Resources on idolatry
A review article

Justin A. Neufeld

The books reviewed in this article are:

Campbell, Will D., and Richard C. Goode. *Crashing the Idols: The Vocation of Will D. Campbell (and Any Other Christian for that Matter)*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010.

Keller, Timothy. *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters*. New York: Dutton, 2009.

Robinson, Marilynne. *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.

In *The Sickness unto Death,* Søren Kierkegaard gives a compact yet intricate definition of the human being. He says that the human being is a relation, a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal, which relates itself to itself. In addition, this relation that relates itself to itself "must either have established itself or have been established by another." Kierkegaard sides with the latter, offering this final definition of the human being: "The human self is . . . a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another."[1]

This formal account is given content by Kierkegaard's discussion of the person of immediacy. This person defines herself by her success at acquiring and keeping the objects of her desire. She is happy when "good fortune" brings these things into her possession, and is unhappy when, by "bad luck" or "a stroke of fate," they are taken from her. The person of immediacy, therefore, is a person who rises and falls with the gain and loss of external things, without ever recognizing the true despair of her condition, which is her separation from the eternal. She is not aware that her attempts to be happy by getting this or becoming that are, at

bottom, attempts to be rid of herself as spirit, that is, as a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal.

Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*

I start with Kierkegaard because Timothy Keller's *Counterfeit Gods* emphasizes the fundamental moral-spiritual character of human beings and asserts that idolatry is the substitution of a created good for God as the focus of our identity and meaning. Keller begins the book by noting the suicides of high profile executives following the 2008 global economic crisis. In this context, Keller echoes Kierkegaard's observation that when we despair over the loss of created goods, we are really despairing of the eternal—that which would release us from our despair. Despair, he writes, "comes from losing an *ultimate* thing. When you lose the ultimate source of your meaning or hope, there are no alternative sources to turn to" (x–xi). The economic crisis is a gift, Keller writes. It has alerted us, not just as individuals but as a society, to our misery. Now is a chance to escape our enslavement not only to the false promises of wealth but to all enchantments.

Keller's *Counterfeit Gods* emphasizes the fundamental moral-spiritual character of human beings and asserts that idolatry is the substitution of a created good for God as the focus of our identity and meaning.

In the following chapters, Keller tackles the personal counterfeit gods of romantic love, money, success, power, and glory, and the corporate counterfeit gods of racial pride and cultural narrowness. What Keller says about each of these counterfeit gods is instructive, and his alignment of specific biblical figures with these idolatries is illuminating; at those points where he pushes the limits of what the biblical text can bear concerning the character of Jacob's or Zacchaeus's existential struggle, his fundamental claims about the spiritual dynamics of service to these gods remain compelling.

Together with the introduction, the chapter on Abraham serves as the foundation for the book's analysis of idolatry. The story of Abraham, according to Keller, is the story of the struggle of faith against idolatrous love. Abraham sacrificed friends, family, and prosperity to follow God. In return he was given the promise of the one thing he did not and could not have, a son. Thus, the

birth of Isaac represents both the triumph of Abraham's faith and its point of crisis. Keller writes: "He had waited and sacrificed, and finally his wife had a baby and it was a boy! But the question now was—had he been waiting and sacrificing for God, or for the boy? Was God just a means to an end? To whom was Abraham ultimately giving his heart?" (6).

The point that Keller wants to make is that we all have our Isaacs, created goods for which we have rejected God or for which we are using God. And thus, like Abraham, we must face our Mount Moriah, the moment when the things we love are threatened and we must opt either "for bitterness and despair" or for faith that life and love are found in loving things in God, not apart from God. But Keller works against this point by means of an interesting interpretive decision. He decides that Abraham was commanded to sacrifice Isaac because Isaac had become a counterfeit god. God "was calling in Abraham's debt. His son was going to die for the sins of the family" (10). What happens on Mt. Moriah, however, is that grace triumphs. Isaac is spared. Yet this leaves God's justice unsatisfied. The solution for this difficulty, Keller writes, is Jesus. The ram that was substituted for Isaac prefigures God's only Son, the true substitute for the debt of sin. "The only way that God can be both 'just' (demanding payment of our debt of sin) *and* 'justifier' (providing salvation and grace) is because years later another Father went up another 'mount' called Calvary with his firstborn and offered him there for us all" (18).

The major weakness of Keller's book lies here, in how he sees God in Jesus addressing the idolatrousness of the human heart. In a word, in his interpretation of the story of Abraham, Keller risks turning God into a counterfeit god—not with the claim that we owe God everything, or with the claim that sin introduces a debt we cannot pay on our own, or even with the claim that forgiveness cannot fail to make the destructiveness of sin manifest. The problem lies with how God elicits recognition of these truths.

Keller has given us a God who finds satisfaction for the debt of our ingratitude by taking our firstborn, but who then deflects that debt onto his own son. Thus we are spared—but not without the debt being collected, and not without us duly noting what we have narrowly avoided. It is only *this* god, Keller declares, who

assures us that we are truly loved and truly secure. I'm not so sure. These seem like the methods of a pseudo-god, powerful but insecure, competing with others for human loyalty and affection.

Keller could learn from Kierkegaard on the significance of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. For Kierkegaard, Abraham is the father of faith because he neither rejected eternal joys for temporal joys nor rejected temporal joys for eternal joys. The person of immediacy follows the first path: blind to the eternal dimensions of the human spirit, he serves the god of his stomach. Socrates exaggeratedly described this person as one who "surrenders to pleasure and sets out in the manner of a four-footed beast, eager to make babies." I mention Socrates because Kierkegaard praises his wisdom. First, Socrates recognized the narrowness of human existence that does not attend to the transcendent dimensions of goodness and beauty. Second, Socrates recognized that even if we give up the fanciful love of the person of immediacy and embrace a truer form of love, we still face the hard truth that even this love is not rewarded on earth. Thus, Socrates counselled his listeners "to die to the temporal vindication of love by dwelling in higher sufficiency of the love of the eternal."[2]

Abraham, having renounced the temporal vindication of love, was nevertheless able, by faith, to re-embrace the temporal. It is for this reason that we find him welcoming Isaac with joyful laughter when God's promise is finally fulfilled.

It is only with Abraham, according to Kierkegaard, that we see the error of this higher wisdom. Like Socrates, Abraham died to the impatient desire to see love rewarded. He too rested in the higher sufficiency of the love of God. However, unlike Socrates, Abraham did not treat his earthly loves with resignation or ironic detachment.[3] Instead, having renounced the temporal vindication of love, he was nevertheless able, by faith, to re-embrace the temporal. It is for this reason, says Kierkegaard, that we find Abraham welcoming Isaac with joyful laughter when God's promise is finally fulfilled.

What does this review of Kierkegaard have to do with Keller? Jesus is not a solution for a problem in God. He is not God's means of collecting on a debt he is owed so that, now satisfied, he is able to give the mercy he was otherwise unable to give. Rather, the penalty that Jesus suffers is death—the wage of sin, the natural

consequence of our prideful separation from the source of life—and he suffers it at the hands of humans who have fallen so far from the thought of God that they believe physical death is the greatest possible punishment. They do not recognize, as Jesus said upon hearing of Lazarus's death, that "this illness does not lead to death." The illness that leads to death is the egoistic spiritlessness that belongs, in different ways, to both Socrates and the person of immediacy; it is what Abraham, in fear and trembling, triumphed over on Mt. Moriah. For Kierkegaard, the gift of Jesus' atoning presence is that he frees us to enter the ordeal of humble faith that Abraham modeled.

One of the antidotes to the interpretation of Jesus that I have attributed to Keller is an enlarged sense of God's transcendence and sovereignty. Both Marilynne Robinson's *Absence of Mind* and Goode and Campbell's *Crashing the Idols* communicate this powerfully.

Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind*

The target of Marilynne Robinson's book *Absence of Mind* is expressed in its title: she is after the baffling modern tendency to assert that the mind is not to be credited or trusted. She singles out Freudianism and Darwinism as two exemplary, and irreconcilable, instances of this tendency. Each in its own way asserts that our experience of the mind—its creativity, its complexity, and its liberty—is illusory. The real forces at play are either genetic imperatives or unconscious drives. Our sense of ourselves as rational, free, reflective agents is a screen thrown up by these deeper elements.

The majority of the book is devoted to Darwinism, but it is important to note that Robinson is not an enemy of evolutionary theory. Her target is narrower, namely, the chortle of triumph that came in response to the discovery of evolution and which continues to be heard today. Charles Darwin was the first to chortle. The opening chapter of his *Descent of Man* (1871) contains this sentence: "It is notorious that man is constructed on the same general type or model as other mammals. All the bones in his skeleton can be compared with corresponding bones in a monkey, bat, or seal. So it is with his muscles, nerves, blood-vessels, and internal viscera."[4]

The background to Darwin's remark is his belief that Christianity stands or falls on showing that the characteristic activities of humans—our wit, rationality, and morality—belong to our souls, nonmaterial substances created by God and for God, free from the decay and dumbness belonging to matter. Thus, demonstrating the extensive biological similarity of humans to animals, and showing how our characteristic activities are anticipated in primates and other species, deals a decisive blow to religion in general and Christianity in particular. Now we can say good-bye to superstition and anxiety. Now we can say good-bye to Christianity's powerful but hectoring god who jealously promises heaven for those who flatter him and hell for those who do not.

In response, Robinson points out that Darwin and those who have followed him abide by the mind-body dualism they think they have refuted. The evidence is their repeated insistence that because cognition is embodied in the (evolved) brain, we cannot really be concerned to see, know, and love far beyond the limits of any conception of utility. And so from Darwin to today we have been subjected to comical attempts to explain altruistic behaviour in terms amenable to rational self-interest. "A parent is likely to rescue a child of his own, since that child is presumably the bearer of half his parent's genetic inheritance. . . . To quote Lee Alan Dugatkin, 'If grandchildren are in need of rescue, the net benefit received by the altruist is cut in half.'"[5]

The idolization of substance that has afflicted Christianity has been unthinkingly appropriated by scientists ever since Darwin. The cure for it is a more penetrating wonder served only by openness to divine sovereignty and transcendence.

These perspectives are terribly shortsighted, Robinson contends. Demonstrating that the brain is the site of wit, rationality, and morality does not diminish the spiritual reach of these activities, unless we take a diminished view of the brain. In other words, it is only "notorious" that we share so much with animals if we think so little of them. But nothing says that we must. Rather than lowering our estimation of our minds, our similarity with other species and the embodiedness of our thinking should raise our estimation of the material universe. "If the mind is the activity of the brain, this means only that the brain is capable of such lofty and astonishing

things that their expression has been given the names mind, and soul, and spirit. Complex life may well be the wonder of the universe, and if it is, its status is not diminished by the fact that we can indeed bisect it, that we kill it routinely" (112).

Thus, not only have the Darwinists given us self-interested genes, they have given us self-interested genes that are ashamed of themselves and cloak their nakedness through the fine words of *love*, *sacrifice*, and *moral duty*. In the end, Robinson's claim is that the Darwinists' determination to explain change within and between species in terms of randomness and self-interest, while situating these explanatory categories within a broader narrative about the accidental and unthinking origin of the universe, leaves us with anomalies that only an unscientific commitment to curtailing the capacities of the mind can live with. The idolization of substance that has afflicted Christianity has been unthinkingly appropriated by these scientists. The cure for it is a more penetrating wonder served only by openness to divine sovereignty and transcendence.

Will D. Campbell and Richard C. Goode, *Crashing the Idols*

This brings us to *Crashing the Idols*, a book designed to serve as an introduction to the life and thought of Will Campbell. It begins with a biography of Campbell and closes with Richard Goode's explication of Campbell's theological vision. Between these pieces by Goode is a reprint of Campbell's *Race and Renewal of the Church*, a powerful text.

According to Campbell, any attempt to address the problem of race by adopting a humanitarian approach—by which he means one emphasizing law and order, equality, communication, human rights, constitutional process, public schools, the dangers of poverty, and so on—is to work at the level of the symptoms. What needs to be confronted is the disease of sin. What is the sin? It is the denial of God's sovereignty. Campbell writes:

> *When we confess God as Creator and Sovereign who not only brought the world into being but continues to be its sole sustainer and judge, we see that no matter how high man may rise, no matter what legislation we engineer, no matter how loudly he screams "nigger, jew, dago, kike," his final outcome will be that of the mighty*

> *kings of Judah, in the book of the Chronicles and the Kings—Jehoahaz, Joash, Jeroboam.*[6] *Each died and slept with his fathers and another reigned in his stead until he too died and slept with his fathers and another took his vacant throne. To recognize God as Sovereign, Creator, Judge, and Ruler of the universe is to see how weak is the hand of men who must die and sleep with their fathers and go down into the great sepulcher of the earth together with "all sorts and conditions of men" only to be raised and judged by that one Sovereign who is Lord of all* (118–19).

Campbell opens *Race and Renewal of the Church* by characterizing the work as his effort to say something about which the Bible says nothing. The cause of the Bible's silence is not its ignorance of the issue; it is its principled refusal to legitimate racial categories. The Christian, Campbell writes, does not speak as a white man, a black man, or a red man. Rather, he speaks as "the offspring of a 'peculiar family,' so strange as to be called a *tertium genus*, a third race, a people neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, embracing master and slave alike . . . asking only one question of each: Who, do you believe, is this man who is called the Christ?" (77). Race becomes a natural category only when the emphasis is on humans instead of on God, and we betray this rejection of the basis of our common humanity whenever we focus on the strategies and institutions we might employ to effect reconciliation. We *are* reconciled, Campbell says again and again. We need only abide in the kingdom already established and invite others to do the same.

Here we arrive at the deep tension of Campbell's theological vision. On the one hand, Campbell calls the church to incarnate the reconciliation that Christ has effected. On the other hand, he sees *all* institutions as evil.

Here we arrive at the deep tension of Campbell's theological vision. On the one hand, Campbell calls the church to incarnate the reconciliation that Christ has effected. On the other hand, he sees *all* institutions as evil, because what is required to preserve them inevitably conflicts with the other-regarding, sacrificial character of reconciling love. In what sense they are evil, however, is not clear. Is this the kind of evil one must flee from? Or is

it the kind of evil that must be suffered in patience and penitential prayer? More thought needs to be given to the radical anti-institutionalism belonging to Campbell's theology of the principalities and the powers. But it is clear that it needs to be done in the spirit of Campbell, whose passionate hatred of slavery is matched only by his passionate desire for reconciliation with the enslavers. "The church must stand in love and judgment upon the victim, the victimized, and those, both black and white, who exploit both, for they are all children of God" (90).

A compelling picture of the challenge of faith

Together these three authors give us a compelling picture of the challenge of faith. Robinson's critique reminds us that the devil is the best cure for humanity's preference for the dualism of body and soul over the dualism of Creator and creature. As Augustine noted long ago, the devil is the "fleshliest" of all created things not because he has a body—he does not—but because he is supremely proud and envious. If the body were the problem, we would have to absolve him of all vices. The issue is not the particular substance we are as much as it is the substance of our willing. Accordingly, the ordeal of faith—recognizing that love is not temporally vindicated while being humble enough still "to rally to finitude and its joys"[7]—is not done away with by discovering the embodiedness of cognition or the evolution of our species.

Campbell's discussion of race reminds us that the ordeal of faith does not end here. Not only must we confront the challenge of choosing or rejecting faith in a sovereign God, but we also must live with the consequences of faith's rejection by others and ourselves. We must, that is, confront the challenge of choosing or rejecting reconciliation both with those who have acted mercilessly toward us and with those we have acted mercilessly toward. And all this because of Christ: his appearing forces a decision concerning these possibilities without making this decision for us. This is a steep price to pay to avoid idolatry. In its light, the unfreedom of service to counterfeit gods looks liberating.

Those familiar with Keller's *The Reason for God* will know that there Keller affirms substitutionary atonement but denies that Christ was a substitute to satisfy God's wrath. Rather, Christ

suffered the violence, death, and alienation that results from our prideful separation from God, thereby testifying to the destructiveness of sin while also releasing us from its consequences. So I am puzzled by Keller's interpretation of Christ's sacrifice in *Counterfeit Gods*, and by his smug dismissal of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*.[8] I invite readers to make their own judgments about where Keller stands. And I believe that if they take up *Counterfeit Gods* alongside *Absence of Mind* and *Crashing the Idols*, they will deepen their understanding of just how costly and rewarding is service to the sovereign God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Notes

[1] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sicknesss unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 13–14.
[2] P. Travis Kroeker and Bruce K. Ward, *Remembering the End: Dostoevsky as a Prophet to Modernity* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 218.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 22.
[5] Robinson, *Absence of Mind*, 61.
[6] These racial and ethnic slurs, which are a way of elevating ourselves above one another and thus before God, are a denial of God's sovereignty. They are a reflection of the core sin Campbell is addressing—the sin of pride and presumption. They reflect our refusal of both our lowliness before God and our dignity in being graced with God's sovereign company. Those who use this kind of language are in denial that they are dust, and that they will die, and that they will be brought before the sovereign creator of the universe.
[7] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 37; see 118–20.
[8] For Keller's dismissal of *Fear and Trembling*, see *Counterfeit Gods*, 8. Readers familiar with *The Reason for God* will also know that chapter 10 of that book contains the argument of *Counterfeit Gods* in short form. They will also know that Keller begins this chapter with Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death*, affirming its statement of the eternal dimension of the human being. This makes what Keller says in *Counterfeit Gods* all the more baffling.

About the reviewer

Justin A. Neufeld is a PhD candidate in the department of religious studies at McMaster University (Hamilton, Ontario). He teaches part-time in philosophy at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba.