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Giving up God ... to Find God: Breaking Free of Idolatry

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Abstract

In this inspirational book, Kerry Walters names today's "golden calves" --the idols we mistake for God, that keep us from knowing God truly. These idols include the "genie god," "big brother god," "patriot god," the "we-can-do-it! god," "by-the-book god," "my god," and others we have been taught or found in modern life. The more idols we recognize and remove from our interior shrines, Walters shows us, the more space we have for the real God, and for the spiritual values that make a difference in our lives and world.

Keywords

idolatry, Genie god, Big Brother god, Patriot god, We Can Do IT! god, By-the-Book go, My god, Church god, Designer god, Sunday School god, Egghead god

Disciplines

Philosophy | Religion

Comments

This is the preface of Dr. Walters complete book, *Giving Up God... To Find God*.

**Giving Up god
... To Find God**

Giving Up god ... To Find God

Breaking Free of Idolatry

KERRY WALTERS

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Preface

You act like mortals in all that you fear, and like immortals in all that you desire.

—SENECA

Man is indeed out of his mind. He cannot even create a flesh-worm, yet creates gods by the dozen.

—MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE¹

This is a book about idolatry, both the disease—for a spiritual disease it surely is—and its treatment.

Whenever we succumb to idolatry, or the worship of false gods, we fall victim to a kind of spiritual insanity that puts a brand-new twist on the old Greek maxim that the gods first make mad whom they would destroy. In the case of idolatry, our own madness creates the gods who wind up destroying us. Idolaters are indeed, in the brutal but accurate words of the sixteenth-century essayist Montaigne, out of their minds. For what person in full possession of his or her faculties would prefer artifact to reality, especially when the reality that's forsaken is the living God?

¹Seneca, "On the Shortness of Life," in *Dialogues and Letters*, ed. C. D. N. Costa (New York: Penguin, 1997), 60; Michel de Montaigne, "An Apology for Raymond Sebond," in *Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (New York: Penguin, 1993), 594.

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And yet we make that choice all the time. Driven by piling anxieties and inflated lusts—Seneca hit the nail on the head when he said that we humans fear like mortals but desire like gods—we clutch at false deities who can, we tell ourselves, give us everything we want without requiring anything from us in return. But like all delusions, idolatrous ones can't endure for long. Even if the idols we tailor bestow a false sense of security in the short run, they betray us sooner or later. Then the very gods we hoped would protect and serve us become demons who drag us ever further away from what our hearts *really* desire but our timidity forgets: a relationship with the sometimes elusive, always mysterious, utterly unmanageable, and forever transformative presence of God.

As with all maladies, the first step in overcoming idolatry is learning to recognize both its causes and symptoms. So in Chapter 1 I provide a clinical etiology that traces idol worship back to its root causes. Although much more ancient than the Hebraic golden calf, idolatry is a cunning disease that easily accommodates itself to the historical and cultural specifics of each generation. Chapters 2 through 11 offer diagnostic descriptions of the ten most common ways idolatry afflicts us today. Although I suggest therapeutic tips along the way for coping with these various forms of idolatry, my full prescription is reserved for the concluding Chapter 12.

Like many physical illnesses—malaria, for example, or the flu—the spiritual malady of idolatry can be recurrent. Some people are so chronically afflicted by it that it becomes a more or less permanent debilitation. But for most of us idolatrous temptations tend to come and go. Periods of special stress can bring on attacks; curiously, so can periods of spiritual dullness or complacency. The environment in which we live almost always influences the frequency with which we will succumb to idolatry. One of my claims in this book is that contemporary American culture is an especially fertile medium for the growth of idolatries.

As you read this book, you may recognize a particular form of idolatry that you recall suffering from in the past or

perhaps feel yourself slipping into now. You may even have firsthand familiarity with more than one of the various kinds of idolatry I describe. In fact, I'd be surprised if things were otherwise. Different idolatries attack us at different stages of our spiritual development. Looking at my own life, for example, I'm pretty sure that I've fallen into a good one-third of the idolatries I discuss in this book. It doesn't help that many of them cluster with one another, so that an embrace of one ensures that several others tag along for the ride. Most idolatry is a form of polytheism.

Also like many other maladies, idolatry typically doesn't get cured once and for all. The Psalmist reminds us that we humans are like grass that dies in a day and is thrown on the fire. It's foolish of us to deny our frailty. It's an inescapable fact about who we are, even if we try to pretend otherwise. The deep-seated anxiety it brews within us periodically boils over in dreadful moments of panic or despair, which in turn make us particularly susceptible to the contagion of idolatry. We will experience these dark nights of the soul all our lives, and so we will never escape the temptation to scurry in desperation to idols that offer us false hopes of protection.

When it comes to treating idolatry, then, the goal isn't to make it vanish—that's too unrealistic to take seriously—so much as to control and contain it. The key, as we'll discover, is recognition that our essential frailty as humans, although always frightening, is also a blessing, because it can lead us to a grateful and awe-filled awareness of our dependency on God's grace. God is the supreme Physician who ceaselessly offers therapy—God's very self—for our susceptibility to idolatry. The more we direct our attention to God, the better able we are to give up the false gods birthed by our inordinate anxieties and desires. Given the human condition, there may be no final cure for idolatry this side of the grave. But the divine Healer is always available to move us through the latest crisis and closer to the health he intends for us.