



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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No Other Gods
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Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me (Exod. 20:1-3).

There is a theory among many anthropologists and psychologists that human beings invented gods to overcome their sense of powerlessness and make them feel more secure.

Nature, for example, is full of powerful forces: lightning and thunder, hurricanes and tornados, earthquakes and floods. All these things can be terrifying, and so, the theory goes, primitive humans conjured up the idea that the forces of nature are controlled by gods, and they invented religion as a way to placate the gods and find security for themselves.

Early humans sought protection not only from the literal storms of life, but from metaphorical ones as well. Sickness and disease were everywhere, and for want any better explanation, these, too, were attributed to gods, and people prayed to the gods for health and healing. And there were other dangers, like hostile tribes of foreigners, so people asked their gods to beat up other people's gods, or give them the strength to win victory themselves.

And then, of course, there was death. Of all the things people could not control, death was the most obvious and the most terrifying. If religion was invented to calm people's fears, it had to deal with death especially. So religions claimed, contrary to appearances, that death is not the last

word, but within these bodies that wear out and die, there is a soul that lives on, either in endless cycles of reincarnation or permanently in some sort of afterlife.

While they were at it, the theory continues, shamans and monks and priests figured out that the promise of rewards in heaven or a good reincarnation, on the one hand, and punishment in hell or a bad reincarnation, on the other hand, would go a long way towards keeping people in line. So religion became not only a way of easing people's anxieties but also a way for priests and rulers to maintain social control by justifying whatever values and hierarchy they wanted to impose.

Some version of this theory is how social scientists typically account for the rise of religion and its remarkable persistence in most times and places. Many social scientists are atheists or agnostics, and their theories help them make sense of other people's religion, even as they themselves think religious claims are mostly nonsense on their merits.

Well, where does that leave those of us who show up in church regularly, especially if we take the claims of Christianity seriously?

I've been a minister for forty-odd years, and I obviously take Christianity seriously, or I would have done something else all these years. But I've also had a life-long interest in the sciences, and I know the arguments of those who have been called "the cultured despisers of religion." And I know that thoughtful people in our society, and in our congregations, wonder about these things too.

Some churches discourage questions and seem to want people to check their intellect at the door. I've always thought that was a disservice to religion, because any faith that's afraid of questions is a fragile faith, not very strong at all. A frightened faith might hide behind hostility to mask its insecurity, but a confident faith should welcome challenges by way of refining its own understanding of the truth.

I want to say two things briefly this morning about the gods people believe in. First, I want to say that much of what the social scientists claim about religion is right, especially when they're describing gods that turn out to be mere idols. But then I want to add that none of these criticisms need undermine faith in the one true God, and the best alternative to bad religion is not atheism but a better religion.

In the first of the Ten Commandments God declares, "You shall have no other gods before me." That's the first commandment because everything else follows from it. People are always tempted to serve other gods, and whenever our devotion to something else makes us unfaithful to the one true God, we get caught up in some sort of idolatry.

Any person, party, or purpose, or any other thing to which we're devoted can become an idol for us if our devotion leads us to act in ways that are contrary to the will of the God we Christians know most fully in Jesus Christ. If there's no daylight at all between our idea of God and any of our other interests, then it's likely that our god is too small, and what we call "God" is just a sanctified image of our other loyalties.

Many people don't recognize idolatry because they think it means bowing down to statues or icons or some other obviously silly thing to worship. But idolatry is tempting precisely because it's so much more subtle than that.

Personal relationships can slip into a kind of idolatry when someone we love becomes the only object of our devotion and our sole purpose for living. Some romantic songs used to say things like, "You're the one I worship and adore." Most of us recognize the hyperbole, but still, some people are so devoted to another human being that if anything happens to disrupt that relationship, they really don't know how life can go on.

Parties and tribes can become idolatrous too, when devotion to the group causes people to abandon the grace and compassion and justice that God wants us to show toward all human beings.

Many of us watched the sorry spectacle that played out in the Senate Judiciary Committee on Thursday, where at least some participants seemed much more interested in scoring points for their side and winning at all costs than in finding out the truth while treating everyone else with courtesy and respect. The whole episode was a sign of how ugly our hyperpartisan tribalism has become, and how it threatens to undermine the very civility and institutions upon which our democracy depends.

I was fortunate on Wednesday, the day before the Judiciary Committee hearing, to have two guests in the class I teach at Carnegie Mellon called "Fake News: 'Truth' in the History of American Journalism." My guests were retired

congressmen, one a Democrat and the other a Republican. They're part of a project whereby former representatives visit college campuses for two main reasons: first, to demonstrate that people from opposite parties can work together, and even like each other; and second, to encourage young people to consider a life of public service. It's too easy, they said, to wash our hands of the political challenges that face our nation. Democracy depends on people getting involved, but we need to do that in such a way as to find common ground for the good of the nation as a whole.

Both of these men were in their seventies, and though they had served for many years in Congress and accomplished a great deal, they were modest about themselves. They talked about how compromise requires trust, and trust requires people to get to know each other as human beings. That's gotten much harder to do since people have taken to denigrating government per se and settled into hardened siloes of partisanship, demonizing opponents instead of recognizing legitimate differences and seeking what's best for everyone.

If parties and tribes are common objects of idolatry, another perennial temptation is the nation itself, which is a kind of party or tribe writ large. In many countries these days, as the former congressmen said last week, people are voting for demagogues who stoke their resentments and feed their fear of foreigners, looking for scapegoats to blame for their discontent. People vote for politicians who foster hatred and hostility, as though this generation has forgotten the two world wars our parents and grandparents fought as a result of hypernationalism.

I'm reading a new biography of Martin Niemöller, the German pastor who became a leader in what was called the Confessing Church, over and against the German Christian Church that fully supported the Nazis in the name of nationalism before and during World War II. Niemöller is the one who famously said after the war:

First they came for the Communists, and I did not speak out because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me.

Niemöller was considered by many to be a hero after the war because of the resistance he and others in the Confessing Church showed against the Nazis. But his biographer tells a more nuanced story, including how, in the First World War, Niemöller had been a submarine commander who proudly sank all kinds of ships, including civilian ones, without any regrets for the glory of the Fatherland. Later on, Niemöller voted for Hitler more than once. He only gradually came to oppose the Nazis when they interfered with the church's affairs, while he held on to the fervent nationalism the Nazis exploited, until it finally drove their country to ruin and defeat.

We human beings have all sorts of objects of our devotion because we want the benefits they bring: a sense of belonging and identity, power and prestige, wealth and comfort and security. All those things might be fine as far as they go, but each can be so powerful in its appeal that it

easily becomes an idol. The first of the Ten Commandments reminds us that, if our lesser loyalties are not ordered and disciplined by our loyalty to the one true God, they can lead us down a path that ends in disappointment, and sometimes even devastation and destruction.

We tend to follow gods that work for us, and as long as they seem to be working we have no incentive to give them up. The more tangible the results they offer, the more we're tempted to elevate them above the one true God, who can seem abstract and distant until we get to know him.

I've been asking people lately how they come to know that God is real. Many say they see God in nature, and what they mean is that they discover an awe and beauty and majesty and power that transcends anything we humans can achieve. Nature points beyond itself to someone infinitely greater than ourselves, on whom we're obviously dependent and to whom we therefore owe our ultimate devotion.

Some people say they really turned to God only after some lesser god let them down. All sorts of idols clamor for our devotion, and only when other gods fail to give us what we want do some of us come to rely on the one true God. Then we learn that even if we can't control the things that frighten us, God can control them, and so we come to trust in God. That's what faith is, after all: trusting in God and ordering our other devotions by our ultimate devotion to God. Only then do we find the security we've been seeking, because only God is great enough to provide it.

Some people find God in service and caring for other people. That makes perfect sense, since the Bible tells us

that God is love, and the more we learn to love other people, the closer we get to God, even if we don't recognize at first the One who is drawing us into relationship and showing us what love is.

And many people find God in prayer and devotion, because those are among the ways a relationship with God takes shape. A whole pattern of living is formed in that way, until God becomes as real through our experience as anything else in life.

In all these ways, the lesser objects of our devotion find their proper place, where we're free to pursue them, not as idols and rival gods, but as gifts of the one true God. God orders all good things in such a way that when we learn to give glory and honor and praise to God, we find at last the comfort and security and peace we were seeking all along.



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