its day as a category or way of analysing beliefs about God or the cosmos.

Yet this is premature. Improper use of a particular analysis does not automatically mean it produces a false diagnosis. Historically, when faced with a strongly pluriform religious culture where political control lay clearly in non-Christian hands, the Christians of the Roman Empire made enormous, and unembarrassed, analytical use of idolatry, seeing it as theologically fundamental. Tertullian could write:

The principal crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, the whole procuring cause of judgement, is idolatry. For, although each single fault retains its own proper feature, ... yet it is marked off under the general account of idolatry.<sup>3</sup>

Why disregard this central aspect of their work while studiously preserving closely related material such as Nicene Trinitarian theology<sup>4</sup> and Chalcedonian descriptions of Christ?<sup>5</sup> Why was idolatry so useful analytically?

1 C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, Fount, 1942, 1977, Letter I.

2 Whereas Article 2(1) of the 'UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief' reads 'No one shall be subject to discrimination by any State, institution, group of persons, or person on the grounds of religion or other belief.' G.A. res. 36/55, 36 UN GAOR Supp. (No. 51) at 171, UN Doc. A/36/684, 1981.

3 *On Idolatry* 1. Idolatry is a stock reference point in Justin Martyr (e.g. *First Apology* 9) and the Greek apologists. Athanasius devoted a monograph to it and the tradition is continued to some extent in Augustine's *The City of God*.

4 Articulated in the Nicene Creed of 325 and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381, but note too from this period the writings of Athanasius, Hilary of Poitiers and the Cappadocians.

5 Chalcedonian Definition 451, and note the writings of Cyril of Alexandria and Leo the Great as well as, later, Leontius of Byzantium and Maximus the Confessor.

Most important, though, is the biblical data. In using the tool of idolatry, the early church applied New Testament material (not simply Old Testament): thus 1 John 5:21 retains the warnings against idols, and 1 Thessalonians 1:9f describes salvation itself as turning from idols and being delivered from the coming wrath. Is then idolatry fundamental to describing the human condition?

## The biblical scope of idolatry – idolatry and creating

The first objection to using idolatry analytically is its irrelevance, since today's westernised cultures do not use physical idols. This misunderstands how the New Testament in particular uses the concept. Paul well knows that a physical idol is 'nothing' (1 Corinthians 8:4). Yet his Areopagus address of Acts 17:22–34 illustrates concerns beyond physicality alone. A dominant thought is that the creator God needs no humans to serve or provide for him. To act as though he does reverses the true relationship in which he provides for humans. The true relationship is that of uncreated Creator with created.<sup>6</sup>

However, the relationship is denied if the uncreated Creator is treated as created, as a being who is somehow dependent, rather than independent and self-existing.<sup>7</sup> Making physical objects of worship certainly does deny this. But behind such manufacture lie someone's art and imagination, depicting God, or the gods, as he or she sees fit (Acts 17:29). The uncreated Maker is treated as something made, conceived by human thought. So, reducing something to physical form is not of the essence of idolatry. Hence the remark that covetousness is idolatry (Colossians 3:5). One can idolise an abstract thought, as in classical Marxism, or a lifestyle, as in the leisured and pleased West. Therefore the redundancy objection to the analytical tool of idolatry fails, because idolatry does not require a physical idol.

The relationship is equally denied, though, when what is created denies its dependency and contingency towards its creator. This robs the Creator of his glory (Revelation 4:11 glorifies God since creation is sustained by his will). In classical mythology this denial occurred by attributing human existence to the making not of God but of Zeus, but there again the fact of createdness itself can be denied, as with the Epicureans' insistence on human life as random, not created. Atheism itself is idolatry in this developed sense, and is thus pervasively present in today's culture in the objective randomness of some existentialists and some 'credal' versions of evolution. Furthermore, a culture so insistent on prioritising its pleasures as ours also appears idolatrous: we accept a 'dependence' on what is not God. Such denials so elevate a human construct (a story about Zeus, a human theory of randomness, a view of human wellbeing) that it displaces God considered as Creator.

The early church deployed this developed sense of idolatry. Idolatry, insists Tertullian, occurs when something is elevated 'in place of God, against God', and needs no physical idol.<sup>8</sup> It matters not whether the 'something' is physical, or an abstract idea, or a lifestyle, or a political party, or even a conception of God originating purely in human imagination. For something originated has been elevated in place of the unoriginated.

Humans, remarked Bertrand Russell, are born with the 'cruel thirst for worship'.<sup>9</sup> Russell observes that people elevate something, anything, in their lives, but passes by the biblical perception that while all equally may worship, not all worship is equal. Strikingly, God uses idolatry terminology to distinguish himself from other objects of worship, and to provide a fundamental description of the human condition. Romans 1:18–32 is the classic example, and highlights 'exchange': people exchange the glory of the immortal God for images (verse 23), and they exchange the truth for a lie (verse 25). Genesis 1–3 and Jeremiah contribute greatly here.

The reader of Genesis 3 approaches it with two repeated lessons

from Genesis 1 and 2. First, when God speaks, it is so. His word is utterly effective and sovereign. Physical reality and word correspond. Secondly, God is a benevolent creator: creation is created good and he blesses his creation. The serpent's words in Genesis 3:4 provoke incredulity, for they tempt the woman to deny God's word is effective ('you will not die') and his goodness ('God knows...that you will be like God'). The serpent disputes not God's existence, but his character as creator. Taking the fruit denies God's sovereignty and also his character. Man and woman act on a false view of God and indeed exchange the truth about their creator for a lie.

Jeremiah deals less with denying God's character than attributing that character to something other than God. In chapter 10 the creator–created distinction is pervasive: what distinguishes God is that he creates (verses 12–13) while the idol is created (verses 3b–4, 9) and so is not a creator (verse 11). The idol has no life in it, but only the form and place its makers give it. It therefore has no power to speak, instruct, save or judge.

Nevertheless, what idolatry offers is highly attractive. By reversing the relationship of humans in the image God confers, humans have a god of their choosing, a designer deity.

## Idolatry and lie

This reversal of relationship involves idolatry as telling a 'story' about God, but a fictitious one. The 'making' is a 'making up'. The Bible strongly develops this motif that idolatry is human fiction as 'lie' (Isaiah 44:20). The idol lies about God by likening something to the unique uncreated God. Thus Isaiah 40–55 insists the 'nations' are idolatrous and proclaims God is incomparable to anything within the created order.<sup>10</sup> This contrasts with depicting him as a golden bull, something created (Exodus 32:4). But idolatry equally lies about God by asserting what is not true of him – for example that he requires human sacrifice. Alternatively the fiction may attribute divine characteristics to something we create (divine rights of judgement to 'the Party' or divine omniscience to 'the Market'). A subtler version of the latter obtains where God is 'written out' as a speaking character. A culture whose views on morality and meaning are so strongly shaped by the media risks writing God out, since it chooses others than God as its defining truth-tellers. The first and second commandments reflect these forms of fiction (no *other* gods, and no *made thing* to be worshipped, even if it allegedly represents Yahweh).

Such idolatrous lies falsify a person, obscuring and distorting who the person is. The lie destroys true relationship as humans stop relating to God as he knows himself to be, instead treating him as they have fashioned him. Idolatry strongly expresses human sovereignty, but sovereignty at the expense of true relationship. God is treated not as a person we encounter (a 'Thou' in Martin Buber's terms), but as an object (an 'It'),<sup>11</sup> indeed a plastic, malleable one. Buber writes 'The *Thou* meets me.'<sup>12</sup> Imposing identities on other persons risks not 'meeting' them – preventing them being a 'Thou'. The biblical God reveals he is not infinitely plastic and malleable. To treat him as that involves counterfeit, not true, relationship, with him. The price for being makers of God, albeit attractive, is that the God we make is not real. The true God is hidden, because we attempt to reduce him to an 'It' of our choosing. Buber notes: 'This self-hood...steps in between and shuts off from us the light of heaven.'<sup>13</sup>

Thus the Bible does not primarily condemn pre-exilic Israel for materialism (or secularism), but for idolatry. This matters. First it helps us recognise secularism and other avowedly a-religious or atheistic belief structures not as non-religious, but as covertly religious. The pressing question becomes, What eclipses the true God? That might be express worship of 'another' god. It might be ascription of ultimate, God-eclipsing, worth to particular values, such as the

10 Isa 40:18, 25; 44:7; 46:5, 9. The cognate concept is that there is no god besides God: Isa 43:11–12; 45:14, 21; 46:9.

11 See for example M. Buber, *I and Thou*, 2nd. edn., T & T Clark, 1958.

12 *Ibid.*, p.11.

13 M. Buber, *The Eclipse of God*, Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1952, 1988, p.129.

6 Compare Athanasius, *Contra Gentes* 28.

7 Note here Ex. 3:14.

8 *On Idolatry*, 4 and 3.

9 Quoted by C. E. M. Joad in *God and Evil*, Faber and Faber, 1942, p.59.

inspiring mottoes of European secularists ('liberty, equality, fraternity' or 'truth, beauty and freedom'). More darkly, it might perhaps be the minimal position of 'eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die', born of the false belief that God is absent or indifferent. These self-proclaimed a-religious systems carry a religious weight.<sup>14</sup> Thus a primary apologetic and evangelistic question concerns a person's particular idolatry: What has eclipsed God for them?

Secondly, the concept of idolatry provides the biblical framework for analysing explicitly spiritual beliefs, doing so in the context of truth and falsehood. This contrasts with the Romantic influence on European culture, which stresses the subjective force and immediacy of experience, and its consequent authenticity. The Bible endorses that paganism may provide 'spiritual' experiences,<sup>15</sup> but the criterion of evaluation is not intensity of experience or emotion, but attestation to the God revealed by Jesus Christ.<sup>16</sup> The shift is subtle, but enormously significant. Christians in early centuries met many religions in a world hungry for religious experience and they normally evaluated these things within the framework provided by the analytical tool of idolatry. For their pains these Christians were dubbed godless and irreligious, indeed atheists, the counterpart of today's charge that Christians are spiritually imperceptive.

Christians then did not, of course, succumb to the view that spiritual experience was largely self-authenticating. They sought to uphold the truth about God, and were aware that by losing the concept of idolatry, which implies that one can lie about God, one loses the ability to tell the truth about God. And truth mattered. Abolishing the concept of lie abolishes the concept of truth, including the truth that humans are sheep without a shepherd, which motivates compassion, and hence evangelism. The concern for truth is not simply calculating, rational, and cerebral. Biblical love and biblical truth go hand in hand.<sup>17</sup> A biblical love for the lost cannot be divorced from awareness that idolatry is possible. Without idolatry, there are no lost. Thus the second objection noted above, that the concept of idolatry breeds spiritual blindness, is unfounded. The concept of idolatry opens up spiritual perception regarding being truthful to and about the God who is worshipped.

However, the wish to discard idolatry as an analytical tool is unsurprising. Idolatry necessarily introduces truth and falsehood, a highly threatening distinction for fallen humanity. Humans do not by nature desire the truth about God. Jesus describes the opposition of his antagonists in John chapter 8 as arising not from simply failing intellectually, either to know the facts or to grasp his case, but from just the fact his teaching is the truth (8:45). This tendency continues within the redeemed community: people, Paul predicts, will prefer teaching they like to teaching that is true (2 Timothy 4:3ff).

Despite great criticisms, then, the analytical tool of idolatry is central for today's church, both for examining our general culture, and also our own practices. We are strikingly prone to evaluating services on whether they make those who do not believe 'at home'; evangelistic tools on the acceptability of content to non-believers and simple numerical 'results'; sermons on whether people 'felt guilty'; and pastoral work as 'successful' because the person counselled felt there was empathy. Such things may be highly desirable. Yet making them final criteria of judgement departs from the category of true/false on which idolatry concentrates. Whether our teaching and practice is idolatrous should be a primary question, especially since indwelling sin makes it so naturally one of the last.

## Idolatry and harlotry

Idolatry, then, counterfeits the true relation between worshipper and worshipped. Old and New Testaments portray that true relationship as marriage: Yahweh to Israel and Christ to the Church. The marriage imagery conveys intensity (especially because of the sexual dimen-

sion), highlighted in Hosea 1–3. This impression of intensity is confirmed elsewhere, notably in the Song of Songs, whose refrains warn of the power of human marital love<sup>18</sup> and celebrate its mutuality.<sup>19</sup> Holy marriage also involves a conformity between bride and groom. In Hosea 2 and 3 Israel is expected ultimately to conform to Yahweh's conception of marriage, not hers, and in the New Testament, Christians pattern themselves on Christ, and indeed are expected to conform their lives to the Trinity's mutual life.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, the worshipping relation involves profound attachment and conformity between worshipper and worshipped. It is therefore enormously important that idolatry is so strongly depicted as harlotry. Physical adultery or immorality parodies marriage, as gifts God intended for marriage are perverted. Spiritual harlotry likewise parodies holy marriage, as Israel becomes embroiled with other gods. She displays quasi-marital devotion to them (e.g. Hosea 2:5) and two considerations about this adulterous parody of marriage are particularly pertinent. First, the sexual imagery (e.g. Ezekiel 23) suggests the idolatrous relation is compulsive, carrying insatiability and addiction. Secondly, there is the developing conformity between worshipper and worshipped: in Ezekiel 22 Israel's standards are increasingly those of the idols. A people become like their gods, predictably, given the addictive, compulsive nature of the relationship. Outside the biblical material, just this aspect of relationships is emphasised by Buber, that as an 'I', that with which I am in relation shapes me.<sup>21</sup>

This is bleakly suggestive in several directions. First, S. P. Huntington suggested that with the end of the Cold War, conflict would now occur on a 'civilisational' level.<sup>22</sup> In biblical terms one might describe such conflicts as battles between conflicting idolatries. This is illuminating, because it explains that commitment to a 'civilisation' is not always going to be 'voluntarist' or explicable on purely 'rational' bases. In the context of Huntington's model the addictive and conforming elements imply a further dynamic, even an intensification, to civilisational conflict, despite globalisation.

The third objection above, that the analytical tool of idolatry breeds bigotry and arrogance, is answered by the positive contribution the tool makes in a cosmopolitan setting, recognising spiritual dynamics rather than ignoring them. Ignoring these dynamics risks understating the problems of conflicting civilisations (or idolatries). Dropping idolatry as an analytical tool can tacitly assume that ideological commitment can be readily changed, which is far from clear.

This particularly applies to Christians' relations with the world. If idolatry indeed contains accelerating addictive tendencies, then *rapprochement* between Christians and the world appears remote. Rather, Jesus' warnings of a 'religious' antipathy to Christ's people are underlined (John 15:18–16:3, especially John 16:2).

Applications also arise over theological trends. English churches increasingly think God's justice has no retributive element in the sense of moral desert.<sup>23</sup> Apart from what this entails for the Cross,<sup>24</sup> the question arises, what kind of God is it whose justice lacks any retributive element? If the worship relation involves a people conforming to its god, then the contours of our God predict in some ways our future character and contribution. Thus, Christians have consistently tried to contribute to debates over penal policy and justice. In future that Christian contribution will not feature moral desert. A Christian influenced by this view of God might feel unhappy about extenuating or exacerbating moral circumstances. C. S. Lewis long ago pointed out the paradox in this discussion of punishment.<sup>25</sup> Far from leading to lighter punishments, the non-desert schools of punishment may lead to indefinite extension of punishment, or 'cure' as it is termed in Lewis' novel. Treatment continues until cure.

18 S. of S. 2:7; 3:5; 8:4.

19 S. of S. 2:16; 6:3; 7:10.

20 John 17:21, 22. However, the Trinity remains a pattern. Certain differences remain between the uncreated relations of the triune God and the relations of created beings.

21 E.g. Buber, *I and Thou*, 2nd. edn., T & T Clark, 1958, pp.15, 16.

22 *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*, Pocket Books, 1998.

23 See e.g. some of the essayists in *Atonement Today*, J. Goldingay (ed.), SPCK, 1995.

24 Classically it is a recipe for repudiating penal substitution.

14 Michael Burleigh's *The Third Reich: a new history*, Macmillan, 2000, examines Nazism as a *religious* phenomenon, even while in some respects it eschewed such a characterisation.

15 Notably 1 Cor. 12:1, 2.

16 Cf. 1 Cor 12:3.

17 Truth and love are remarkably interwoven in 2 John 1–6.

In dispute resolution more generally, the notion of mercy becomes problematic. Mercy characteristically has been seen as an undeserved kindness. It implies action going beyond what is normally demanded or expected in a particular relationship. God shows mercy in Jeremiah 3:12 in inviting Israel to return, when, for her faithlessness, she deserves judgement. An act of mercy thus involves recognition of wrongdoing within a relationship – hence the prayer of Luke 18:13 where the tax collector pleads not his innocence and works but God’s character. Moral desert is integral here: mercy is where one does not get one’s moral deserts. If there are no moral deserts, there is no such mercy.

Naturally, this goes beyond our relations with God. We are expressly told to be merciful as our heavenly Father is (Luke 6:36). Changing his mercy alters ours too. There are here profound consequences for human relations, which are marked, given the consequences of the Fall, by mutual fault. It is not uncommon in counselling to find that parties need to forgive one another. However, it is extremely hard to see how to frame forgiveness without invoking a mercy which involves moral desert. On this basis the Christian contribution to, for example, marriage guidance, would not find it easy to speak of forgiveness.

## Idolatry, demonolatry and the victory of Christ

Losing the concept of idolatry also affects how we see Christ’s victory. One way the New Testament views salvation is as Christ’s victory over idolatries that enslave men and women.<sup>25</sup> Here the parody is that of understatement, by denying that Christ had an enemy to fight. It is important here to see just who is conquered. Idols, be they physical or abstract, are in a sense ‘nothing’. They are not the gods their worshippers imagine. But the Bible insists that behind idolatry stand demons. Idolatrous sacrifice is ultimately offered to demons (1 Corinthians 10:20a) and idolatry brings the worshipper into relation with demons (1 Corinthians 10:20b–21).<sup>27</sup> The behind-the-scenes exploiter of idolatry is the demonic, providing us as idolaters with a relationship whose true nature we do not normally suspect, either in its deceitfulness or its evil. It is, no doubt, possible to perceive that one is supernaturally enslaved. C. Arnold suggests that the world of hostile supernatural powers was all too visible to the inhabitants of Asia Minor,<sup>28</sup> a view paralleled by some missionary descriptions of animist attitudes in Papua New Guinea. It is equally possible to be enslaved and be unaware of it. The question must be faced whether this better describes the modernised West, where perceptions of reality are so strongly shaped by powerful visual media, and values readily situated in a life of wealth and health, a carnival culture, to paraphrase Mikhail Bakhtin.<sup>29</sup> This too is an apt continuation of Genesis 3, and highlighted by Jesus’ depiction of Satan as the ultimate liar (John 8:44) and the ‘false’ believers there as liars too (John 8:55). But in vanquishing a person’s idolatry, Jesus vanquishes a covert demonolatry, a victory indeed.

25 *That Hideous Strength*, cf. Lewis, ‘The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment’, *The Twentieth Century: an Australian Quarterly Review*, 1949, III:3. Also D. B. Knox ‘Punishment as Retribution’, *Interchange*, 1967, 1:5–8.

26 Notably 1 Thess. 1:9, 10.

27 See too Deut. 32:17 and Ps. 106:37.

28 C. Arnold, *Power and Magic: the concept of power in Ephesians*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2nd edn., 1997, p.167.

Understating Christ’s victory profoundly alters a believer’s relationship with God. If the Cross marks a minimal victory, then the effusive gratitude of Ephesians 1:3 seems exaggerated. If the Cross is not a signal victory, why hope that God can deal with other problems, let alone judge? Again, this is a far cry from the beliefs of the early church. There the Cross was seen as victory precisely because idolatry was vanquished, thereby also vanquishing demonolatry.<sup>30</sup> The Cross thus gave a real hope for which men and women would die.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, the character of Christ’s deliverance alters. It is not simply a realisation that idolatry is false and that the truth can be told of God. The link with the demonic underlines the ethical evil of idolatry and portrays false worship not simply as an intellectual error needing correction, but a sin requiring repentance and forgiveness. Understanding idolatry better deepens understanding of the forgiveness Christ won. Hence a Christian sees himself or herself as, amongst other things, a rescued idolater. Such a self-understanding does not necessarily breed arrogance and contempt (the third objection to the tool of idolatry noted above), but can promote humility about oneself, gratitude to one’s rescuer and concern for those still needing rescue.

## Epilogue

The practice of idolatry persists today. Properly understood, the analytical tool of idolatry is relevant, spiritually perceptive, and breeds true compassion for others, as well as humility. The concept of idolatry helps us to see the spiritually counterfeit, for it exposes a parody of true spiritual relationship. Idolatrous practice parodies the relation of creation by reversing it, with humans making the god of their choice; it parodies true worship in true relationship by offering a lying fiction; it parodies the relation of holy marriage by offering unholy harlotry; and parodies the victory of Christ by understating it. Tertullian memorably envisaged idolatry as fraud.<sup>32</sup> It is doubly so, defrauding God of his glory, and humanity of true relationship. It cruelly counterfeits real spiritual currency: spiritually, it is ‘funny money’.

Understanding idolatry is to understand oneself and one’s world. For a Christian is a member of Idolaters Anonymous. We were idolaters, exchanging the truth of God for some lie or another, and the tug of idolatry persists. This fundamental idea was greatly used by the early church, but that was a church that tried to use the Bible’s categories for analysis and did not exchange the truth of God for a lie. The price for that was an acute awareness that they were not at ease in their old world, ‘with an alien people clutching their gods’.<sup>33</sup> We Western Christians, perhaps, do not find the people alien, because we fight shy of finding their gods alien. As we lose the concept of idolatry, we shall be all too at ease.

29 M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, Indiana University Press, 1984.

30 Again, the early writers were emphatic on the link between idolatry and demonolatry.

31 Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*.

32 *On Idolatry*, 1.

33 T. S. Eliot, *The Journey of the Magi*.

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