

# **Desirable God?**

## **Our Fascination with Images, Idols and New Deities**

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## 5. Authentic Humanism and Forms of Profane Idolatry

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On a general human and profane level, one can only talk of idolatry when one absolutely attaches oneself to a reality that does not deserve this because it simply is not divine. This means that a profane idolatry is never merely profane, but always displays religious airs as well. After all, what is characteristic of idolatry is that it always divinizes something or someone, whereby a profane object in idolatry never simply remains profane or 'worldly' but likewise acquires sacred traits. In this sense, idolatry as divinization is a specific form of 'transference'. And note well, everything can be an object of that idolatrous transference:<sup>1</sup> a part of nature, an appearance, a human being, a process, a conviction, a charismatic leader or guru, an institution, an economic-financial establishment, military apparatuses and the arms race,<sup>2</sup> a political leader or a head of state (king, emperor, Führer),<sup>3</sup> and, last but not least, one's own land, people and culture, to which Bart Verbesselt dedicates his essay in confrontation with the current concept of a 'multicultural society'.

<sup>1</sup> No thinker has ever mapped out so thoroughly the most important forms of profane idolatry in our times as the Russian thinker, Nicolaj Aleksandrovic Berdiaev. Cf. his work: *Slavery and Freedom* (1943).

<sup>2</sup> D. Sölle, 'Das goldene Kalb von heute', in: H. Albertz, *Die Zehn Gebote. Eine Reihe mit Gedanken und Texten. 1. Ich bin der Herr, dein Gott... Du sollst keine anderen Götter neben mir haben*, Stuttgart, 1985, pp. 56-60.

<sup>3</sup> For the treatment of politics as a source of idolatry, especially in the Jewish context of the discussion on God's kingship and the institution of the earthly kingship in Israel, see: M. Halbertal, 'Afgoderij en politiek', in: *Nexus*, 1998, nr. 21, pp. 77-88. See also: A. Finkelkraut, 'Idolâtrie de l'État', in: J. Halpérin, G. Lévitte (eds.), *Idoles. Données et débats*, Paris, 1985, pp. 59-65 (followed by discussion: pp. 67-71).

However, something does always take place in the transference: the chosen 'object' is vested with qualities that actually can only be ascribed to God. Considering that the process of divinization or sacralization does not always take place consciously or explicitly, and it usually does not take place in strict religious terms, it is better to speak about the quasi- or pseudo-religious character with which the divinized 'object' is clad. In this regard, profane idolatry can also help in acquiring a correct image of religious idolatry, because both are marked by an inclination towards absolutization. Then, from the moment that mention is made of inclination, there arises human desire or longing. In that sense we can state that idolatry, both on the religious as well as on the profane level, is a manner of desiring, as will be further made explicit in the Afterword of this book. Paying closer attention to the desire behind every form of idolatry will help us see in what sense idols are related to ideals, or rather how idols appear to be absolutized ideals.

### Idols of the Tribe, the Cave, the Market and the Theatre

We find a quite original approach to profane idolatry in the view of the English philosopher, Francis Bacon (1561-1626). With the term 'idols', he refers not to the objects of superstition or perverted religious cults, but rather to the illusory images and false concepts, which we not only form in our minds but which we cherish, precisely because we are attached to them in an almost religious or sacred manner. These idols stand in contrast to 'icons', which, as images, reflect in an authentic way the original models. Bacon distinguishes four sorts of idols: the idols of the tribe ('*idola tribus*'), of the cave ('*idola specus*'), of the market ('*idola fori*') and of the theatre ('*idola theatri*').

The idols of the tribe ensue from the imperfection of our natural faculties of knowledge, especially that of our senses. Based on a mistaken sensory perception, we construe all sorts of wrong conceptions, opinions, convictions or forms of superstition (e.g.: belief in the supernatural, like extra-terrestrials, UFO's and the



like). We build up all kinds of 'beliefs', of which we likewise swear that they are true and reliable. Only a critical scepticism and a methodical (scientific) analysis can protect us from the confusion of the subjective with the objective.

The idols of the cave remind us of Plato's myth of the cave and the illusory shadows. This kind of idol refers to the personal uniqueness, development and history of humans, namely their temperament, talents and inclinations, the upbringing they received and the society and culture to which they belong. All these lead humans, individually, to develop their own mode of approach to and conceptualization of the world, where consequently they confuse their personal, subjective mode of seeing with the objective conditions of affairs, situations, facts and persons. These false concepts and images – these idols – can only be conquered by objective, verifiable search for the truth.

When we enter into relationship with other people, we fall prey to the idols of the market, meaning to say to the tyranny of language and words. People believe that they are the masters of their own words, in the sense that they are convinced that their words depict reality correctly. But nothing is less true, for on the public forum words are transformed into substitutes for the things that the speaking person intends, or they are employed to express the non-existent fictions of our mind. But then we begin to discuss amongst ourselves about the meaning of the employed 'nouns' or labels, whereby we are no longer able to make sense of it. On the contrary, an artificial network of terms and concepts is woven, which are no longer about reality but about the manner in which we in the discussion – and, as sources of the discussion – make use of terms and meanings, and juggle them. At the 'market' of society – in the media, we would say today – we constantly make use of generally accepted, i.e. conformist slogans, phrases and terms, which we consider to be 'deep truths'. In our present society, this represents a widely spread form of self-deceit. Only a constant investigation into the real world and the testing of our language as to this actual reality can save us from these false mental images or idols.

Finally, the idols of the theatre refer to the confusion that dominates in our thinking and speaking about the true nature of knowledge itself. Concretely, it refers to the manner in which philosophies function. The current supra- or supernatural views, the empirical, rational or sophist systems of argumentation can be compared to theatrical presentations and plots within a scene, insofar as they are invented by the human mind and imagination, and put together in such a way that a test with reality must always be obliged to provide an answer as to the question of truth. Here, therefore, idolatry consists in an extreme reverence for all that is so-called scientific and 'academic'. It is a fascination for theory as a developed system, with a high level of technical and learned jargon, that is only accessible to the initiated, meaning to say to those who, after strict selection procedures, are chosen in order to be initiated by top-scientists, and who, in turn, were selected and introduced into the system by their predecessors. Theory is elevated as such into an independent modality that neglects investigating how, for instance, people in certain situations actually function. We can deduce from this that whoever aestheticizes theory and excessively cultivates it for oneself is in danger of not being able to pay attention any longer to the true nature of problems, so that one neglects to pose the question how matters in fact turn out differently than expected from the scientific theory. The scientifically developed and complicated conceptual framework, paradigm or model can as such even come to the fore to the extent that it takes the place of reality, or that reality no longer has any say about it, in the sense that one thinks one has, by means of the theory, arrived at reality itself, or stronger still, that the theory becomes the reality. Note well, it is not theory itself that must be rejected, but the fact that it makes us blind to a number of essential dimensions or aspects of a reality or a behaviour that elude formalization and systematization. Through this, we should actually realize that our theoretical descriptions are always more meagre than reality, the situation or the behaviour itself. Scientists, however, can be so addicted to their theoretical models and schemes of thought that they are even no longer open to the new

and the different that comes upon them from reality, and consequently lapse into a self-satisfied ideological blindness.

According to Bacon, this applies in a special way to theology, which not only pretends to be a doctrine but also precisely in and thanks to the doctrine, believes it grasps the hidden reality, even though it bases its extravagant interpretations on Scripture and on dogmatic claims of an ecclesial (highest) authority. In this regard, theology is a 'fantastic' doctrine that must be strictly distinguished from philosophy, if one wants to be able to grant philosophy, which must base its claims on natural reason, any credit. Furthermore, such theological presentations, which Bacon also calls aberrations and delusions, keep us from our (Christian) task to improve the world for the sake of our neighbour. We then also lapse into idolatry when we let ourselves be fascinated and entirely drawn away by power, authority, prestige and the like, whereby we no longer take notice of the true challenge of Christianity, namely the care for 'real' people in need.

### Secular Humanism as Radical Anti-Idolatry

It is clear that Bacon's unmasking of idols is no neutral description, but an ideological thesis that, notwithstanding its Christian motivation, is also characterized by the burgeoning 'modern' idea of enlightenment, namely the idea of an objective-scientific analysis and truth, and of an autonomous subject that only obeys the laws of reason and empiricism. This puts us on the track of a very specific phenomenon, namely that of a humanist struggle against religion as idolatry – a struggle that can be found especially in secular, atheist humanism.<sup>4</sup> In a religious context, one is spontaneously convinced that religion itself is not idolatrous, at least when it is lived out authentically. In other words, idolatry is only but a false or wrong form of religion, while religion in itself is not

<sup>4</sup> A. Nehamas, 'Rede en religie. Pleidooi voor het heidendom', in: *Nexus*, 1998, nr. 21, pp. 110-121.

questioned. In modern, atheist humanism, however, one proceeds from the position that religion *tout court* is a form of idolatry and thus is simply reprehensible. Secular humanism, which has become classic, proceeds from the position that all forms of acknowledgement or veneration of a transcendent or divine power is unacceptable, and this precisely in the name of the value and the dignity of the human person. Religion is not only criticized as to its possible idolatrous excesses, but in its very core.

Since religion keeps on posing essentially the dependence of the human person, both on doctrinal as well on practical-ritual levels, a humanism that defends the radical independence and autonomy of the human person cannot but deny religion in the name of human autonomy. Religion is based on the fundamental conviction that it is not the human person himself but God who is the centre of the universe, and that they are dependent on God for their existence (creation), redemption (salvation) and fulfilment (eternal life). In other words, religion poses heteronomy as the ground for existence, action, prayer and celebration. Secular humanism opines that this heteronomy directly leads to the alienation and denial of the human person. Kneeling before God, cross or tabernacle, praying with full surrender to God in order to beg His mercy: these are not forms of humility, but of humiliation and self-abnegation, of the erosion of one's own power and responsibility.

In this regard, secular humanism is consistent with itself when it states that atheism (in doctrine) and a-religiosity (in practice) are the conditions for an authentic humanism that promotes the adult human being as 'lord and master' of their fate in this world. Precisely because it is about an axiological humanism, which stands up for the value and the power of humans, it cannot remain neutral or indifferent towards religion, since religion seems to deny and destroy this value of humans. This reverses the religious struggle against all possible forms of idolatry by making religion itself the object of anti-idolatry. Where religion labels the divinization of the mere human as idolatry, anti-religious humanism considers the humiliation of the human by means of religion

as the most serious form of idolatry. In other words, the rejection of religion as idolatry is, for this humanism, the condition for ennoblement, meaning to say the liberation and emancipation of humans, whereby humans recover themselves and their capacities. By projecting the fullness of humans – the human – to God, religion undermines and reduces their humanity to nothing. Modern humanism reverses this movement by giving back to humans the fullness that was projected outside of themselves as their own being and strength, so that henceforth they no longer need God in order to realize themselves (Feuerbach). From now on, they are responsible for themselves and their own self-realization, and humans can love themselves once again, while religion only teaches humans to disown and 'hate' themselves. It is clear that in his *Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, Nietzsche has acutely seen and announced this necessary, humanistic death of God, although it could still take centuries before His shadow, which has stayed on after His death, disappears. Moreover, he has also brought this death – and the struggle to conquer God's lingering shadow – to an unbelievable peak by means of his plea for the virile and literally 'self-satisfied' '*Wille zur Macht*' ('*Herrenmoral*') which resists the weak and enfeebling Christian moral slavery of love, mercy and forgiveness towards the other.

Undoubtedly, this is a difficult criticism, which still arouses resistance even today. Nonetheless, Christians are faced with the challenge to take seriously this critique (and others) in the sense that these criticisms can help them to purify their own conceptualization and experience of God. Our thinking-and-living-towards-God is, after all, "*menschlich, allzu menschlich*", to quote Nietzsche once again. That is why we must dare to question this being-towards-God and test it as to its authenticity, in the humble awareness that this is a task that we can never bring to fruition. But it is precisely in this permanently incomplete, critical test that space is created for a modest but real surrender to God's 'despite everything'. Thus, He acquires not only the first but also the last word, thanks to and despite all critical wrestling with our approaches of God.

We cannot forget that out of a certain philosophy, which has permeated strongly in Western Christianity and has influenced it for a long time, God has been presented as the highest Being. Likewise, this highest Being was seen as unchangeable and immobile, and thus also unmoved. God stood entirely above reality as the First and Formal cause, and He was moreover omniscient and omnipotent. Modern atheism has rightly expressed a radical critique against this, so that Christians began to question the obviousness of their so-called onto-theological concept of God. In order to formulate a response to this critique, they returned to the image of God, as is presented in the entire bible and especially with Jesus in the Second Testament, hesitantly at first and afterwards ever more clearly, in particular under the influence of biblical exegesis, and finally confirmed and exhorted by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

That does not mean that we should let go of our critical attitude towards the biblical presentations of God. Likewise, biblical images and concepts of God are and remain human images, which must constantly be tested as to their quality – which implies the enduring value of a negative theology. It is only that the emphasis on the importance of negative theology should not lead to a general equalizing of all images of God. Not all presentations of God are equally relative and worth questioning. Some images of God must be rejected entirely, while others must rather be rid of their one-sidedness or limitations. In the essays of the first part, it has been made clear how the biblical, especially the Christian God, is not unmoved but a moved, affective and affected Mover, who can be touched and is also actually touched by the fate of the world and of people. This idea of an associated God of love is not a non-committal image of God, which can simply be questioned. Critical questioning here only is involved in the manner in which God's loving involvement with humans and the world is presented and thought of, and not on the idea of involvement itself. It is about a critical thorough reflection, which does not just proceed in any direction, but which can only be concerned with a qualitative purification and deepening of the idea of an associated God.

### Forms of Secular Humanism as Human Idolatry

We return to secular humanism, for this humanism is not only the source of radical anti-idolatry, which incites believers to question themselves regarding their own images of God. It also bears within itself the seeds of its own perversion so that it can itself become an idolatry.

It is indeed remarkable that anti-religious humanism, in its periodically fanatic struggle against religion and religiosity as the most perverse idolatry, can turn to its own opposite and become the victim of its own struggle, meaning to say, bringing forth by itself a form of idolatry that is at least as serious as religious idolatry. When humans, or rather the sovereign individual, is promoted to the 'measure of all things', and this 'almighty' human is required by means of its scientific knowledge and technical capacity to bring heaven back down to earth – this is in contrast to religion which wants to bring humans of the earth (as a valley of tears) to heaven (as paradise) – the human himself is divinized and set at the place of God. We can consider this replacement of God by the human, to be understood as 'I', as the most elementary and radical form of idolatry, out of which all other forms of profane idolatry flow forth. Even in a non-religious mode of seeing, such a divinization of the human must be labelled as idolatry, as the deification of the human, meaning to say as a perverted image of the human that does not take into account human finitude.

Contemporary, so-called postmodern humanism presents itself quite more modestly than the secular humanism that has ensued directly from the Enlightenment. Current secular humanism accepts the factual and principal non-omnipotence and non-omniscience of the human; it acknowledges its partiality, temporariness and limitation; it accepts the boundaries of human rational and technical capabilities. This postmodern humanism then criticizes the modern belief in progress as a form of idolatry, which for that reason must not be superseded by a religious humanism but by an ever-secular humanism that remains quite modest about the power and greatness of the human and about

the feasibility of society and history. The current environmental problem illustrates, in fact in an eloquent way, the boundaries and risks of human mastery. Stronger still, environmental and other problems, which have ensued directly from the unbridled exercise of human capability, make it unambiguously clear that a craftsmanship that is exercised absolutely destroys itself and ends up in the loss of the mastery over the craftsmanship.

Others, who present themselves as anti-humanist and consequently are of a neo-conservative bent, claim that all the moral problems that confront us today ensue directly from the modern deification of the thinking and acting person. With that, they refer to the rising number of divorces; escalating aggression, violence and criminality in the cities of our so-called social-welfare societies; to the liberalization of abortion and the legalizing of euthanasia; to the production of human embryos for all sorts of tests (for instance, stem-cell research and cloning) for commercial purposes or for the insemination of single women and lesbians, which leads to the devaluation of marriage as the basis for the family; to the libertine sexual morals of multiple sexual contacts outside of any context of a relationship with a future commitment, to which AIDS infection and the sexual abuse of children are the price (cf. the Dutroux case in Belgium in 1996, which has not yet been legally resolved); to the free, capitalistic and globalizing market economy, which does not bridge the gap with the Third World or developing countries but makes it even wider, and so forth. What is very essential in this attempt at unmasking secular, anti-religious humanism is the (already suggested) thesis that this downward problem spiral does not flow forth from the shortcomings and faults of humanism as it has been propagated but, on the contrary, is embedded in the being of that humanism itself. The better enlightened humanism succeeds, all the more does it turn into its own opposite and ends up in all sorts of pernicious side effects. In this regard, modern humanism is its own greatest enemy, and not religion. The problem thus flows forth from the values themselves that are profiled by that humanism as fundamental and ultimate values – that all have to do with the confir-



mation and unfolding of human capabilities – but not out of the incapacity to substantiate these values. When humans are made all the more holy and divine, which for instance happens this very day in the discourse on liberal human rights, which in the name of individual freedom claims the constitution for oneself – while human rights are actually intended in the first place to protect other people against all forms of violations of their human integrity and dignity – all the more pernicious and unrelenting are humans ruined in their own project. It is therefore about time that secular humanism wakes up to not only look beyond itself and unmask other, principally religious, ideologies as forms of idolatry, but also to look within itself and dare to question radically the idolatrous deification of the human as the alpha and omega of truth and meaning.

From a faith perspective, this implies the acknowledgement that no single worldly, created reality, thus not even humans, carries within itself an ultimate holiness. And when the human is indeed characterized by any holiness, then this holiness is derived not from oneself but is received from elsewhere. For believers, it is freely and undeservedly proffered to them by a creative and redeeming God. In this regard, it belongs to the essential task of a religion to indict both religious as well as profane and secular forms of idolatry, without lapsing into an one-sidedly pessimistic anti-humanism (which would precisely be proof of neo-conservatism).

Moreover, it is important not only to unmask certain forms of secular, modern humanism as idolatry, but also to point out how this secular humanism employs a perverted God-image in its rejection of God and religion. In its emancipatory defence of the autonomous, knowing and acting human it rejects God precisely because it thinks it can discover in God a threat for human self-determination and power. Well then, this implies a certain God-image, namely the image of an almighty and all-knowing God, who as a self-satisfied and perfect Being jealously wants to keep this omnipotence for itself and thus, grants nothing to humans. Such a God-image must indeed be disavowed and destroyed if one

wants to safeguard human value and dignity. The human attempt to draw to oneself the power over existence has consequently led to God being seen as a threatening power, before whom one must shrink in fear. Such a God-image, however, cannot be called an authentic God-image. The biblical image of God presupposes that God and humans stand in a bond with each other, without this relationship – or covenant – being characterized by a despotic, arbitrary exercise of power from the side of God, nor by a shrinking in fear on the side of humans. Our analysis of certain forms of secular humanism thus establishes what we proposed as a thesis in the beginning, namely that profane idolatry also has a religious dimension. Since modern, atheistic humanism finds that the power of God forms a threat for the power of humans, there is no other choice than to deny the power of God in order to give back to humans the power that they essentially deserve. When the profession of faith in God is made at the cost of humans, then the promotion of humans is made at the cost of God. With this, a certain concept of God is at the same time posed, which is, however, contrary to that of the biblical tradition.

### New Idols After the Death of God

It is claimed that every age and culture has its own, new idols. But is this claim not too easy and cheap? Is it not rather so that in our late-modern, Western society idolatry no longer exists or, in any case, is irrelevant since people believe less and less? And if they do believe, it rather seems to be a vague belief in a godhead or rather in 'the divine' ('there must indeed be something') than in a personal and interpersonal God who binds Himself to humans and the world, and to which one is existentially involved, up to one's very concrete daily existence and actions. Late-modern people no longer experience idolatry as a threat precisely because they no longer let their lives be determined by the faith in a God who has fiercely forbidden idolatry (as is apparent in the first and second words of the Decalogue and the entire Mosaic law). Is a study of

idolatry and idol worship in a post-Christian era like ours still useful and necessary, since as secularized people we deem ourselves immune to whatsoever form of idolatry, because we no longer believe in any god or, in any case, do not believe in one that we truly live out of that faith (leaving aside the exceptions or the 'holy remainder' of course)?

Or is it perhaps so that in a secular world, where religious indifference – to be distinguished from an active repudiation of God – has become so utterly evident that one no longer stops to think about it, the idols are going to thrive and flourish? If God is dead, will people not believe much more in their own fabricated gods, because they perhaps do need fixed values and points of reference, an absolute reliability and meaning? Naturally we likewise cannot deny that in the present postmodern climate there are more and more people who with great ease are capable of living fragmentarily, meaning to say without any anchoring and founding in an ultimate perspective of meaningfulness, and are indeed rather happy (they indeed do not have to be perfectly happy, for that would still be a remnant of the modern ideology of progress). But is this fragmentary existence, without striving for an underlying meaning, not already an expression of our late-modern welfare existence? As long as we can live well on the professional and consumptive, affective, familial and social levels, it is not difficult to be happy fragmentarily, here and now, without cares for tomorrow, and even make others happy! But what happens if this whole world of happiness collapses like a house of cards at an unexpected setback of unemployment, divorce, the suicide of one's child, a persistent handicap or a deadly disease of loved one, an unacceptable injury because of a failure or one's own fault, or an irreplaceable loss caused by crime or a terrorist attack or another form of moral evil inflicted by others? Then do not the questions as to the why and wherefore, questions concerning meaning and meaninglessness, arise once again when people begin to search for something or someone wherein they can discover a promise of unconditional fulfilment and healing, to which they can entrust themselves without reserve? Is it not and has it not always been

our 'restless heart' that, notwithstanding all fragmentary satisfactions of happiness, comes to disturb the 'established order', which is the source and immediate cause for new idols time and time again? And does this not apply in particular to our secular, post-Christian era which has finally come of age and become mature and has happily left behind the scientifically untenable hypothesis of our infantile attachment to a good and almighty God and Father? That is why we offer the hypothesis that today the profane idols are not decreasing but rather increasing, precisely because there are less and less 'religious deities', due to the demise of religiousness, to which people can devote themselves with their whole heart and soul, with all their strengths and all their efforts. In this regard, profane idolatry is most characteristic of our age, certainly in our Western and all 'westernized' societies. Apparently, the analysis sketched above of Bacon from the second half of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century has simply been prophetic in the sense that his view on the rise and development of idols has come to its full right only now.

Notwithstanding this generally widespread secularization, coupled with what Nietzsche has called the 'death of God', meaning to say a strong loss, or even the absence of an awareness of God<sup>5</sup> that has become unproblematic, it is remarkable that one keeps on using religious terminology, and thus keeps on speaking of forms of idolatry. Why do we not use ordinary profane language,

<sup>5</sup> We thus understand the 'death of God' not as an ontological statement about the existence or otherwise of God, but as a statement about the manner in which people live without God. That God is dead means that God has died and has disappeared, usually without a sound, from the experience of people, especially that of Western and westernized peoples. They no longer live, act and think out of a religious relationship. God no longer plays any real role in their lives. They think time and again about it, but He no longer forms any part of 'the reasons for the movement' of their heart, of the dynamism and the 'drive' of their longings and strivings. Religious expression still comes at most now and then from without, as trimmings or as an interruption into real life, but for the rest, religion no longer plays any real inspiring role in the lives of most people in the West, meaning to say in their ethics, social commitments, politics, economics, artistic expression and in all their human, worldly activities.

for instance, 'delusionary images', instead of idols? Extreme attachments to worldly realities, which in one way or the other refer back to possession, honour and power – *avoir, valoir, pouvoir* (Ricoeur, referring back to Kant: *Habsucht, Ehrsucht, Herrschsucht*) – are still labelled as idols. We keep on characterizing even the so-called 'new', contemporary idols, as (false) gods, whereby we immediately indicate that there is something amiss, not *per se* with the realities as such but in any case with our attachment to them. Why do we not just simply leave behind the religious language, since we do no longer feel and see ourselves religiously inclined? In any case, that would be more honest and adequate. But apparently, the religious symbol of the 'golden calf' and of idolatry keeps on appealing to our imagination.

Apparently, we are aware deep within ourselves, without really explicitly developing it thematically, that whoever strives exclusively and totally for wealth, power and honour, strives for those realities in a wrong way, in the sense that one divinizes them. At the same time, one realizes that they ultimately will not be able to satisfy, and this striving will appear to be an illusion. Precisely because we keep on using the religious terms idols and idolatry, it becomes clear that these realities are about temptation, against which we must offer resistance if we want to live authentically. The terms work like a kind of scruple and suspicion in our collective consciousness, by means of which we are warned, as it were, that we cannot simply entrust ourselves blindly and surrender total commitment to them. Nothing in this world is worth our total passion, which is the crisis consciousness that the terms idols and idolatry introduce into our spontaneous consciousness, in order to safeguard us from ever waking up with a hangover from our total, drunken surrender to those realities. Apparently, the religious metaphor of idolatry works in our collective consciousness (subconscious) more deeply than what we are able to observe and say on a conscious level. "It is as if a remembrance of God lives on in order to protect us from ourselves. The healthy common sense of all modern cultures is permeated with it that the exaggerated pursuit for money, sex, power and fame – which

Francis Bacon called the 'idols of the tribe' – is a form of idolatry. With money one cannot buy love; with sex one cannot get love; and both power and fame offer no exemption from one's fate and death."<sup>6</sup>

### Fascinated by the Image-Culture

Our discussion above on idolatry that can be coupled with secular humanism, and on 'idols after the death of God', has directly set us on the track towards profane idolatry, which, notwithstanding certain affinities, must indeed be distinguished from religious idolatry, as was offered in the first part of this book. The moment has come to sketch more closely and critically investigate "the buzz and flicker of the idols of today".<sup>7</sup> It is not our intention to offer an exhaustive overview of these forms, for this in fact would not even be possible considering the (in principle, unending) plurality of forms of idolatry. We rather opt to focus on some noteworthy, paradigmatic models of new profane idols and false gods, like: the market economy and money, the extreme-right fascination for 'one's own land', the all-pervasive myth of genetic health, the excesses of the body-culture in top sports, the present power of the screen (TV, film, video) and of the entire image-industry. We call these idols 'new' false gods because, among others, they are precisely on the rise in our post-Christian, late-modern era. In the different essays of this second part of the book, the characteristics and dynamics of these current, late-modern idols will be further deepened and specified.

Today we are inundated by the virtual world that penetrates up to the intimacy of our daily lives by means of the audio-visual, TV, video clips, films and the like. This virtual world often represents

<sup>6</sup> M. Ignatieff, 'Afgoderij als metafoor', in: *Nexus*, 1998, nr. 21, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> H. De Dijn, *Geluksmachines in context. Filosofische essays*, Kapellen, 2001, p. 7. In the third part of his book, this author sketches and interprets a number of current idols (pp. 77-121).

an endless happiness, whereby fantasy is given unlimited free reign. Even the most intimate relationships are presented without reserve. Love and violence are interwoven and interchanged with each other in an imaginary game that never ends. The world that is designed is, at the same time, a fantastic world, a universe wherein we can determine ourselves what brings life and offers happiness, in a wholly spontaneous and reckless manner, without any external limitation. It is a game of total self-satisfaction and enjoyment, whereby the unending exchanges can only but strengthen the impression of unending possibilities. We can simply consider this as a late-modern, secular form of idolization. In his essay, Bart Pattyn sheds light on how glamour, virtual violence and aestheticized happiness in the image-media, upon closer inspection, both depict and hide an audiovisual allaying of fear.

The very unique paradox of contemporary image-culture especially consists in that the relationship between image and reality is more and more disturbed.<sup>8</sup> What is essential to the authentic functioning of the image is that it refers away from itself towards the reality that it images. The truth of the image does not lie in the image itself but in the other-than-the-image, the real – even though a huge creative freedom can exist in order to evoke matters and meanings and the image *per se* does not have to be a faithful depiction of the 'real' reality. In this approach, the main emphasis is not yet put on the image, and reality still is first and foremost the main concern. According to Jean-Luc Marion, it has become more and more evident that an irreversible shift has taken place in our audio-visual age, in the sense that the image has come to stand as the indispensable mediator between reality and us. We have ended up in a 'terror of the visible'.<sup>9</sup> Especially thanks to TV, we have ended up in a world wherein we apparently only have

<sup>8</sup> H. Belting, 'Het bedrog van de hedendaagse beeldcultuur', in: *Nexus*, 1998, nr. 21, pp. 138-146.

<sup>9</sup> J.-L. Marion, *La croisée du visible*, Paris, 1996 (2nd ed.). Cited by: R. Welten, *Fenomenologie en beeldverbod bij Emmanuel Levinas en Jean-Luc Marion*, Budel, 2001, pp. 143-144.

more and more access to the reality 'of what happens in the world' by means of manufactured images. This 'autonomy of the image', that directly results in an 'audiovisual idolatry', ends up, according to Jean Baudrillard, that the bond between the image and reality increasingly vanishes, as indeed is apparent especially in the manner in which contemporary persons in our consumer society experience the images of the visual media. The image is separated from reality, and is thus literally 'ab-solutized'. The difference between image and reality disappears, in the sense that the image can only refer to itself as a game that one can summon and start up time and again, as we can see in the new visual media, video and internet. In a certain sense images become meaningless because they become signs that no longer refer to a farther positioned meaning, but only to themselves as signs that one can summon and experience as a game. Images become '*simulacres*', literally illusions and distortions, which only simulate reality by putting themselves in the place of reality. Precisely insofar as they promote themselves as reality, they also exercise an enormous power on the onlooking person. As simulated reality, the image literally keeps us fascinated. The world becomes a phantom, a ghost, when we especially enter into contact with it via manufactured and mounted images, just as we see this more and more amongst children who are able to spend hour after hour before the TV-set – the handy and ever-available baby-sitter. Even the information that is introduced in the image media, and which must somehow ease the hunger for the real, is marked by the function of replacement. In our post-industrial information society, more and even more information is produced, much more than the production of material goods. In that manner, acquiring information becomes more interesting than collecting things. Images are collected like an informative spectacle whereby a sort of effortless-information comes to be, since one no longer makes an effort in order to write down everything. The photocopy machine had already set this process in motion, but it has been accelerated by the internet. Even the news bulletins on TV, which still explicitly deal with events going on in the world, confirm and reinforce the power of the image, for the



paradox is that only the reality that is depicted as a transmitted image acquires the status of reality and social relevance. Among others, this has become very much clear in the CNN images of the double airplane collision into, and the collapse of, the WTC Twin Towers in New York as a consequence of the terrorist attack on Tuesday, September 11, 2001 – images that have gone around the entire world innumerable times. Paradoxical in all this was that the reality surpassed the fiction, but that, at the same time, it has only been through the image that a shockwave of anger, powerlessness, disgust, compassion, feelings of revenge and sadness have inundated the world.

Hence it is no coincidence that today we speak of an image-culture, which is easily inclined to deteriorate into an image-cult, meaning to say an unbridled cultivation of the image for its own sake and despite itself. Or rather, we speak of ever interchangeable and alterable – zappable – images, which create their own virtual image-world, of which one has the impression that it is the real world. In other words, one gets so fascinated by the game of images that reality is eliminated and the image is promoted to reality. In the meantime, we have progressed so far as to be able to let virtual humans perform in films and, note well, these virtual people seem just real, although there is nothing real about them anymore since they no longer present real, existing actors. In other words, we can ask ourselves whether what is at work here is an iconomania that results in idolatry, albeit then an unarticulated, quiet idolatry. People need images in order to be stimulated, or rather, they need stronger and stronger images because these can apparently stimulate and move them more than reality. We can even speak of a 'craving for the image', which is encouraged by the ever advancing production of images by the worldwide image-industry. The images shown do not stand of themselves, for themselves, but they are part of an unstoppable current of images, which spans the whole world like an unending network and inundates us spectators from all sides: an awesome web from which there is no more escape. The images that are produced massively are then consumed just as swiftly, so that it is no longer about this

or that product in itself, but about the continuous production of images that tempts the masses into a blind idolatry, of which we are not even aware. "Considering that the images are pleasantly empty, we enjoy their appearance and the intoxication of the temptation itself: we let ourselves be tempted by the temptation and consume the consumption. The dance around the golden calf is repeated in new variations, whereby we no longer worship idols but the beauty of the appearance, which redeems us from reality and reflects back to us from a smooth surface all transcendence."<sup>10</sup>

### When the Image Leaves Nothing to the Imagination

An important aspect of the relationship between image and reality in the image-culture has not yet been touched. Up until now the impression could be gained that the image-culture is not really interested in reality. Nothing, however, is less true. To the extent that the image and the participation in the universe of images stand central in the image-culture, the attention for the realism of the image becomes greater and more compelling. At this, we stumble upon a remarkable paradox: because the image itself in the image-culture is not real but, at the extreme, virtual, meaning to say constructed in an utterly artificial way, and therefore concerns an unending current of ever-changing images, the images must be, or rather appear, as realistic as possible.<sup>11</sup> Hence the current fascination for the so-called 'reality-TV', which rattles on in its obsession for 'Real reality', and of which Big Brother apparently is at the moment one of the most advanced, but not yet the ultimate, expression.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>11</sup> R. Scruton, 'Afgoderij in de moderne cultuur', in: *Nexus*, 1998, nr. 21, pp. 160-170.

<sup>12</sup> K. Raes, 'They Shoot Horses Don't They? Over Big Brother en aanverwante gruwel', in: Id., *Verschaalde waarden. De onmin in een cultuur*, Kapellen, 2001, pp. 105-111, especially pp. 109-110. On the current image-culture, see also: *Ibid.*, pp. 112-118, 119-124.

Let us just think, in this regard, of the representations of death, violence, blood and fear in film genres like horror, action, disaster, and even crime. The images of torture, revenge, or of aggression and violence, of evil and death must be as horrible as possible, in the sense that they must seem very real and direct. Precisely because it is about fantasized representations, thus about surrogates of reality, the representations must come as close as possible to reality. Or rather, they must even be more realistic and stronger than ordinary reality, for it is only by means of this ultra-realistic exaggeration that they acquire from the spectator their believability, or rather their attractiveness and fascination – by means of which one keeps on watching them and enjoying them. The torture chambers, the crimes committed or the retaliations, the mutilations, verbal and non-verbal aggressions, leading to death, must be so 'natural' and portrayed as life-like as possible. Nothing is still left to the imagination. Thus the gross and the brutal, the disgusting and the explicit 'anything goes' acquires the unique, almost Messianic task of evoking the reality of suffering and death, disaster, outburst of anger, threats and death *and* the 'horror' or the disgusting and the frightening behind these realities.

A similarly fantasy-less realism of the image can be found in pornography, where the boundaries of tolerance are pushed further and stretched wider (with the exception of child pornography, as a consequence of the Dutroux case, Belgium 1996). Soft porn evolves into semi-hard porn and continues to come close to the neighbourhood of hard porn without being considered as such (but isn't this escalation inherent in the dynamics of pornography itself?). In an extreme and ever more extreme manner, pornography offers people the opportunity via explicit representations to both arouse as well as to satisfy their sexual impulses. The manner in which pornography hooks into human desire is however paradoxical, for it offers only images which gives the impression, throughout the voyeurism of the consumer, that sexual desire is really gratified, whereas it is only aroused and fed by the images. In order precisely to escape from this lack of reality, the pornographic

presentations must be as real and candid as possible so that the consumer can literally see that it is indeed all real, that nothing is dissimulated, pretended, or merely suggested, that no artistic deception or 'comedy' is at work.<sup>13</sup> This demand for tangible realness goes so far that in hard porn one intends to prove that these are real penetrations and ejaculations, which are shown in detail – for which the sexual activity must not be interrupted at its peak point, precisely in order to show to the viewer that it is no dissimulation, craftily simulated by the actors without their really having to complete the sexual intercourse. The explicit evidence not only exposes the intimate act to unashamed eyes, it furthermore destroys that intimacy itself. They want to make it visible, but thus they destroy the intimacy for it cannot be made visible: that is precisely its essence as intimacy. Pornography does violence to reality because it wants to make everything appear utterly real and that is precisely what makes it so theatrical, and thus obscene and vulgar. Pornography becomes vulgar and theatrical at the same time because, as the explicit evidence of its own realness, it must unravel and belabour the different facets of the sexual body and especially of the performed sexual activities in different positions and from different angles, without lapsing into repetitiveness. This gives pornography a rhetorical, meaning to say solemn, long-winded and exaggerated character whereby that which must remain private and intimate becomes public and exhibited without shame. In that manner, a reciprocal bond arises between the exhibitionism of pornography and the voyeurism of the consumer. The exaggerated realism with which sexual bodiliness and activity are brought to the screen allows no romance whatsoever, for nothing else is left to dream. The sexual impulse that seeks for direct satisfaction via pornography is not interested in a poetically evocative, refined depiction of mutually growing intimacy; it only desires as directly as possible a representation of sexual bodily forms and activities that reflect reality as faithfully as possible. In other words, it strives

<sup>13</sup> C. Verhoeven, 'Pornografie als tijdsverschijnsel. Een voorzichtige verdediging van de intimiteit', in: *Kultuurleven*, 45(1978), nr. 2, pp. 101-113.

for images without imagination; for an utterly illusory object that leaves nothing at all to the imagination! In pornography, there is no room for the metaphorical, just as there is no place for the poetic-evocative in foul, obscene language.

In complete contrast to this, the film "*Il Postino*" illustrates the whole dynamics of metaphorical language in being in love and in love, whereby even the sexual body, namely the nakedness in the film, acquires a metaphorical significance and only thus can become the condition and expression of intimacy. In metaphor and symbol, everything still needs to be dreamt up and devised, whereby the need can grow beyond itself into a longing that longs for the longing of the other. In pornography, the perfect realization and depiction counts as the perfect image, but for that reason it also remains perfectly unreal. In pornography, one turns completely towards the image as the only reality, for it is only by means of the image that the sexual impulse can be started and satisfied, which we simply can call a form of idolatry: the image becomes the '*Ein und Alles*'.

That this concerns profane idolatry with a quasi-religious tint is apparent from the fact that it is unrelentingly coupled with desecration and profanation – a religious dimension turned upside down, an inverted idolatry. In contrast to imagination and metaphor that elevate persons and orient them towards the holy, pornography lowers persons by pinning them onto the externally sexual of the entirely naked, accessible body and of the sexual activity, which is fragmented into separate segments (precisely in order to increase the reality level of the depiction). The veneration that is only fitting for higher, elevated matters, and ultimately only towards the one invisible God, is directed in pornography to something that is lower than the person is himself or herself. In every authentic religion lives the fear for, and thus the alert suspicion against, desecration and profanation, meaning to say the exposure of the holy to unashamed glances. In pornography, sexuality as body and as experience becomes simply banal, vulgar and gross, whereby it loses its elevated, mysterious and mystical character.

This desacralization, however, is not only applicable to pornography, but likewise and perhaps even more to the exhibitionist display of terror and horror, aggression and hate, crime and death. Likewise here, that which is inviolable and holy in humans is squandered away in such a way that violence, blood and horror become entirely common and matter-of-fact. And precisely based on their extremely realistic and overwhelming presentations, they lose their real character: they become a game that we can even play on the computer to amuse ourselves. While in classic idolatry, realities are sacralized or divinized undeservedly, in this case sexuality, the body and 'making love', good and evil, suffering, life and death are totally de-divinized and desecrated. We can simply call them forms of 'inverted idolatry', but they remain nonetheless forms of idolatry because images and depictions are entirely absolutized, meaning to say detached from the real, and elevated into the real that is directly present. By means of this, one thinks and hopes one can get access to the reality. This is nothing but an illusion, which feeds on other new illusions time and again in order to get a grasp via the realistic image of the reality that is not given. The consequence is that desire ends up in an unending downward spiral of the devaluation of that which is depicted and of itself.

### Image-Culture and Stardom

With regard to the image-culture, we cannot ignore the remarkably huge connection that has arisen between the media and the world of celebrities: figures from the world of royalty, from the world of films, sports, music and shows. Who would not spontaneously think of the admiration and adulation or cult of Princess Diana, which already grew during her lifetime, but which exploded especially after she died. The fatal car accident of which she sadly was a victim initiated or accelerated inadvertently a process of sacralization. Afterwards it cooled off rather quickly and a number of people went through a sort of hangover, moving from a certain embarrassment to scepticism and, eventually, to casual

indifference, as if one had not taken part emotionally in the adulation. But one cannot indeed deny that many were fascinated by her mysteriously charismatic aura, which was in part created and maintained by the media. The paradox is that she keenly collaborated but at the same time became its victim. The media attention led to a sort of total adulation and admiration, and as victim of the accident she also won back her total innocence, even though she certainly did not turn out to be so innocent and irreproachable in other aspects – e.g. on the aspect of marital fidelity. But this weakness and even the fact that she had suffered (or still suffered) anorexia was taken up tenderly in the image of her 'divine beauty and innocence', especially because she seemed rather to be the victim of the way Prince Charles treated her in their marriage. Should we rather state that she herself and those who surrounded her succeeded in making her appear in the media, and before the national and international public, as the victim of Prince Charles and the difficult and rigid British Royal House. In that manner, her eating disorder and her extramarital relations displayed especially her vulnerability, which undoubtedly aroused more sympathy than condemnation. This vulnerability as victim made her not only more popular, but it also gave her a special halo of closeness to small and vulnerable people, namely the children, the handicapped and victims of landmines. It is precisely this positive side of her actions that strengthened the manner in which they made her into an idol, of which she also became eventually – as was already mentioned – a victim.

The adulation of celebrities into sacralized idols, which is aroused and cultivated by the media, is especially known in the world of film, sports and music (or other glamour worlds, which exist only as such by the grace of the media). It is no coincidence that we speak of 'stars': they are after all robed with an aura of gleam and glitter which lifts them up above the ordinary masses and grants them the status of 'demi-gods'. Fascination and identification go hand in hand, in the sense that those who are totally fascinated by their star would actually also like to be identified with him or her: they want to become like their idol –

which is precisely an unmistakable indication of an idolatrous relationship.

The manner in which the stars of film, sports, pop music and the music culture are linked to idolatry in language is not only descriptive, namely indicating a factual condition, but also interpretative, namely evaluating in a qualifying and critical way. To label actors, sports heroes and singers as idols or stars means ascribing already a specific quality to their appearance and performance, and moreover critically unmasking this quality precisely by calling the figures idols. Calling Madonna an idol means saying something positive and negative about her at the same time. The positive is the adulation and identification with her appearance and personality; the negative is that this admiration and identification is actually found overstated, whereby it becomes artificial and unreal by precisely calling her an idol and not simply an 'example' that inspires. As a word, the word idol already bears within itself the implicit reference to exaggeration, to something that takes on extreme and imbalanced forms and that therefore is more akin to a game than a serious, decisive and definitive reality. In a certain sense it remains amusing, even though for the one who identifies oneself with one's idol that one wants to become physically a double of the idol, this is all bitterly and painfully serious, and can even lead to the destruction of one's own unique personality.

In this regard, the creation and experience of idols in our late-modern society is characterized by an interesting ambiguity. Idolatry is something quite serious, since it is all about an adulation and absolutization of matters or persons (like celebrities of music, film, sports and the entertainment world), who in reality are not absolute, heavenly or divine and also do not deserve it. Idolatry then presupposes a sort of total faith in, and a total admiration for, the idol in such a way that the devotees are entirely absorbed in the fascination for their idol and derive precisely therein their kick and gratification. But at the same time, this seriousness is usually also characterized by a certain flimsiness for the many who elevate something or someone as their idol and let themselves – at



times literally – be dragged along by them. The total surrender to the idol is also coupled with a certain aestheticization. One enjoys it to the utmost, but at the same time, one knows that it is all quite fleeting. And perhaps one surrenders oneself to the full now-moment of the total, almost hysterical identification precisely because one inadvertently realizes how fleeting is the fascination for the idol. Fans are fanatically involved in their idols in the now-moment, but at the same time, they behave so fanatically because they know that it will probably not last. In this regard, the profane creation of idols amongst all sorts of public figures and stars protects itself against the totalizing seriousness of idolatry. Actually, one is not searching for a total attachment, which would orient, promote and give meaning to one's whole life (that would indeed be really 'religious'); one rather searches for a merely momentary kick, which can be experienced intensely 'in the meantime' – like an intermezzo, a suspension of the ordinary course of prosaic everyday life – and not only once but time and again, so that one feels entirely good and connected. Hence, many never lapse into real idolatry in their relationship with their idol. They have no problems at all, when they have been amused and saturated by the object of their adoration, to move on to another object whereby they can let themselves be fascinated once again – hungry as they are – in order to be able to venerate it totally. This can continue unceasingly, for the adoration of stars and celebrities is insatiable because the identification with the idol never delivers what it intends: one wants 'to be' the star that one 'worships', but it is precisely this that is impossible.

This insatiability then sees to it that one begins to search for a new, more promising idol, which in any case still seems to hold the promise at the beginning of a total, gratifying identification. Naturally, it becomes seriously dramatic when the fascination, adoration and identification is not characterized by the flimsiness just sketched, but when it is 'dead serious' or a 'matter of life and death', as it were. And, sadly enough, this also happens. There are people who let their lives and the meaning of their existence depend on it, so that they then arrive at an extreme investment of

all their emotion and energy in the identification with their idol. This then leads easily, if not unavoidably, to a violent destruction of their own being and unique personality. Unfortunately enough, they do not even realize the breach of this violence, precisely because they have not maintained any distance between them and their idol – they always want to be near, to touch and hold on to him or her<sup>14</sup> – while a certain taking distance among most fans of stars and celebrities has not indeed disappeared, although the dividing line is not always clearly defined.<sup>15</sup>

### Between Culture Pessimism and Fanatic Passion

Another current example is the computer, which is a symbol of the entire expanding world of electronic communication. In this book Sylvain De Bleekere treats this topic, referring to the movie, *Dekalog I*, by the Polish director, Kieslowski. De Bleekere raises the question: "How far are we willing to put our trust in the computer (and in other new technologies)?" No one will be so crazy or naive as to deny the unmistakable usefulness of computers, or the mobile phone and others. But one can also enter permanently, 24 hours a day, into a virtual world via *www*, whereby

<sup>14</sup> Analogous idolatrous behaviours can also be discerned in the current phenomenon of 'stalking'.

<sup>15</sup> Another negative reverse-side of stardom can be seen among the celebrities themselves. They are faced with the temptation to be comfortably settled in their being-idols, meaning to say to let themselves be worshipped as idols and, in keeping with this, behave like a star or a celebrity. This can go so far that they are entirely fascinated by the fame and the media-attention that creates this fame, until they can no longer do without it. But in turn, this usually has a destructive effect since stars can no longer live normally, no longer have a real private life, pursued as they often are by the media, in particular by the paparazzi. Many cannot deal with the burden of their fame, and they then succumb, as it turns out in the media stories about their depressions and suicidal tendencies, their addiction to drugs or poppers, chaotic relationships, exhaustion and overwork. Their adulation and idol-status, in which they have established and amused themselves, has become hell.

we acquire or create the feeling of a kind of omniscience and thus of omnipotence. This feeds our fantasy which dreams and desires endlessly, and which reflects before us an unbridled freedom.

These ever-new technologies are good and offer people enormous possibilities. They are a firm expression of the craftsmanship and the responsibility of human beings. The risk rather is that the relationship is reversed. Then humans become the victims of their own craftsmanship, and their craftsmanship begins to take control of their lives, while it should actually be the other way around. Humans themselves should remain the master of their craftsmanship and thus be able, out of their personal craftsmanship, to take control over their own lives. They become the slaves of their own power, which then begins to control them as a strange power. Their own power is transformed into a strange and alienating power that grips them obsessively like a snake that mercilessly coils around and strangles them. Then their involvement becomes a way of investing themselves, or rather delivering up themselves without the least critical reservation or alertness. We can also simply call this a form of addiction. Addiction is always a kind of idolatry. One enters into an exclusive and total bond with that one product or that one means, that one behaviour or that one rule, from which one expects everything or to which one obeys completely. As we already mentioned, idolatry is always a form of violence. In idolatry, one subjects oneself to one or the other image or reality, whereby one also mortgages one's freedom. If the heart lets itself be manipulated by something or someone, and is entirely filled by it, being entirely enthralled and swept away by it, so much so that one is no longer capable of maintaining some distance and soberness, then one is controlled and possessed by it. In this sense, a total passion always leads to unfreedom, although one is not aware of this unfreedom precisely because one thinks, speaks and acts within the full identification of the passion. Plato calls this the 'slavish soul', which is not even aware of the alienating heteronomy of its own passion because it exists entirely out of that heteronomy. The slavish soul is in the grip of an inner tyranny, namely the tyranny of the emotion without reason, of the

emotion as utter reasonless surrender, of a canine fidelity, or rather devotion, which no longer discerns the imposing and patronizing weight of its own unreflected attachment. The passion that ends up in addiction is actually no longer an awareness of the addiction, since one is wholly immersed in one's own passion. Love for the idolized image or the idolized reality is fulfilled by the slavish soul in such a way that it can no longer deviate towards one or the other 'as far as I am concerned', towards a secret place where one can only be oneself in order to reflect and come back to oneself. In the passion that becomes addiction one loses even the capacity to be raped by the object of one's own passion – one has become so very much identified with one's own passion – even though this passion is experienced as the pinnacle of ecstasy by means of the idolized 'object'.<sup>16</sup> Indeed this critical approach to passion, or rather to complete passion, should not be understood as an argument for passionlessness, lukewarmness and insipidity. On the contrary, passion, drive, involvement and commitment to values and ideals, and, in religion, a commitment to God (and God's Reign) as the ultimate value, are praiseworthy and desirable, just as the gospel suggests: "Where your treasure is, there also will your heart be" (Mt 6:21). This is only about avoiding an idolatrous passion, which is both destructive for others as well as for the impassioned self.

### The Myth of Health

The care for one's own health is another domain of life where the chance for a new, secular form of idolatry is quite real, and in fact already appears more and more.

The current approach to health seems like a myth, in the sense that one proceeds from, and even requires, that all bodily infirmities

<sup>16</sup> E. Levinas, 'Freedom and Command', in: A. Lingis (ed., transl.), *Emmanuel Levinas. Collected Philosophical Papers*, Dordrecht/Boston/Lancaster, 1987, pp. 15-17

must be overcome and eradicated from this world. No single defect, no single setback, no single form of failure is still acceptable to such a mentality. In our society, in other words, health threatens to be an outright condition, even an absolute value. One speaks of physical health, psychological health, relational or affective health, social health, and spiritual health. The definition of health by the World Health Organization encompasses all dimensions of our being-human, as if everything could be reduced to health. Even religion today belongs to the concept of health. In certain illustrated magazines, sold in huge quantities in newsstands, health is treated as a total concept that attracts everything to itself. Being-healthy immediately becomes the criterion for well-being and happiness, yes even of meaning and religion. Naturally, this cannot be, for then one dimension of existence becomes absolutized into the first and the last, into everything, which directly ends up in a new idolatry.

A concrete example of this expansionist, totalizing concept of health is the so-called genetic health, which Kris Dierickx will discuss further in his essay. By means of genetic testing and intervention in the fertilization process, one wants to have absolute certainty whether the beginning human life is healthy, meaning to say without (serious) defects. Adult people want to know whether they would transmit serious defects or handicaps to the following generation(s). Based on genetic research, people would like to be informed of that, so that they could possibly avoid it. This is understandable, but at the same time, it can be an attempt to acquire total power over one's own genetic integrity and that of others.<sup>17</sup> The identification of 'genetically healthy = perfect = happy' is an idolatry, which is at the same time a form of violence. When I attempt to gain full power over my genetic health, it also gains power over me. That is the paradox. Idolatry always turns out to be a source of violence, and this in a double manner. From

<sup>17</sup> K. Dierickx, 'Genetic Medicine and Public Health care. Genethics and Beyond', in: C. Gastmans (ed.), *Between Technology and Humanity. The Impact of Technology on Health Care Ethics*, Leuven, 2002, pp. 120- 125.

its striving for autonomy that desires possession, power and honour, one desires to draw all things to oneself. But in so doing, that which one wants to control takes hold of us, so much so that it controls us in an irresistible and violent way. Perhaps it is due to its great wisdom that the bible says: "Be careful! Do not idolize anything. Make no images not only of me, but idolize nothing, no being above in heaven, on earth or under the earth." No single being may be divinized, worshiped, or idolized, for whosoever divinizes a being also becomes completely dependent on it. The power that I exercise gains power over me!

### The Body Between Culture and Cult

In extension of the cult of health, an entire culture on one's own body has also arisen in our consumer society, a culture that can degenerate into an idolatrous cult of the body.<sup>18</sup> In his essay, Bart Vanreusel looks into a very specific form of body culture, namely top sports, and he wonders whether the normalization of excess is not an indication of idolatry.

It cannot be denied: one's own body is a very special experience. It is not only a means with which I act and be, but it is also really myself. By means of my body, I step outside and work, but also enter into relationships. The body offers enormous possibilities for non-violence and the expression of love. Through it, I can also be religious and express myself in signs, rituals and symbols. All this requires a deep respect, appreciation and care for one's own body. As a creature of God, who has given me tangible and perceptible life, I am called to love my body, my life and myself. Belief in creation implies, in other words, a healthy self-love, which also expresses itself in the care for one's own health and one's own body.

<sup>18</sup> M. Pages-Delong, *Le corps et ses apparences. L'envers du look*, Paris, 1989; R. Laermans, *Schimmenspel. Essays over de hedendaagse onwerkelijkheid*, Leuven, 1997; K. Raes, *Verschaalde waarden*, Kapellen, 2001, pp. 49-53.

Concretely, this means the task to ensure a healthy and balanced diet, without the excesses of abuse and exuberance, or of an exaggerated, obsessive attention. No one will deny the importance of medical treatment and care in case of illness, without thereby lapsing into the extreme of an exaggerated preoccupation with or a one-sided medicalization of one's health. One can also be faced with the task of seeking psychotherapy, counselling or guidance, namely when it turns out that one can no longer cope with one's personal problems by oneself or with the usual help of one's relational and social environment. Another example of self-care is the care for hygiene, appropriate clothing and housing, and an overall healthy lifestyle with regard to, among others, work, sleep, rest and relaxation. With this, one is faced with the task to avoid all imbalances, like 'workaholicism' and the pressure to perform. In our consumer and affluence society, the 'old' virtue of moderation, i.e. the 'proper and reasonable measure', is and remains applicable more than ever.

There can be little care and too much asceticism, as is the case in certain conceptions that are inimical to the body. But there can also be exaggerated self-care, which is based on a one-sided I-involved experience of one's own body. The body can be so intensely aestheticized (stylized, refined, made-up and fashioned) that it becomes merely a means to capture unbridled pleasure or exercise power over others. A form of idolatry of the body likewise resides in the violence already discussed above, which is displayed and spread exuberantly and unashamedly, especially in the image media, however paradoxical this may sound. Through the body, which is the plaything of brutish and excessive violence, violence is depicted in such a way that it is evoked in its shock effect as something attractive and fascinating, and thus is aestheticized. A kind of total power over the body comes to be expressed. The body is reduced to an object of a merely narcissistic, self-identified and completely self-absorbed mode of life, while the body does indeed also have its darker side, its inaccessible and multiple meanings. When we start to think that we can, in a bodily sense, be totally transparent and experience total power or unbridled

pleasure through and with our own body, we end up directly in an idolization of the body. Through that, we do violence to ourselves and to others, *and* we let ourselves become obsessed and occupied with our bodies, so that we are possessed by it. Insofar as we are fascinated by it, it also begins to control and to subjugate us!

In our present society, one concretely notices that something is happening in terms of bodily self-care<sup>19</sup> when we note the developments of ever-new means, techniques, treatments and possibilities, which are strongly recommended, if not imposed, by all sorts of advertisements and so-called medical and pharmaceutical advice, with all the collective and individual obsessions thereof.<sup>20</sup>

### Money, Greed and Globalizing Economy

Still another important domain is that of the economy, with its phenomena like work and capital or profit seeking, money and the stock exchange, consumption and advertising,<sup>21</sup> and much more. Today the worldwide, (neo-)liberal free market system is associated in the same breath with the phenomenon of economic globalization. In his contribution Yves de Maeseneer, by presenting and discussing Naomi Klein's anti-globalist manifesto *No Logo* (2000), unmasks the hidden theological figures of the globalization process.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. F. Borel, *Le vêtement incarné. Les métamorphoses du corps*, Mesnil-sur-l'Estrée, 1992; J. Goedgebuure (ed.), *Het verdeelde lichaam. Ervaring en verbeelding van lichamelijkheid in een gefragmenteerde cultuur*, Baarn, 1990; R. Laermans, *Individueel vlees. Over lichaamsbeelden*, Amsterdam, 1990; Id., 'De mannequinmaatschappij. Over 'look', lijfstijl en lichamelijkheid', in: F. De Wachter (ed.), *Over nut en nadeel van het postmodernisme voor het leven*, Kapellen, 1993, pp. 65-79; K. Vuyk, *De esthetisering van het wereldbeeld*, Kampen, 1992; N. Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, London, 1990.

<sup>20</sup> See e.g.: K. Davies, *Reshaping the Female Body. The Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery*, New York, London, 1995; M.O. Little, 'Cosmetic Surgery. Suspect Norms and the Ethics of Complicity', in: E. Parens (ed.), *Enhancing Human Traits. Ethical and Social Implications*, Washington, 1998, pp. 162-176.

<sup>21</sup> F. Beigbeder, *14,99 Euro. Keiharde afrekening met de reclamewereld*, Breda, 2001.



In the world of economy we are also faced with a double meaning. Money is necessary to mediate goods and services to people whom we do not directly have before us. It is possible to deal with this ethically and meaningfully, but this does not happen automatically.<sup>22</sup> Today, economic technocracy practically encompasses the entire world – in what is now fashionably called globalization – and this ultimately becomes the only criterion for well-being. Then that economic and financial technocracy begins to function by itself, separate from the question of well-being and separate from all ethical concerns. Money speculation becomes a game in and of itself that people can play undisturbed, but which has enormous consequences not only for the economies of the South, but also here for us. Because of this, the poor become still poorer and the rich richer, or we have the new rich detached from all social-ethical criteria and questions. At this, it is fitting to introduce the following verse from the gospel: “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (Mt 6:24). This razor sharp statement, which rightly points to the entire aspect of the involvement of the heart and our efforts in our preferences, challenges us time and again to make an essential choice *and* to let this fundamental option do its critical, orientating work in matters of business and the whole of economic life. In the message of Jesus, but also in the First Testament,<sup>23</sup> a persistent suspicion towards wealth and the abundant possession of material goods runs all throughout like a main theme.<sup>24</sup> After all, wealth can control and swallow up the person

<sup>22</sup> E. Deutsch, ‘Argent et sexe’, in: J. Halpérin, G. Lévitte (eds.), *Idoles*, pp. 41-49; C. Réveline, ‘Les différentes formes de l’idolâtrie dans la Bible et aujourd’hui’, in: *Ibid.*, pp. 11-29.

<sup>23</sup> J. Sicre, ‘L’actualité de l’idolâtrie’, in: *Lumen Vitae. Revue internationale de catéchèse et de pastorale*, 48(1993), nr. 3, pp. 283-287.

<sup>24</sup> Whoever has easy access to material affairs is quickly attached to them, and this attachment does not need very much to end up in idolatry. A simple example of this can be found in the way in which people in Flanders today spice up the celebration of the sacrament of confirmation of their children into a glorious

so much so that no more place is left for the essential, God and His Reign: "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter into the kingdom of God!" (Lk 18:24-25). Indeed, this is not about wealth in itself, but the attachment to wealth. Humans are attached easily, quickly and totally to wealth, for fortune, money and possessions make life comfortable, reliable and pleasurable. Hence, Paul outspokenly states that greed is equivalent to idolatry (Col 3:5).<sup>25</sup>

We still can establish the bond between economics and idolatry in another manner, namely as an extension of Bacon's 'idol of the theatre'. Allan Janik claims that our unhealthy fascination for all that is theory and theory systems is nowhere as startling as in economic thought or in economic theory.<sup>26</sup> Overconfident as people are – and economists are also people – they try to get a grasp of economic processes by designing mathematical models, and this not only in econometrics but in almost all tasks of the science of economics. By that means, economic theory arrogates for itself the pretension of being a science, both a pure as well as an applied science, which not only can understand, but also can exercise a certain influence on, human phenomena and behaviour in the world of production, business and consumption. The latter, however, is apparently a great illusion, since economists up until now have never been able to forecast with success an economic catastrophe and much less be able to control and steer it,

feast, for which they spend huge amounts of money. The intention rather seems to advertise the well-being and social position of the parents rather than making central the meaning of the ritual for the child. Bordering on a caricature, some parents would even much rather organize a confirmation feast without the church celebration, for that is at most still an indication of how the meaning of the ritual eludes them and of how they have very little or no interest at all in the ritual itself.

<sup>25</sup> G. Manenschijn, 'De markteconomie en de sociaal-ethische betekenis van idolatrie', in: R. Burggraeve, J. De Tavernier, D. Pollefeyt, J. Hanssens (eds.), *Van madonna tot Madonna. In de ban van beelden, idolen en afgoden*, Leuven, 2002, pp. 233-264.

<sup>26</sup> A. Janik, 'Afgoderij na de dood van God', in: *Nexus*, 1998, nr. 21, pp. 43-44.

notwithstanding all their elegant tables and analyses of all sorts of market and other mechanisms. Apparently, the economic event eludes the studied and theoretically mapped out necessity, and it is not because an economic theory can depict something beautifully and insightfully that it would also work likewise in reality. In other words, there are a number of *imponderabilia* or incalculable, capricious factors that make an objective-scientific approach to economic events difficult and uncertain. It is striking at times how in the economic study of certain phenomena, like work, some factors are taken into account in a too limited manner or are even neglected, such as the proficiency acquired from practical experience, precisely because a too one-sided attention is paid to the relationship between capital (profit) and work. It is not because one has developed a powerful and clear theory on the economic function of work that one can solve in no time, with the help of the elegant economic theory of work, the problems that arise in the work place. Yet the science of economics still stubbornly believes in the myth of the controllability of economic life, whereby economic theory indeed displays the traits of an idolatry. Furthermore, the more fanatic the employment of economic theory in replacement of reality, all the more violent becomes the science of economics precisely because it begins to function as a final system that must provide decisive answers to very concrete, practical questions and problems. These problems and questions are determined more by coincidental circumstances and factors – the ‘cyclical market conditions’, as it is beautifully called – than by strictly measurable and controllable, necessary mechanisms. So little is necessary and predictable in economics, that one easily becomes the victim of one’s own overconfidence in economic systems.

### Conclusion

The various forms and shapes of profane idolatry challenge us to seek the proper balance in our relationships with created realities

and worldly values. Indeed, we must take care that we do not lapse into a kind of culture pessimism. God is the origin and creator of all that we are and also of the realities around our fellow humans, world, the nature, plants, animals and us. In the first creation narrative, we read: "God saw that it was good", and after the creation of humans: "indeed, it was very good". This means that all creation has a positive, valuable meaning. It deserves respect and the opportunity to unfold. The critique on idolatry or idolization should therefore not mean that we condemn or reject creation itself. A Rabbinic midrash (Avodah Zarah 54b) poses the question: "Why doesn't God intervene to destroy images of idols when we idolize creatures?" The answer of the Rabbinic tradition is that God indeed cannot destroy His own creation – the sun, the moon, the stars, the planets, the earth – because humans are so foolish as to worship them!<sup>27</sup> What indeed must happen is to critique human arrogance, pride and overconfidence. Evidently, idolatry or idolization is only the absolutization of something which is in and of itself simply valuable, in the literal sense of 'being worth the while', meaning to say worth the effort of a persevered striving and desiring, to be sure in the humble awareness of the relativity – thus not the totality and ultimacy – of the 'value' striven for.

It is good and desirable that the human heart becomes attached, and deems things, persons and projects as important, meaning to say that it ascribes value and commits itself to such things with the necessary passion. When humans have no 'treasures' or valuable affairs, then their hearts are nowhere and empty. And that precisely forms the humus for all sorts of perverse, absolutist and totalitarian attachments. The pursued values become promoted to ultimate, divine values to which one can only fanatically identify oneself and for which one will then support and struggle as a matter of 'live and death'. This leads both to self-destruction as well as to the destruction of others.

<sup>27</sup> Cited by: K. Seeskin, *No Other Gods. The Modern Struggle Against Idolatry*, West Orange, 1995, p. 21.