

Preface 7

Ecclesiastes 12:12

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Herbert Schlossberg's IDOLS FOR DESTRUCTION

(Part I)

by Gary North

Subtitled, "Christian Faith and Its Confrontation with American Society," this book is a tour de force. That it is Dr. Schlossberg's first book is remarkable. That he wrote it, as he admits, virtually "from scratch" philosophically, is even more remarkable. That he is not employed by any academic institution is not remarkable at all. He is an investment counsellor by profession, having escaped the cloistered and underpaid halls of ivy while there was still time.

Sometime in early 1977, the author became convinced that most of what he had been fed in graduate school had missed the mark in almost every respect. As a Christian, he was interested in finding specifically Christian answers to the fundamental social problems of life, but he had found nothing that satisfied him intellectually. Then he ordered a copy of *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, and began his inquiries. Simultaneously, he began taking books out of the library on social theory and practice. Somehow, he went "straight to the mark." He analyzed the teachings of the neo-conservatives in terms of a biblical framework. He read Mises, Friedman, Sowell, and other free market economists. He read many of the works of Robert Nisbet. The footnotes in *Idols for Destruction* trace his intellectual pilgrimage, and could serve as a introductory guide to recent Western thought and culture. The major flaw of the book is that he left out hundreds of footnotes—references to newspaper articles, for example.

Let me say from the outset that the book is very nearly flawless. His style, the balance of topics, the lucid analysis, the theological framework, his use of ridicule (where warranted), his memorable aphorisms, and above all, the book's basic thesis, all combine to make this book, hands down, **the most important single-volume critique of contemporary secular humanism available today.**

He submitted a description of the book to about a hundred publishers, including Nelson. They all rejected it. He did not think he would be able to get it published by any conventional publishing firm. Then the manuscript received favorable comments from Carl Henry, the former editor of *Christianity Today*, who is well respected and also known for his political conservatism. This recommendation persuaded Nelson to reconsider. The irony of this is that Dr. Henry is an outspoken opponent of the Christian Reconstruction movement. He did not recognize in *Idols for Destruction* the underlying theological presuppositions of its critique of

humanism, despite its footnote references to the writings of members of this movement. His recommendation succeeded in getting a major Christian publisher to put into print the book which is unquestionably the most eloquent presentation of the Christian Reconstruction movement's basic objections to humanism.

The End of the Road

Schlossberg begins with despair—the despair of contemporary humanism. The title of H. G. Wells' book, *The Mind at the End of Its Tether* (1945), expresses it best. The end of optimism marks this civilization, a point emphasized by Robert Nisbet's *History of the Idea of Progress* (1980). Like Nisbet, Schlossberg does not believe that a civilization which has given up faith in the future will survive very far into the future. He cites William Foxwell Albright, the distinguished Christian archeologist, who has written that the impasse of today's world is similar to the impasse faced by the Hellenic world in Christ's day (a point driven home in Charles Norris Cochrane's definitive study, *Christianity and Classical Culture* [1944]). Sociologist Daniel Bell made this observation about the transition from technocratic optimism in the 1950's: "Paradoxically, the vision of Utopia was suddenly replaced by the spectre of Doomsday."

Schlossberg insists that historical description is not enough to satisfy men; they search for the **meaning** of historical events. But to find meaning, men must come to a theory of historical development. Some have used **spatial** analogies: rise, decline, fall (Gibbon's history of Rome). Others have used **organic** analogies: birth, growth, decay, death (Spengler). He rejects both spatial and organic analogies. "In place of these analogies the biblical explanation of the end of societies uses the concept of *judgment*. It depicts them as either having submitted themselves to God or else having rebelled against him" (p. 6). In other words, Schlossberg has adopted Cornelius Van Til's theological classification of Christianity as a religion of **ethics** rather than **metaphysics**. Historical development must always be seen as an ethical process.

Idolatry

Here he introduces the organizing theme of his book, idolatry:

All such visions are freighted with religious content, although this is often not recognized. They contain at least some of the components we expect to find in

religions: a theory of knowledge, an authoritative literature, a theory of historical relationships, a cosmology, a hierarchy of values, and an eschatology. To cite an obvious example, Marxism, which some people still insist on calling a science, has every one of those features. What more could we ask of a religion? Well, it might be said that a religion should have God as its end. But anyone with a hierarchy of values has placed *something* at its apex, and whatever that is is the god he serves. The Old and New Testaments call such gods idols and provide sufficient reason for affirming that the systems that give them allegiance are religions (pp. 4-5).

"Idolatry," he writes, "in its larger meaning is properly understood as any substitution of what is created for the creator" (p. 6). Whatever man places at the top of what Schlossberg calls the "pyramid of values" is what he serves.

Western society, in turning away from Christian faith, has turned to other things. This process is commonly called *secularization*, but that conveys only its negative aspect. The word connotes the turning away from the worship of God while ignoring the fact that something is being turned to in its place. . . . All such principles that substitute for God exemplify the biblical concept of idol (p. 6).

From the outset, therefore, this book rejects any concept of intellectual neutrality. We cannot avoid a philosophy. The question is, *which philosophy?* We must begin with assumptions of how the world works. They cannot be proven; they are assumptions (p. 8). Why, then, do so many academic Christians adopt the assumptions of the spirit of their age—a humanistic age? He cites W. R. Inge (maddeningly, and all too typically, without providing the original source): "He who marries the spirit of an age soon finds himself a widower."

The False Hope: Pluralism

Schlossberg rejects pluralism as a social philosophy. Here is a marvelous aphorism—one of dozens which fill the book: "A pluralistic society heralds the virtues of paths that have no exits" (p. 9). Each path goes its own way, headed . . . where? How do we make a workable society by means of pluralism? What we find today, he says, is "a clash of idols": capitalism vs. socialism, statism vs. libertarianism, individualism vs. collectivism, rationalism vs. irrationalism, elitism vs. equalitarianism, reaction vs. radicalism.

The conflicting parties and the media create false dilemmas, and the ecclesiastical leaders lunge at them as if the only response to a dilemma were to impale themselves on one of its horns. The issues of the day are so contrived as to create the illusion that every choice is wrong, that nothing can be done without doing some evil, and that the only question is which course of action is less evil (p. 10).

There is a third way between these contradictions, or "antinomies." What Schlossberg's book attempts to do is to chart the intellectual evils of our day, in the hope of "clearing the deck on the Titanic," so to speak, but only as a first step to keep her from sinking. (His next book should probably be called *Altars for Construction*.)

There are six idols surveyed in the book, idols of history, humanity, mammon, nature, power, and religion.

Which Kind of Idol?

All idols belong either to nature or to history. The

whole creation falls into those two categories, and there is no other place to which man can turn to find a substitute for God. Any idol that is not an artifact of the natural world is an artifact of the social world (p. 11)

This paragraph introduces Chapter One, "Idols of History." I have never read a more profound, succinct summary of the twin ideological evils of autonomous man's speculation concerning the nature of reality. Man's environment is two-fold: God and the creation. Men either worship God or the creation. But rebellious man rejects this view of his environment. He rejects the idea that the Creator God of the Bible is the ground of all existence. Yet he, too, sees his environment broken into two parts: the physical (or metaphysical) environment and the social environment. By means of Schlossberg's insight into the nature of rebellious man's dual idols, it becomes possible to interpret the whole of humanistic civilization, or any civilization. Which of the two "master idols" is worshipped, nature or history?

Some societies de-emphasize history. Classical civilization did, asserting that reason, not historical change, is the ultimate reality. Eastern mysticism also rejects history, but for the opposite reason, namely, the unreliability of reason—indeed, the unreliability of our perception of the external world. The particularities of historical factuality hold no interest for the mystic. "That is why, as G. K. Chesterton said, it is fitting that the Buddha be pictured with his eyes closed; there is nothing important to see" (p. 13). (But where did he write this? There is no footnote.)

In contrast to the history-denigrators are the historicists, who believe that all laws of social organization and historical development are themselves the product of the historical process itself. Hegel and his followers (including Karl Marx) are the best examples of this form of idolatry. Historical relativism swallows up all permanent ethics. The facts of history smash all the supposedly permanent laws in history. If men's sentiments change, in response to changes in themselves or in their physical environment, then a new law-order must appear which validates today's historical imperatives. Again, a delightful aphorism: "Thus, by the alchemy of historicism, fact is turned into value" (p. 14).

History is the lord of the universe, in this perspective; to struggle against it is futile. History is divinized. The *perceived status quo* is presented as the inevitable and irresistible outcome of the forces of history. Men "have absolutized *this* trend and thereby put history's seal of approval on *this status quo*, one, no doubt, that is moving their way." Their opponents are reminded that it is futile to "turn back the clock."

This application of historicism, like all of them, deifies time, making it an idol. Time will unfold all things, it says, in a way that is inevitably right no matter what happens. . . . Trying to "turn back the clock" becomes more serious than impropriety or stupidity; it is an act of impiety. Historicism is a dogma, as Robert Nisbet has said, "that has had the greatest appeal to several generations of intellectuals bereft of religion and driven thereby into the arms of the waiting church of historical necessity." This is a church with many branches, all of whose members are on the move. Anyone convinced that X is the wave of the future is tempted mightily to enter the struggle on the victory side. Certain that he is on the team that the future will vindicate, the historicist fights with abandon; tepidity is only for people with doubts (p. 17).

The biblical idea of a sovereign God over history has been unacceptable to humanists since the Renaissance. Nevertheless, they have wanted a concept of progress.

They found it within (immanent to) history. "Thus, as with all idols, the principle of immanence is central to theory" (p. 19).

The Christian view is that God is over history, and therefore historical facts have meaning. History is not absurd. "It is important but not all-important. It has much to teach but is not the source of knowledge and wisdom. It imposes limitations on the actions of men, but it does not control them. It commands respect but not worship. Taking history down from above the altar, Christian faith also lifts it up out of the pit" (p. 28).

At this point, Schlossberg returns to the central theme of the book, **judgment**. We refuse to sacralize history, or to argue that progress is in any way inevitable. We are to fill the earth and subdue it (Gen. 1:28). We cannot freeze history in whatever pattern we deem to be eternal. Christians must **judge history in terms of ethical standards that are outside of history**.

Idols of Humanity

Chapter Two is a forthright critique of humanism's central thesis, that man is autonomous, that no God stands above man to judge him, either in time or eternity, but especially not in time. It begins with this succinct observation: "Eve was the first humanist."

Eve was lured into rebellion by the promise that she would be as God. "She could be wise apart from God." This **self-worship** is the basis of all **pride**. It was the heart of the ancient world's kingdoms, as well as the heart of the Renaissance, which looked back to the humanism of classical Greece and Rome as its blueprint. The heart of this faith is expressed, he says, in the second Humanist Manifesto: "No deity will save us; we must save ourselves" (p. 42). Here is an extremely important observation: "The idea of humanity as a deity is seldom avowed openly but rather is expressed by ascribing to man attributes of God: sovereignty (or autonomy), complete rationality, and moral perfection." There is no higher court of appeal than man. It matters little, therefore, whether or not there is a personal God hanging around in the shadows of the historical process. He is not history's judge.

Humanists are **antinomians**, he says. Their ethical systems are relativistic. What men feel is what matters. Their morality is based on "the teachings of King Sentiment" (p. 44). "To assign such values in a system that has no objective standard must either be the arbitrary judgment of a sovereign elite or else a matter of mere social convention. In either case they are subjectively ascertained and may be changed at any time" (p. 44). Humanism holds to "the doctrine of the primacy of sentiment. . . ."

Humanism thrives on sentimentality because few religions are more dishonest in their doctrinal expressions. Unable to withstand dispassionate analysis, which would reveal its lack of foundation, it stresses feeling over thought. That is what makes its sentimentality so vicious. People can get good feelings from almost anything; "sadism" refers to a philosophy that elevates feeling into a moral principle (p. 46).

"There is no action so evil that it cannot and will not be said to be motivated by love. Antinomian love goes perfectly with autonomous man; neither can stand the shackles of law" (p. 47). Who has ever said it any better than this?

Schlossberg recognizes that all laws are theologically based. But when men lose faith in the ultimacy of law, pragmatism takes over, "and that means that breakdown is near. Right and wrong become questions of risk versus reward, and morality then is purely a matter of calculation"

(p. 47). Men cannot build a civilization on such a foundation of ethical sand as this. Men must have faith in the **legitimacy** of law, and pure subjective calculation does not provide such legitimacy. But modern humanism is inherently pragmatic and subjectivist. Therefore, he concludes: "No law can survive the hegemony of sentimentality and human autonomy. Only force remains" (p. 48).

Schlossberg understands clearly that modern humanists have adopted the **ethics of envy**, or what he calls *ressentiment* (following the German sociologist Max Scheler). Men resent any signs of superiority in others. Men wish to pull down others, not for their own personal financial gain, but merely for the joy of seeing the others toppled.

We have seen in our day what the French philosopher Jacques Ellul has called "the divinization of the poor." Humanists have "a penchant for creating wards in order to strike at enemies," Schlossberg says (p. 54). They hate the middle class—the "bourgeoisie"—and the ethics of that class. Another doctrine is that of **equality**. Not equality before the law, but the more pernicious version: **equality of results**. The perveyors of equalitarianism have used **guilt** as a means of creating political support for programs of compulsory wealth redistribution. Such a political program requires a **permanent class of victims**, for "there is a kind of helper that needs someone helpless to assist" (p. 57). Schlossberg then discusses in detail the poverty issue, which is based on the inescapable existence of **relative poverty**. It is an issue that will not go away, for perfect equality cannot (and should not) be attained. The welfare programs of the modern humanist State have created a system of **permanent dependency**, or what Schlossberg perceptively calls "the curse of ontological victimhood." A victim is always **society's victim**.

The same humanitarian destiny that perpetuates victimhood on one imposes permanent guilt and material loss on the other. *Ressentiment* enjoys its double triumph in the public celebration of humanitarianism: It exalts categories of weakness, sickness, helplessness, and anguish into virtues while it debases the strong and prosperous. Denying the possibility of strength for the weak keeps them weak. Being freed from dependence would bring the victim back into the human family, responsible to himself and others. How much better to remain a victim, shielded from trouble and responsibility through altruism (p. 70).

This same humanistic attitude of perpetual victimhood prevails in the field of foreign policy and economic development. The West supposedly has kept the downtrodden masses of the Third World in poverty. Not so, writes Schlossberg, "The culture of the West, infused as it is with Christian values, is superior to any other, and all the valid charges against the West are indications that it has betrayed its own heritage. It is not superior because it is wealthy; it is wealthy because it is superior, because it believes that work is a calling, that matter is important, that reason is a gift of God. This culture, God's gift, transmits its material blessings along with its interpretation of reality" (p. 72).

"The humanitarian aim is to exercise power. . . . all the policies converge on it" (p. 76). (Page 76 sets the record: 5 missing footnotes that I'd like to have.) The Christian view is that influence and authority are an outgrowth of adherence to God's law. The humanists never admit this. "The basic problem for old-fashioned humanists is that they wish to keep the fruits of Christian doctrine while jettisoning the doctrine itself" (p. 77).

Schlossberg points to the ironic fact of parallel develop-

ments: the rise of humanitarianism and the rise of legalized abortion.

It is no coincidence that humanitarian policy has reached the zenith of its influence at a time when death propaganda is so much in evidence. The arguments in favor of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia reveal that the humanitarian ethic wishes to restrict the right to live and expand the right to die—and to kill. Humanism is a philosophy of death. It embraces death, wishes a good death, speaks of the horrible burdens of living for the baby who is less than perfect, for the sick person in pain. It is intolerable to live, cruel to be forced to live, but blessed to die. It is unfair to have to care for the helpless, and therefore merciful to kill. Those who wish to go on living, it seems, are guilty and ungrateful wretches dissipating the energies of the "loved ones" who have better uses for the estate than paying medical bills (p. 82).

In contrast, he says, "The church has always rightly emphasized knowing how to die, but that does not make death a friend. In the absolute sense, there are no good deaths. Death is the enemy, the last enemy to be destroyed (I Cor. 15:26). The good-death people know nothing of life. . . ."

Humanism has given us a philosophy of "depersonalization and dehumanization" in the name of humanity. In contrast, the Christian argues that all men are made in the image of God, and therefore that all men are fully responsible before God. To be **human** is to be **morally responsible**. Men are not the products of their social and physical environment. They are the products of an environment of **cosmic personalism**, although Schlossberg does not use this phrase. Humanism denies that all men are responsible for their thoughts and deeds. Only humanism's enemies are seen as responsible, and therefore human. The permanent victims are not responsible, and therefore not truly human.

It is ironic that for humanitarians only poor people, minorities, and those who have run afoul of the law are assumed to be shaped by the iron grip of circumstance. If we look at the villains instead of the victims—the police, politicians, social workers, businessmen—we find that the humanitarians have given them free will. They do not speak about the industrialist's tyrannical father, the loan shark's miserable child-

hood in an orphan home, the policeman's neurotic mother. Those people are responsible for their acts, and therefore are human. Humanism thus awards its enemies the status of human beings while taking that status from its wards (p. 83).

Humanism is irrational, he concludes. It bases its assertion of the dignity of man on the philosophical premise of naturalism—the environment of an exclusively impersonal nature—yet there is no way to derive this dignified status of man from impersonal nature. "Elevating the will to a position of eminence in *determining* good and evil, it insists on its impotence in *doing* good and evil. Exalting human beings to divine status, it nevertheless is willing to kill them for their own good . . ." (p. 84).

He cites Dostoyevsky's words: "If God is dead, everything is permitted." The moral principles that have undergirded the West for many centuries "seem to be hanging in midair" (p. 86). The theological roots have been abandoned. "Finally, with the remnants of Christian principle entirely gone, sentiment will rule completely." We will see infanticide, forced sterilization, the execution of the elderly, and other moral horrors. We will also see the advent of totalitarianism. Moral anarchy leads to the disintegration of society, and men will not live in anarchic social conditions. "Autonomous man, they find, needs leadership, and strong leadership is the hallmark of humanist society. Whether embodied in a committee or personalized in a leader, the elite dominates. Thus, far from bringing liberation, the anarchy of humanism brings enslavement" (p. 87). Educated men know this. If they believe that other men are essentially machines, they want to become the programmers.

Schlossberg ends the chapter on the idols of humanity with these moving words:

Humanitarianism is saviorhood, an ethic perfectly suited to the theology that divinizes man. But the theology that divinizes man, it turns out, only divinizes some men. The objects of humanitarian concern become less than men, so that the humanitarianism can exercise the prerogatives of a god.

The god that failed is man (p. 87).

(To Be Continued)