

The idolatry of the self

Renouncing the religion of Sheilaism

Rebecca Slough

The worship here just doesn't feed me. I don't get anything out of the service. Our worship is not upbeat enough. Our worship is too emotional and not intellectually serious. I don't like . . . [choose your favorite: the music, the preaching, all the masculine or feminine language, the responsive readings, the visuals]. I just don't like it when . . . [supply an ending of your choice]. I have often heard these and similar critiques of congregational worship in North America. People offer them as justifications for leaving one congregation for another, for changing denominations, or for leaving the church all together.

These complaints are theologically threadbare. They presume that the primary purpose of Christian worship is to nurture, feed, and comfort *me*. They are spoken as if the ultimate goal of worship is to fulfill my desires, as if worship is a commodity: I don't

The complaint that “the worship here just doesn't feed me” is theologically threadbare. Such critiques presume that the primary purpose of Christian worship is to nurture, feed, and comfort *me*.

get anything out of it. My worship preferences have priority over any consideration of the congregation's history, its shared values, and its mission. Church leaders should be struck by the narcissism lurking in these complaints.

People ought to complain when what happens in worship is biblically trite, poorly led, nonsensical, or confusing. Some critiques that congregational leaders receive do have theological concerns at their base. But many discontented worshipers lack the language to get to the deepest questions or stirrings of

their souls. So they do what anyone in cultures shaped by consumerist and therapeutic values does: they frame their complaints in the words of the self: I, me, my, and mine.

Sheila Larson, a young nurse, was interviewed as part of a large sociological study, the results of which were published in the mid-

1980s in *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*.¹ She named her religion, her faith, as “my own Sheilaism”: “I believe in God. I’m not a religious fanatic. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It’s Sheilaism. Just my own little voice . . . It’s just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think He would want us to take care of each other.”²

Give Sheila credit: she names her religion what it is. She is unencumbered by a community of people who live within the wisdom of a tradition. She is freed from any external claims that would anchor her faith. She is not bound by the need to discern whether her own little voice is truthful or deluded. She can freely assert what “He” would want us to do (though how she knows this remains sketchy). She relies on no one; beyond the obligations of her job, it seems that few people rely on her. She demonstrates no embarrassment about the idolatrous character of her faith.³ And Sheila may not be unusual in her beliefs, values, loves, and sources of trust. Perhaps if we were as honest as she is, many of us would give our faith not Sheila’s name but our own.

In *Greed as Idolatry*, Brian Rosner distills a definition of idolatry as “an attack on God’s exclusive right to our love and trust.”⁴ We cannot assume that worshipers whose preferences are continually frustrated do not love or trust God. But we may question whether they have placed themselves right alongside God as the focus of commitment, love, and trust. Individualism is a strong sociocultural value in North America. Self-reliance, economic independence, free choice unencumbered by the needs of others, few obligations to honor ties to family or community, privately held faith commitments—these are societal marks of the competent man or woman. North Americans may love and trust a “God-of-the-gaps” amid other sources of security they have garnered for themselves.

We become what we worship

In his biblical theology of idolatry, G. K. Beale explores the thesis that biblical writers throughout the canon describe idolaters as exhibiting the spiritual characteristics of the idols they worship.⁵ He demonstrates how Israel—in its spiritual blindness, deafness,

“stiff-necked” stubbornness, disorientation, and incomprehension—resembles the idols that cannot see, hear, yield to God, or interpret God’s activity. In the Old Testament, idolaters worship animals made out of wood or stone. Idolatry in the Gospels and in some of Paul’s writings takes the form of worshipping Jewish tradition.⁶ Israel, and later the Jews, become like the idols they wor-

Self-reliance, economic independence, free choice unencumbered by the needs of others, few obligations to honor ties to family or community, privately held faith commitments—these are societal marks of the competent man or woman in our society.

ship.⁷ “Let all who have ears to hear, listen” is a recurring biblical exhortation spoken by the prophets, Jesus, and Paul to awaken the dead senses of God’s people.

Beale’s work alerts us to characteristics of worship that focus trust and love almost exclusively on the self. Vision is limited to “my needs.” “Good” worship results in warm feelings, a personal high, or some “awesome” cathartic release of energy: “I feel, therefore I am.” Or, “good” worship is intellectually stimulating, critically assessing the truthfulness of faith claims. If they cannot withstand the scrutiny of reasoned analysis, beliefs are set aside like outdated clothes: “I think,

therefore I am.” Confirmation of the self becomes the highest value of worship, a cul-de-sac of ceaseless personal needs, desires, and fears.⁸

In the deepest reaches of consciousness, we know that the self is too flimsy to build our lives around. We know there is something beyond the neat principles, values, beliefs, preferences, and goals we have constructed to manage our doubts, failures, and pain. God can serve as the Other beyond. But so can money, goods and services, technology, security devices (including armies), social connections, work, and addictions. If we choose God as the Other, we maintain a relationship with clear arrangements: we do this—God does that.

Joan Chittister wonders why religion has gotten media attention while expressions of faith are hardly noticed: “The answer to the questions cuts to the core of the spiritual life. The fact is that it might well be that deep down we are still substituting a kind of magic for faith. God we make a cornucopia of human desires, a vending machine of human delights. We coax God to be on our

side and call it faith. We cajole God to save us from ourselves and call it devotion. But those things reduce God to some kind of popular puppet.”⁹

We keep fear of our inadequacy at bay with structure, organization, and clear role arrangements. When the self is the center of all our concerns, or even if God shares the center with the self, three things result: (1) we expect that God will play by the rules we have set out between us; (2) we don’t expect (or accept) that God has purposes that might disrupt the relationship we have settled into; and (3) we assume that with God there is no mystery. We do, in fact, come to see God as a puppet, like all the other puppets we worship, trust, and love.

Breaking out beyond the self

God has given us the capacity for consciousness. Being a self is a good gift from God for the sake of relationship with God, other people, and creation.

Families, friendships, and congregations are the primary spaces in which we learn to love, trust, and serve God. Our unique gifts can be honed for God’s purposes in the company of others. With the help of mature friends we learn to discern how our gifts may be best used for the sake of others. But families, friends, and congregations can also fall into idolatry, trusting tradition or structures of relationships in order to keep their fears of the unknown at bay. Many Christians struggle to find mature believers who can help them move beyond their preoccupations with the self to be drawn into a deeper relationship with God.

Beale uses Isaiah 6 as a paradigm for how God must intervene to break the hold of idolatry. In a dream Isaiah is drawn into an encounter with God in the temple, surrounded by seraphs continually proclaiming God’s holiness. Isaiah comes to his senses, seeing himself accurately as a sinful man living among an idolatrous people. He confesses, and a seraph purifies him with fire. He emerges from the dream with a mission to serve the true God and reveal the depths of idolatry that have captivated Israel. An extraordinary action by God is required to break the prison of idolatry.¹⁰

In Isaiah’s dream God uses a place of worship and actions of worship to open Isaiah’s senses to what is really real. God still uses

familiar aspects of worship to help Christians name the truth about ourselves and to focus the self's love and trust on God.

Being present in the gathered body of Christ reveals the visual and aural truth that the self's relationship with God is corporate and individual. God's word, Christ's presence, and the Holy Spirit's empowerment are active in the body and in each worshiper. Deepening personal relationships with other maturing Christians often deepens the self's relationship with God.¹¹ Gatherings around the Lord's table with people we love in Christ begins to loosen the self's terrible fears of not having or being enough.

The exasperating books of Job and Ecclesiastes force us to grapple with God's mysterious character that will not be controlled by our pious intentions, desires, or strivings for personal

**In Isaiah's dream
God uses a place of
worship and actions
of worship to open
Isaiah's senses to
what is really real.
God still uses
familiar aspects of
worship to help
Christians name the
truth about ourselves
and to focus the
self's love and trust
on God.**

meaning. Job, in particular, plays havoc with the safe arrangements we have established with God. Good, honest, hardworking people have lost jobs in the recent economic downturn. Notions of self-sufficiency and autonomy are shattered. The shame of failure clouds everything. The unemployed ask, why? Yet the wisdom books leave us not with fear but with the assurance of God's abiding presence, a presence we feel near at hand or trust at a greater distance.

Psalms and hymns of praise that include expressions of thanksgiving set the self in its proper relationship with God. Praise acknowledges God's power to create, love, save, and provide for humankind. Acknowledging God's power costs the self its illusion of power. And gratitude means relinquishing the illusion of self-sufficiency. None of us can provide everything we need for living each day. Gratitude requires humility, which redefines the self's real accomplishments.

Through a cycle of songs like the ones that follow, the self can claim its true identity in God, its true source of empowerment, and its ultimate purpose within God's expansive love for the world. Singing allows us to embody words that express love and trust by using the limits of voice, breath, and body. When we sing

“What is this place,”¹² we gather as a body, in a place, to hear God’s Word and to share at Christ’s table. In sharing together, we become Christ’s bread and wine for one another. In singing “Spirit divine, inspire our prayers,”¹³ we know that our worship is inspired

In confession we confront our inability to control our lives or to liberate ourselves from the snares of evil and death. We cede the self’s power to God, who has power to redeem and save.

by God’s Spirit, not only by our volition. By this Spirit, we recognize our need, our duplicity of heart, and our desire to offer ourselves to God. Through this gathered expression of the church, the Spirit reveals God’s glory. In the company of the congregation, I sing “Praise, I will praise you Lord,”¹⁴ and in doing so I praise God with my whole being. Praise leads me to loving God and binds me to God’s service. I find joy in God, not in who or what I am. In song we pray “Open, Lord my

inward ear.”¹⁵ Because I trust God, I dare to ask to hear words of truth about myself. With persistent but steady gentleness, the truth of my soul is told. By God’s grace I am changed, giving up all that seemed important to me, so that I can share in God’s wisdom, power, and love. With an ear that hears, I can say with Isaiah, “Here I am, Lord.”¹⁶ I will go where you lead me, for the sake of your people.

Confessions of sin name the truth about human sinfulness, limitation, and captivity to powers that constrain our love for God. Confessions of faith in God relinquish the self’s belief in itself as savior and lord. In confession we confront our inability to control our lives or to liberate ourselves from the snares of evil and death. In confession we cede the self’s power to God, who has power to redeem and save.

The baptismal rites set out in the *Minister’s Manual* accent the individual and corporate nature of claiming Christian faith; they set a life orientation for new believers.¹⁷ The baptismal questions give candidates the opportunity to renounce the powers of the world; to assert their belief in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit; to accept God’s Word as a guide for life; to take on the responsibility for giving and receiving counsel; and to participate in the mission of the church.¹⁸ The questions imply that idolatry, whether of the self or of something else, can divert a believer’s ability to love and trust God, but they are not explicit. Renouncing the powers of

the world may not be a strong enough conviction to resist the tempting power of the self. Perhaps in this period of the church's history, two additional questions should be added: Do you promise to love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength? Do you promise to love your neighbor as yourself? And the fitting answer to these questions would be, "With God's help, I do." These affirmations could help keep the tendencies toward "Sheilaism" in check.

Conclusion

Human consciousness, self-awareness, reflection, and volition are God's gifts for building loving and trusting relationships. In giving us these capacities God has taken great risks. We may use them to worship God or ourselves. In cultures that exalt market capitalism, consumerism, unbridled technological development, privatization of religious values, and entitlement or exceptionalism, the temptations to make the self an idol are nearly overpowering. The church is possibly the only space in contemporary North American societies in which that idolatry can be challenged. It takes the body of Christ, enlivened by the Spirit, to keep the self focused on loving and trusting God completely.

Notes

¹ Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, updated edition with new introduction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). This sustained study, first published in 1985, explores the public and private expressions of personal commitments of faith, service, community, work, marriage and family.

² *Ibid.*, 221.

³ Sheila was a young woman at the time of the study. Her views are somewhat caricatured in the Bellah study and to a certain degree in this essay. We can hope that her ideas about faith developed as she encountered more of life's quandaries and unanswerable questions.

⁴ Brian S. Rosner, *Greed as Idolatry: The Origin and Meaning of a Pauline Metaphor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 148. Rosner's project is to demonstrate what Paul means in saying that "greed is idolatry" in Col. 3:5 and Eph. 5:5. Greed and idolatry do not normally inhabit similar semantic domains. For this essay I have drawn on his definition of idolatry, but have not dealt with greed. This quote gives a fuller view of his project's conclusion: " 'greed is idolatry' may be paraphrased as teaching *that to have a strong desire to acquire and keep for yourself more and more*

money and material things is an attack on God's exclusive rights to human love and devotion, trust and confidence, and service and obedience" (173; Rosner's italics).

⁵ G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2008). Beale traces explicit and implied references to idolatry throughout the biblical canon. Early in this work he acknowledges that his approach to identifying texts, especially in the New Testament, is not limited to explicit references to idolatry, but rather looks to probable allusions to texts related to idolatry. He pays careful attention to the recurring references to people not having eyes to see or ears to hear, who are stubborn or easily led astray. He demonstrates how such references in the Old Testament were specifically tied with situations in which idols played an important role in the story. Later references to spiritual blindness, deafness, stubbornness, and being lost are also found in contexts in which people were not able to apprehend what God was doing in their midst (see 22–35).

⁶ Beale claims that in the Old Testament the primary form of idolatry was worshipping gods created by human hands. In the New Testament, idolatry was connected with worshipping the Jewish tradition (169).

⁷ Among the texts that Beale explores are: Isa. 6; Ps. 115:4–8; Ps. 135:15–18; Deut. 4:27–29; Exod. 32–34; 1 Kings 12; Num. 25; Ps. 106:20; 2 Kings 17; Jer. 2:5; Hosea 4:7; 13:2–3; Ezek. 44; Gen. 1–3; Ezek. 28; Isa. 29; Matt. 13:10–15; John 12:37–43; Acts 28:25–28; Rom. 1, 12; Revelation.

⁸ See Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 138–40.

⁹ Joan Chittister and Rowan Williams, *Uncommon Gratitude: Alleluia for All That Is* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 8.

¹⁰ Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 268–69.

¹¹ Roberta Bondi, *Memories of God: Theological Reflections on a Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 201. Bondi writes about the sixth-century teacher Dorotheos of Gaza who said, "Imagine now . . . that there are straight lines connecting from the outside of the circle all human lives to God at the center. Can't you see that there is no way to move toward God without drawing closer to other people, and no way to approach other people without coming near to God?" (201). Bondi elaborates more on this teaching in *To Love as God Loves* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

¹² *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press; Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press; Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992), no. 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, no. 30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 76.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 140.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 395.

¹⁷ *Minister's Manual*, edited by John Rempel (Newton, KS, and Winnipeg, MB: Faith and Life Press, 1998) is recommended for use by pastors serving Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada congregations.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 48. An alternative set of questions on page 51 asks the baptismal candidate whether she/he renounces the devil. This alternate set (more than the set of questions found in the complete form of the service) places temptation as a clear threat to baptismal life.

About the author

Rebecca Slough is academic dean and associate professor of worship and the arts at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana.