

Preface 9

Ecclesiastes 12:12

Institute for Christian Economics 1984

Herbert Schlossberg's IDOLS FOR DESTRUCTION

(Part 3)

by Gary North

Idols of Religion

The sixth and final idol in Schlossberg's pantheon is this one. (Best of all, there are few missing footnotes in this chapter.) He begins by comparing the hostility toward clericalism and ecclesiasticism on the part of atheists. Attacks on both need not be confined to atheists, however, the prophets of Israel attacked the religious establishment throughout Israel's history. "From the time that Aaron, the first high priest, acceded to the people's wish by casting a golden calf (Ex. 32), the religious leadership has always prepared the way for apostasy" (p. 232).

Even in the midst of rampant social evil, in the days of Isaiah, the people took part in the official religious rites of Israel. God rejected their sacrifices because of their hypocrisy.

Any institution can become idolatrous, but it appears to be a particular hazard with institutions of religion. The charge to live righteously and speak the Word of God faithfully apparently provides fertile ground for the noxious weeds of self-righteousness, and they in turn render one impervious to the prophetic voice that demands repentance and restitution. From that low state, it is only a short step to the religious institution's becoming an active agent of idolatry or even become an idol itself as people confuse the means of worship with the object of worship (p. 233).

Rather than openly rejecting the religion of Jehovah, the Israelites mixed the traditional rites with the ethics of Canaanitic religion. By combining temple religion with pagan beliefs and practices, the religious leaders had debauched the nation (p. 234).

In the United States, mainline churches do not actively distinguish themselves from the surrounding cultural institutions. The rationalistic perspective of the Enlightenment has come to dominate American society. "Mortimer Adler puzzled over why Protestant theologians should have come to the position of atheism and decided that it was because they had committed themselves to the reigning views of naturalism and materialism. Once the norms of academic orthodoxy were accepted, it was only natural that its conclusions should be adopted as well" (p. 236). As Schlossberg points out, all ecclesiastical traditions have been compromised by the secularism of the universities, where the religious leaders have been trained. University of Chicago theologian-historian Martin Marty identified them in 1969 as "the relevant reverends, the hip and swinging clerics, the secular clergy."

The churches have rewritten Jesus to conform with their vision of the legitimate sort of God: middle class, or a revolutionary, or a social democrat. The norms of secular society are transmitted to the churches. He thinks that the historicist

mentality—the idea that the different laws of historical development, including moral laws, govern each era of history—has made it difficult to conclude that a dominant trend is evil, "and thus stands ready to embrace anything that will confer contemporaneity on itself" (p. 237). To be "progressive" is the historicists' primary goal in life. Thus, "Protestantism has largely divested itself of the transcendent and has become almost indistinguishable from the surrounding culture" (p. 238). He calls this "theological decrepitude" and it accompanies "ecclesiastical debasement" (p. 239). It is syncretism.

It is understandable that humanists extoll the kind of Christianity which is promoted by such syncretism. Christian humanism, after all, is still humanism. The expansion of the messianic State has been aided by the humanists' version of "social justice," the political product of humanitarianism. Schlossberg recognizes the theological origins of humanitarianism, and he forthrightly rejects the whole idea. "The only theology consistent with humanitarianism is works-righteousness, or Pelagianism" (p. 240). Humanitarianism opposes a religion of grace. It maintains its appeal today only because "the humanitarian ethic of the broader society retains a residue of biblical teaching. This enables humanitarian apologists to seize the moral high ground" (p. 241). It is a false religion, an idol. In our day, it has led to a theology which **divinizes the poor** (Ronald Sider's continual refrain, "God is on the side of the poor," is representative of such humanitarian thinking, and it is clear why Schlossberg rejects Sider's theology p. 244n.)

The humanitarians are conducting a war against economics, he says. The theology of moralism, citing Chesterton, is "one solid cataract of platitudes flowing forever and ever" (p. 241). They blame rich people for the poverty of others. They exalt the State and State programs of wealth redistribution. They preach guilt to the middle class, when they should be preaching self-responsibility to the poor (p. 243).

The modern theologians put theology at the disposal of the State or the revolutionaries. "Ecclesiastical support for the state idolatry is unconsciously imitative of the temple religion that endorsed and undergirded the unjust rulers of Judah" (p. 244). Liberation theology, which is at root Marxism, does the same for might be called the **replacement Caesars** for today's establishment. He cites David Chilton's summary of liberation theology. "Jesus is Lord—in the Church; Marx is Lord in history" (p. 249). The revolution breeds a counter-revolution, and the result is warfare and tyranny.

The great evil of today is **civil religion**. This was what John Dewey called for to ratify the goals of the humanist elite (p. 251). It is supposed to integrate the values of the humanist society into the church, thereby integrating Chris-

tians into the humanist social order

One of the continuing complaints by those who want a working relationship with the idols of this civilization is this one. Christian Reconstructionists cause too much trouble. They divide Christians from Christians and Christians from the prevailing order. The critics want to reform the system, not replace it. In short, they want a peace treaty with the humanist civil order. Why make ourselves anathema to the "powers that be," in the church or outside? Schlossberg's answer is eloquent

A religious statement, on the other hand, which says "do not be conformed to the values of society" swings an axe at the trunk of civil religion. Civil religion eases tensions, where biblical religion creates them. Civil religion papers over the cracks of evil, and biblical religion strips away the covering, exposing the nasty places. Civil religion prescribes aspirin for cancer, and biblical religion insists on the knife (p. 252)

Schlossberg warns us against any revival of civil religion. "Times of crisis produce surges of civil piety because religious observances are intended as propitiatory offerings to bring back good fortune and stability. When Augustus sought to restore peace after a long period of civil war, it was natural for him to turn to the imperial cult as one of his tools" (p. 252). If God and religion are treated as **utilitarian instruments** in restoring or preserving order, they are being treated as idols. In such a religion, "There is thus no distinction between being religious and conforming to whatever society expects." Establishment religion in the United States is fragmented. The nation is being divided up into a multitude of competing civil religions. The remnant remains faithful, while "society's chaplains bless whatever policy may issue from the civil establishment" (p. 253).

Warning: "Idols are hard to identify after they have been part of the society for a time" (p. 254). Moloch became part of Israel's religious scene. All the "best" elements of society supported his worship. This is why the prophets denounced them, not because they were powerful or wealthy. This is why being a prophet is dangerous.

As Moloch becomes irrelevant, his followers become irrelevant. "It is a paradox that the attempt to become contemporaneous, which is to say relevant, ensures the irrelevance of theologies and churches" (p. 255). Instead of exposing the idols of modernity, the churches promote and serve them. "The relevant theologies of both left and right confer the baptismal sprinkle on their respective portions of the cultural and political spectrum."

Today we have **democratic idolatry**. The people get what they want.

Schlossberg rejects criticism of the establishment for criticism's sake. He rejects any idea of the prophetic task which places the prophet in a position of perpetual griper. In general, he says,

... the radical Christian left has been a shrill scream, indiscriminately labeling everything it dislikes as idolatrous, and thus deservedly marshals small influence. Moreover, its hasty identification with the prophetic writings that denounce those who oppress the poor lead it to divinize the poor and to cooperate with the policies of social democracy that turn poverty into a permanent condition. Imposing helplessness on poor people, it works to ensure the triumph of humanitarian policies that condemn the poor to perpetual dependency. Having lost the power of discrimination, this type of radicalism mindlessly associates itself with any expression of anti-establishment feeling and so substitutes a shabby anti-Americanism for a truly radical gospel (p. 256).

He asks why the cults are flourishing today. Because people seek out magical gurus who supposedly can offer meaning. They reject creeds for personal membership in a meaningful group. The new humanist Christianity of the mainline denominations no longer can deal successfully with such people (p. 257). "A pluralist society has many ways of coopting the churches" (p. 258).

What we need, he says, is "adherence to a standard." This is what is lacking in modern society, and this society is in the process of disintegration, the churches included. It has been going on for a long time.

If we consider churches in their role as institutions, they exemplify the common ailment of institutional failure in a declining society. Families fail to nurture, governments fail to provide justice, schools fail to educate, and so churches fail to represent Christ. Ecclesiastical failure is not a sudden event but, as in the case of those sister institutions, began long ago. The fact that major denominations are being deserted by large numbers of people does not mean that they have just now slipped. The grave weaknesses of intellectual power, of faith, of integrity, and of a sense of mission are only now becoming evident in the statistics. The mask has been taken away. Choosing to be relevant to society's illusions instead of their historic mission, they join society in its degeneration (p. 258).

Consequences and Expectations

Schlossberg begins his seventh chapter with references to historians who have predicted the future inaccurately. It is a difficult business. Still, the task should not be avoided. But history is an open system, meaning it responds not to its own immanent laws (historicism's lie), but to God. Predictions based on historicism can be overturned. "For if history is subject to principles and forces that lie outside itself, its course can be changed, even abruptly" (p. 261).

There is only one possible cause of a revolution, Peter Drucker says: **a fundamental change in values**. The West has been led astray, Schlossberg says, by false messiahs promoting the worship of false idols. It is a war between the Enlightenment faith and Christianity (The Roman Catholic scholar, Kuehnelt-Leddihn once wrote that the West is the scene of a conflict between the ideas of two men named Jean from Geneva: Calvin and Rousseau). "But when people turn to idolatries, and the outcome of those faiths become incarnated in society's institutions, the rot sets in. What happens in the future depends on the moral state of the people who decide to follow one course of action rather than another" (p. 263). In short, choose this day whom you will serve: Baal or God. Such a view of history is in opposition to the deterministic theories of Enlightenment materialism.

Pragmatism will not work. We dare not jettison principle. We reap what we sow. There is no escape (p. 264). Yet our age is deeply pragmatic. **There are no "technical solutions" that really are solutions**. Ronald Sider is always calling for a reform of the "structures of society." Here is Schlossberg's response to such thinking.

When social pathologies appear, we blame them on the "structures of society" (or if the religious establishment is speaking, our problem becomes "structural sin"). If the structures of society are guilty, and not we, then there is no possibility for personal repentance and no way to deal with guilt. We then do the irrational and destructive acts that maintain the systems of redistribution and humanitarianism, in a desperate and futile attempt to expunge guilt feelings by what seem to be good works. Doing what we please and

blaming the result on structures is the moral equivalent of the free lunch. By-passing repentance and judgment, we try to arrest increasing chaos by adding a special investigative officer to the court, increasing a subsidy here or a dole there, implementing a halfway house here, a counselling service there. The diagnosis is wrong, and so the intended cure is futile (p. 265)

What we are seeing is a flight from moral behavior (p. 266). The whole intellectual elite is determined to believe in determinism. We need freedom to exercise moral behavior, but the planners choose to reduce our freedom

The fundamental capital is **moral capital**. All the foreign aid from the West will not make a fundamental difference to underdeveloped nations whose people are unwilling to accept the moral responsibilities of freedom. Materialist philosophies cannot accept this, and the bulk of the reigning philosophies, East and West, are materialistic (p. 267).

We are being told to be guilty in a world devoid of any faith in morality. Every petty despot exercises power in the name of love, compassion, and righteousness, yet the materialists have no basis of morality (p. 267).

We are becoming lower class. Our elite imitate the styles and fads of the lower class. The music of the day is increasingly primitive. (Schlossberg does not specify which primitive music: atonal modern music or rock music.) We are imitating various proletariats, yet they are no longer imitating the elite, rather like the barbarian members of the Roman army began keeping their own names rather than taking Roman ones, at precisely the time that the Romans began imitating the barbarians' dress and culture (p. 269). Thus, "the mark of a culture's last stage is not decay but syncretism. The advance into the established culture of the West of pagan and primitive modes of music and art should not be regarded, as it is so often, of progress, but rather as a sign of decline. All this has a devastating impact on the life of a civilization." The society "burns in self-hatred" (p. 270).

One sign of this hatred is hatred of reason, of intellect, which undergirded Western culture. The totalitarians will flourish by attacking intellect. This is basic to the creation of a "mass man" (p. 271). The college classroom today is a place where rot is taught, not exposed (p. 272). (Schlossberg, it should be understood, is a former college professor; he is not "shooting from the hip" here.) "Students are left defenseless because they are untrained in discerning the religious assumptions that underlie what they are taught. . . . Then they graduate and teach it to children in the schools" (p. 272).

But it is **moral relativism**, "clothed with suitable scientific coverings," which is the most damaging legacy to the next generation. This relativism threatens the survival of science, for intellectual honesty is the assumption of science. We cannot afford to test everything we are told concerning the results of scientific experimentation

Schlossberg recognizes clearly that "Humanism has become the most messianic of the idolatrous religions of the West" (p. 273). Our cultural collapse resembles Rome's: cults flourish, astrology is popular, and gnosticism—faith is salvation by secret wisdom—is growing in popularity. Irrationalism is offered as a healing ointment for the sterile rigors of rationalism. **Pantheism** is replacing Enlightenment rationalism. But men are not thereby closer to the God of the Bible

Schlossberg sees the Christian school movement as an important institution in the religious wars of our era. He sees also that the State's efforts to control these independent schools is part of an attempted suppression of rival religious views

The religion of growth, the religion of Keynesian economics, is also in retreat. The grand promises of the mid-1960's are turning to dust in the economists' mouths. Big

business gets subsidies, politicians buy votes with tax money, and the State is called in to steal from the productive. The Federal budget is out of control (p. 281). We are consuming our capital, consuming our future. The ideal of the State as a grab-bag of free goodies is leading to social strife, a kind of free-for-all battle to get into the Treasury. Again, we resemble the latter days of Rome, when a similar view of civil government prevailed, and the Roman treasury was emptied (p. 285).

Antinomianism has become a universal faith. Biblical law is rejected, and the New Testament says that such an attitude leads to slavery and idolatry (p. 286). "The contemptuous attitude of many private citizens toward the statutes therefore mirrors that of state officials toward the higher law they should be reflecting" (p. 286). Solzhenitsyn says that the Soviet Union is lawless, and therefore it is tyrannical. Without the protection of the law, the citizen is hampered by endless laws. He cites Chesterton: "When you break big laws, you do not get liberty; you do not even get anarchy. You get the small laws" (p. 287). You get forms in triplicate. You get, in short, the reign of the petty tyrants, the bureaucratization of civilization.

What kind of ethical system dominates in such a world? The ethics of abortion, of euthanasia. It is a dehumanizing ethic. If we say that man is nothing but an animal, we (meaning the elite who hold power) will treat men as if they were animals. "An altruism rooted in sentimentality is unstable and cannot withstand the testing that is inevitable in a civilization in the process of disintegration" (p. 288). Ours is an age in which torture has been revived—a logical consequence of the denial of its Christian foundations. "Once we reject absolute law and adopt theories that regard human beings as simply manifestations of natural forces, it only requires a serious crisis for those ideas to bear their evil fruit. That crisis is on the way" (p. 288).

We see today an accelerating drive for political power. The failures of State planning are used as a pretext for adding more power to the State planners. "Misfortune is taken as *prima facie* evidence that we can no longer afford the luxury of freedom. That is why the successes of the neo-Malthusian purveyors of doom presage the continued tightening of controls" (p. 291). We are headed for fascism

Now that the raiding of the capital stock is producing its inevitable results, the federal government has embarked on a program of "reindustrialization" to repair the damage. The ensuing partnership between government and industry will likely show the characteristics of both the abortive corporate state that almost came into being in the United States in the 1930s and the disasters that pass for planning in such places as Britain, Italy, and the Soviet Union. The resulting economic debacle will be widely cited to demonstrate the failure of capitalism. Already the system has resulted in what Amitai Etzioni—who coined the term reindustrialization—calls "lemon socialism." The state, says Etzioni, continues to encourage consumption rather than investment, and then bails out failing companies—the lemons (p. 292).

What will be the result of all these trends? Schlossberg minces no words. **judgment** This is the thesis of the book. Where men worship idols, they are judged by God. There is no escape, except through repentance before God. "In the prophetic works of the Old Testament, which provide the model for the present study, judgment is inseparable from idolatry. Human actions have moral consequences. There is a principle of moral accountability in the universe. Idolatry destroys those who indulge themselves in it. One of the prophets of the northern kingdom put it this way: 'With their silver and gold they made idols for their own destruction'

(Hos. 8:4)" (p. 293). Here is the source of the book's title. Either the idols will be destroyed by repentant men, just as Josiah destroyed them, or else those who erected them and worship them will be destroyed when God destroys the idols and their worshippers. He cites Deuteronomy 28:58 as a guarantee of future afflictions. "Moreover, this judgment is continually described in personal terms. It is not a vague force that somehow brings retribution; it is the personal wrath of God in action" (p. 294).

He makes a very important point. People who become idolaters are changed. "In a kind of reverse sanctification, the idolater is transformed into the likeness of the object of his worship" (p. 295).

After biblical faith wanes, a people can maintain habits of thought and of self-restraint. The ethic remains after the faith that bore it departs. But eventually a generation arises that no longer has the habit, and that is when the behavior changes rapidly. When Israel began worshipping the Canaanite gods, it was only a matter of time before the nation began shedding innocent blood (Ps. 106:34-39). There is no protection against this in statutes or constitutions, which become scraps of paper when people come to despise the law that stands behind them. . . . The generation now alive has remained true to many vestiges of the biblical faith. These remnants are like the smile of the Cheshire cat, remaining for a time after the disappearance of the entity in which it was incarnated. Humanism's preoccupation with helping acts would be inconceivable in a society with a different heritage. . . . Thus, the remnant of health can remain for a time after the necessary conditions to sustain it have been removed. Before the capital stock of the old faith is completely exhausted, it still produces a little of its social income. A Faustian bargain has its attractions in the promise of short-term benefits, while the diabolic aspects lose some of their terror for their deferment to a distant future. The Indian summer of the Roman Empire, as Toynbee called it, was mistaken by Gibbon for the golden age (pp. 296f).

The New Community

The eighth and final chapter is the weakest in the book. It outlines what kind of reconstruction needs to take place, either after the judgment or before it, in order to avoid it. He calls for a return to the enforcement of all ten commandments, something that apparently has not been grasped by those neo-evangelical conservatives who have promoted the book, yet who are opposed to the Christian Reconstruction movement.

The message of the Old Testament prophets was twofold. Both tables of the law had been violated, that which permitted only God to be worshiped and that which regulated the relationships between human beings on the basis of justice. Israel's dual failing was the worship of false gods and the rejection of justice. That is apparently the invariable pattern (p. 298).

Orthodoxy is not enough, he says, faith without works is dead. "Bad faith and bad practice are equally defiant of the law" (p. 298).

Straight teaching combined with straight living, in the biblical vision, is to dominate all of life. There are no ex-

empt corners in which one conducts business as usual while making perfunctory gestures toward religious observances. Much of the disagreement within Christendom has been between two half-gospels that have found no meeting ground. When the insistence of the Reformation that salvation was to be obtained by faith alone hardened into a new scholasticism, its adherents turned a deaf ear to the biblical teaching that the commitment of faith posed radical requirements on the way life is lived. It is extraordinary that those who have insisted that the Bible must provide the only authoritative guide for life should have been so prone to ignore the parts that judged their complacent acceptance of society's standards (p. 299).

He is quite clear on his view of biblical law: "If God is love, then we have an objective referent for the law. For it is the law that provides the standard for making love concrete. A situation ethic that uses the language of love to circumvent law, on the other hand, justifies the doing of evil. Neither reason nor love can exist as an independent manifestation of human autonomy" (p. 300).

God is sovereign. He is the Lord of history. We must tell the truth concerning Him. In a classic line, Schlossberg reminds us concerning apologetics, the philosophical defense of the faith: "Apologetics should never be apologetic" (p. 301). The influence of Corneilius Van Til's presuppositional apologetic method on Schlossberg's thought is apparent.

He is opposed to sentimentality. He is equally opposed to Kantian materialism and idealism (p. 301). He is opposed to all traces of autonomy. It is an important aspect of the church, he says, "to unmask the idols," for exposure weakens them. The church must be actively engaged in breaking them (p. 308). He is not afraid of conflict: "Theologies of peace that avoid conflict at any cost produce a tame church without offense, without effectiveness. Such toothless theologies flourish when people do not take the New Testament seriously enough" (p. 309).

Christians must defy mammon: covetousness, including the welfare State (p. 311). Modern democracy has created a system which oppresses the rich (taxes) and the poor (permanent victimhood). We must discriminate between the deserving poor (those who deserve private assistance) and the poor who deserve it.

We need a Christian revolution which begins with the individual who challenges the prevailing culture (p. 325). First we need to change people; then change the culture. We need Christian intellect, Christian charity, Christian education—in short, Christian reconstruction. We need communities dedicated to such transformation, so that as individuals, we aren't lonely oddballs. We need to adopt "the language of militance" (p. 323). We must reject passivity (p. 328). We need to consider how to change the course of the establishment, and then sabotage it (p. 328). We also need to be ready for persecution. And we must become optimists: "We need a theological interpretation of disaster, one that recognizes that God acts in such events as captivities, defeats, and crucifixions. The Bible can be interpreted as a string of God's triumphs disguised as disasters" (p. 304).

When Schlossberg writes a sequel (*Altars for Construction* would be a good title), I hope he spells out the details of his proposed alternative civilization. I think it will look more like *Institutes of Biblical Law* than like *Christianity Today*.