

Idolatry Today

by Lynn Andrew

And the rest of the men who were not killed by these plagues yet repented not of the works of their hands—that they should not worship devils and idols of gold, silver, brass, stone, and wood, which neither can see, nor hear, nor walk—neither repented they of their murders, their sorceries, their fornication, nor of their thefts.

Revelation 9:20-21

Why are the writings of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and the other prophets so concerned with putting down idolatry? The obvious answer is that idolatry was widely practiced in ancient Israel. Is there an “application” today? The usual answer is yes, anything that gets in the way of one’s devotion to God is one’s idol. But that is merely a distant relative of the idolatry principle; it’s an abstraction that covers too much and obscures the point. Is the *principle* of idolatry—the indirect worship of beings in the spiritual realm by means of statues, images, and other agents—being practiced today? The answer is yes, most obviously in Hinduism.

Hinduism is the most widespread of the idol-worshipping religions today. There are twice as many Hindus as Buddhists in the world. Hindus rank third in number behind Christians and Muslims. But those statistics do not accurately represent the influence of the religious ideas from Hinduism that have

reclaimed Buddhism and crept into Christianity. The New Age movement is almost identical with certain aspects of Hinduism.

It must be recognized that Hinduism itself is a collection and evolution of ancient religious lore. It is represented by many sects, each of which is further segmented into various schools of theology. But idol worship is found even in the most rarefied strains of Hinduism if we may define it more generally as "trusting a humanly devised method to put a person in touch with a supernatural being (by whatever name)."

Popular Hinduism is less particular about the purity of sects; and theology is of little concern to the Hindu layman. He favors certain gods for personal reasons and makes offerings and prayers to statues that he believes are virtual incarnations of deities. Long-range personal development is not as important as securing immediate favors. Thus the majority of Hindus are motivated to worship idols for the same reasons that Israel did in Isaiah's day: they seek favors from the gods in their struggles in life and death.

The Bible between idol worship, as is evidenced where the representing a and drink repulsive to the demonic



makes no distinction worship and demon Formal idolatry, such in ethnic restaurants owner has a statue Hindu god with food placed before it, is Christians because of association.

There are two ways to view the demonic connection: either the statue is literally a conduit to a spirit being, or it is simply a manifestation of the satanic principle of the alternate god or anti-Christ. Either way the idol delivers its devotee to the camp of Satan.

But the Hindu religion involves other elements besides statues, some of which are common to Christian practice: prayer, chants, miracles, holy men, priests, scriptures, traditions, temples. Various sects in Christendom regard these elements differently, and some of that we may disagree with, but how are we to make sure that what we practice is not a manifestation of the same ancient paganism that beset Israel and was condemned by Yahweh God—reaching us via Hinduism and New Age influences?

What about prayer? Mechanical repetition is orthodox in Hinduism. Jesus warned about empty repetition as being useless. God loves his true worshipers. Devils are gratified by having devotees but do not love them; thus vain repetition is encouraged in Hinduism. We do not use prayer wheels, but what about those repetitious mantra-like songs that crept into evangelical Christian worship when the New Age movement began infesting the culture? What is done in disobedience of Christ's commandments does not honor God, regardless of the feelings involved. Vain repetition with the intellect suitably disengaged can go beyond vanity and become an invitation to ungodly spirits, precisely because it is being done in disobedience. This issue has been debated to death in recent decades and will not be belabored here.

What is beyond doubt is that mantras—short phrases or words to be repeated over and over—are an important aspect of worship in Hinduism. Transcendental Meditation is a commercialized form of Hindu worship in which the mantras are the names of Hindu gods. The TM initiation ceremony—to which the initiate brings an offering of fruit and flowers—invokes Hindu deities. If the words of the ceremony were spoken in a language that the initiate could understand instead of Sanskrit, TM would not have become so widely practiced in the West. While TM is widely believed to be harmless, serious psychological damage is not uncommon. Beyond the initiation ceremony, the difference between TM and non-religious meditation is the use of the mantra that is repeated until the rational mind is subdued and overcome by ... peace, calm, relaxation—so we are told. There are Christians who have paid the initiation fee, gone through the initiation ritual, and received their “personal” mantra word, not realizing that others have become Christians only after renouncing TM. The proper object of Christian meditation is the Word of God (Psalm 1), not a Hindu demon. Meditating on a section of Scripture or a hymn or paraphrase of it that embodies a particularly challenging thought is much different from cycling a simple abstraction. If the text of the meditation is significant in a wholesome way, it will not bear mindless repeating.

Hindus desperately seek after miracles as proof that their religion connects them with living deity. The “Milk Miracle” that started in India in 1995 is dramatic evidence of this. Someone

held a spoonful of milk to an idol of the elephant-headed god Ganesha and observed milk being drawn up into the trunk. Before the day was out, statues of the entire Hindu pantheon were being fed milk. Millions of people left work, causing traffic gridlock near temples, and devotees stood in lines as long as a mile. Milk sales jumped 30% in New Dehli. It was reported that one store in England sold thousands of extra pints of milk. The milk was being drawn up by capillary action before oozing to the surface and running down the front of the idols, but the scientific explanation did nothing to discourage the faithful from bringing pots and buckets of milk to the temples to witness firsthand what they believed was a miracle that proved they were pleasing the gods. Christians behave in a similar manner over reputed miracles at shrines of the Lady of Roman Catholicism. Millions seek after tongues and healing miracles at the hands of Charismatic preachers. What all of these examples have in common is the religious urge to secure the favor of a deity by means of venerating a visible instrument.

Supposedly when you select a particular statue or icon or use the "in the name of Jesus" formula, you have selected which deity you are dealing with. But is that realistic? Has man ever been able to dictate the terms of worship? One thing we gain from the study of the Bible is the ability to recognize the character of Yahweh in order to distinguish him from his rivals and to avoid practices he does not condone. Regardless of what you call it, if the practice is contrary to the commandments and the character of God, it could get delivered to the wrong address.

Hinduism is famous for its holy men—gurus, adepts, cult leaders—men recognized as having exceptional spirituality. But every religion has its holy men, and it takes no exceptional insight to observe them functioning as idols to some degree. The apostle Paul wrote about this in I Corinthians chapter 3, reprimanding Corinthian believers for making too much of particular teachers. He laid down a principle in this regard: though many build on the foundation of Jesus Christ, some of what they build will prove to be insubstantial. There are many teachers who sound good to the casual Christian because their teachings build on the foundation of Christ, but their doctrines will be consumed by fire in the day of testing, and perhaps the rewards of their adherents will go up in smoke as well. It behooves any Christian who follows a particular teacher to test what is being taught in light of what the Bible says—not a selection of verses but the entire Bible. It is much easier to pick a teacher for subjective reasons and base one's knowledge on the views of that one person; it simplifies everything. So do idols. But everything is not simple. The Bible is a fertile field for both good and evil professors, so before sitting down under one particular tree of doctrine, the more noble Christian examines them all or at least becomes somewhat familiar with the theological landscape. You can judge a tree, whether it be good, bad, or indifferent, by the fruit it bears.

Inevitably the priesthood principle is at work in any organized religion. Ecclesiastical leadership invariably assumes a gatekeeper role to some extent, which is not necessarily an evil thing, but it is

prone to corruption. Human nature guarantees that the arrangement will not be perfectly holy. Priests are tempted to take advantage of their office for personal gratification and are often in control of the mechanisms that were designed to keep them pure and honest. Satan can use them just as well as he can use a statue. The perpetual preacher J. Vernon McGee noted that professional clergy has been a serious detriment to the church. He was concerned about the tendency to "lord it over the laity," and he believed that was exactly what Jesus Christ meant when in two of his letters to the churches he condemned the Nicolaitans.

Priests, ministers, clergymen of all sorts commonly insulate themselves from the laity, which makes them less able to repel attacks by the enemy, not to mention temptations of the flesh. Why does the laity tolerate this? It is the idolatry principle. Idolatry is a simplifier. Listening to an esteemed go-between is easier than "studying to make thyself approved." Once in that mode it is important to maintain the esteem, hence the laity willingly allows, even encourages the elevation of the office and does not want to hear about corruption. It is no secret that the most famous gurus are exceptional not only in spiritual advancement but in material wealth and fleshly pursuits as well. In Hinduism that can be justified. In Christianity it should have no place, but it does.

In an apocryphal chapter sometimes appended to the book of Daniel there is an episode of priestly corruption; and though it may be a caricature, it highlights the real potential for corruption within priesthoods. As the story goes, the Babylonians had a

temple housing an idol called Bel, and this idol daily consumed a great quantity of food and drink: six bushels of flour, forty sheep, and six kegs of wine. Every day the king went to worship this monstrosity. But Daniel was not taken in by it. When the king asked him why he did not worship Bel, Daniel gave the answer that any knowledgeable person would give: "I do not revere idols but only the living God who made heaven and earth and rules all mankind." Naturally the king was offended and said, "How can you deny that Bel is a living god? You know how much he eats and drinks every day!" "Do not be deceived, O king," Daniel replied. "The thing is made of clay; it has never eaten anything." Of course the king was enraged because he suspected that Daniel was right. So he called together the priests of Bel and demanded that they prove that the idol actually consumed the offerings. There were seventy of these characters inhabiting the temple besides their wives and children. Their spokesman proposed a test: "We will all leave the building while you set out the food and wine. Then shut the door and seal it with your ring. If you find that Bel has not eaten it all when you return in the morning, you may take our lives; otherwise, Daniel shall die for his lies against us." The priests were not worried because beneath the offering table they had made a secret tunnel through which they would come in to consume the food. So the king set the food before Bel while Daniel had his servants scatter ashes over the floor. Then they went out and sealed the door with the king's signet ring. That night the priests entered as usual with their families, and they ate and drank everything. The next morning the king came with Daniel

and verified that the seals were not broken, and as soon as he opened the door and saw the empty table, the king cried aloud, "You are great, O Bel; there is no deceit in you!" Daniel just laughed and stopped the king from entering. He had him look at the floor. "I see footprints of men, women, and children!" said the king, and in his wrath he arrested the priests, their wives, and their children and found their secret door. The king put them to death and gave the idol and temple to Daniel for destruction.

How much of what goes into offering plates is being used to promote the Gospel relative to what supports ministers and their families? Proof of efficacy is not required because we know that Daniel was right. The idolatry principle is at work: the ineffective man-made system stands in the place of direct service to God.

Few people know the scriptures of their religion. This is inexcusable in Christianity because, unlike the venerated writings of Hinduism, the Bible is consistent, intelligible, and stands up to rational scrutiny. You will be defenseless against onslaught of Hindu ideology and New Age relativism if you are not steeped in the Bible. Does that sound far-fetched? Certain strains of Hinduism comprehend Christ in some fashion and affirm certain teachings from the Bible, yet they are fundamentally pagan because they have the wrong god in view. The same goes for Christian cults. The god of popular culture is the self, which is straight from Hinduism or at least quite in common with it. Some Christians even regard the Koran as a legitimate holy book, but anyone who has been taught by the Bible knows without the

slightest doubt that the god of Islam is not the God of the Bible.

Every sect of every religion has its own set of traditions which are treated for all practical purposes as if they were ordained by God. Popular religion is built either on tradition or the teachings of some latter-day prophet which then becomes their pattern. Traditions in worship can fit the definition of idolatry: trusting a humanly devised method to put a person in touch with God. The critical thing is the transparency of the tradition. Naturally the more elaborate traditions are more difficult to see through.

The temple principle is that one must go to a temple in order to best connect with God. Where do you find God? In a church building? In your own church work? In people? These are not necessarily idols, but they can become substitutes for God.

To a Christian, an enlightened idolator is an oxymoron. But from the Hindu point of view, even the most spiritually and intellectually advanced worshippers try to please one whom they call "God" while satisfying themselves by means of idols. A devout Hindu speaks to idols, and though there is no response he never questions the ancient wisdom that used this form of worship. He has faith that his prayers have been heard. Hindu philosophy recognizes that ultimate reality is beyond the senses, so the idol no less than anything is a symbol, in this case pointing to a particular form of deity. However, at the same time there is the belief that idols do sometimes respond and converse with the devotee.

Offering food to an idol is not the vanity that it seems to one

who knows nothing about this element of Hinduism: there is intense spiritual discipline involved that lifts one's mealtime from a mere animal-like feeding to an act of spiritual devotion. This includes the preparation as well as the consumption of the food. Laying a sample of the food before the idol is only one physical component of the exercise. The enlightened Hindu will tell you that he makes spiritual progress by eating the food that has been prepared properly and offered to the idol because his devotion enables "God's grace" to transform the food into a "spiritual mercy." He will tell you that not just any food is suitable: it must be vegetarian, not having caused the suffering of any animal, and it must be prepared with utmost cleanliness and never tasted before offering it to "God" because the goal is the satisfaction of the deity, not of the worshiper. The deity should be the first to receive the fruit of one's labor. If all is done in love and devotion, then the offering is deemed to have been accepted.

What the Western Hindu means by "God" with a capital G is not Yahveh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Though spoken of as the one and only true deity, to the Hindu this is not inconsistent with his polytheism. It may refer to one of several deities that have the power to shepherd one's soul to its next incarnation. Thus while the Westernized language of Hinduism mimics that of some Christians, it represents an entirely different theology. It also is a snare to ignorant Christians who see the similarity, assume that it is essentially the same thing, and go off into Hinduism by whatever name,

losing their way in one of its many mazes.

For the Hindu's daily practice, a home altar where an image of a sacred "form" or "incarnation" of "God" has been set up is acceptable. Pictures of one's guru and images of saints may be included as long as the image of the god is the focal point. A sample of the food along with a drink offering is placed on a special plate that is never used for any other purpose. The worshiper burns some incense and sits with closed eyes reciting sacred mantras followed by silent prayer requesting the Lord to accept the offering. By this means the food is transformed *into* "the grace of God," and when consumed it confers spiritual advancement since one's devotion has been demonstrated. For maximum benefit the food should be eaten with meditative awareness.

From the beginning, sacrifices made to God required animal suffering because substitutionary atonement for the death penalty for sin was in view. This is quite opposite to the Hindu view. Idols are specifically and emphatically forbidden in the Bible. This too is quite opposite to the Hindu view. Opposites cannot be the same thing.

Read Isaiah and note how he repeatedly contrasts the omnipotence and lively personality of God with the impotence and dead silence of idols, often in words quoted directly from Yahweh God himself. We learn from Scripture about God's character and personality, his purposes, his love for Israel, and his intentions for the world. If we are to avoid demons and worship only the living and true God, we must know him and what he expects from us. If

we truly know him, we will recognize idolatry and divest ourselves of all forms of it.

Hinduism is the most ancient yet in some ways the most modern of the major religions. It has the chameleon's ability to match another background, and its many heads speak many languages. Snakelike, it poisons intellects and chokes industry, as is evident in the poverty of India where most of the world's Hindus live. It is Hindu philosophy that drives the radical environmental movement, which could not exist without the fundamentally illusionary disconnect from reality that the Hindu outlook promotes. It is the Eastern mindset of Hinduism that inspires modern cults.

Although the gods of Hinduism have other guises, the ancient practice of idol worship continues. According to Revelation 9 the business of idols and idol makers will continue to be a major anti-Christ activity well into the Great Tribulation period. The website of one manufacturer describes its products:

"To add on to the beauty of the home furnishing as well as to worship various gods and deities, our clients can avail from us a comprehensive collection of Statues and Idols. Artistically designed by the talented craftsmen of our organization, these items showcase the traditional patterns with contemporary designs. We have made these items in quality metal such as brass, copper, aluminum, bronze and others. This ensures the high longevity of the products."