

THE IDOL OF SELF

Judges

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Finally, in this connection, it is worth mentioning the idol of the Self. The self is set at the center of existence as a god, ultimate significance is found in godlike individual autonomy, in self-set goals and boundaries. The sacred is defined in the first instance in relation to the self. Self-expression and self-actualization are important themes in this religion, which is evident in our society from the advice columns of newspapers and magazines through to schools, where sometimes the point seems no longer to learn things but to "find oneself" and to be the best person that one can be. The narcissistic society constantly promotes the self over all others. It encourages at every turn the pursuit of personal happiness and gratification. It urges ignoring, and if necessary dispensing with, whatever and whoever stands in our way in this quest for personal satisfaction—whether it be husbands and wives, children, life in the womb, the aged, the poor, the mentally challenged, and so on. The idol of the self promotes sex as the autonomous individuals quest for self-fulfillment.

But, as Provan argues, "the narcissistic society, the society that worships the self, is not the 'good' or the 'great' society, but a "deeply dysfunctional and wicked one." Idols cannot liberate; they can only bring oppression. The oppressive, destructive fallout of the narcissistic society can be seen everywhere in modern Western culture. Interestingly, Christianity begins with a larger story than the individual story, with a much larger moral universe that has "the only true God at its center, whose worship is perfect freedom—including the freedom from the need to believe that we are gods and that we possess the power to attain salvation by our own exertions." Provan sums it up well:

The old gods are still with us. They have simply changed their clothes so that they merge more easily into the modern crowd. They still claim to provide meaning to life, to explain the universe, and to provide the basis for personal security. They still demand wholehearted commitment from their worshippers. Christians ought to be free of them, for a truly Christian view of the world provides the basis for such freedom.¹

Finally, it is important to note that the gods behind the idols of this world are no less demonic than those that stand behind the worship of idols in other contexts (ancient or modern). Ultimately it is the god of this world, Satan himself, who stands behind these gods and demands allegiance with all of the oppressive overtones contained in that commitment.

The gravity of the human tragedy is that we are quite incapable even of enlightened self-interest. Our fallenness prevents us from seeing that false gods—none of whom can create, or bless, or love, or redeem—can do us no real good. Nor can we see that God, in jealousy and fiercely opposing such idols and, indeed, any attempt to make the created into the divine, is actively pursuing our good.



¹ I. Provan, "To Highlight All Our Idols: Worshipping God in Nietzsche's World" *Ex Auditu* 15 (1999): p. 33.