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**THE IMAGE:
IDOLATRY MADE EASY IN A CULTURE
OF IRRATIONALITY AND SPECTACLE**

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SYNOPSIS

Idolatry is more than the adoration of images; it is humanity's deliberate refashioning of the Creator into the creature. The pull of idolatry began with the Fall and has continued to be part of the human story. Person-worship, visual pomp, and political will-to-power are part and parcel of human idolatry. This always has been and will continue to be the case. Idolatrous pageantry and power was most distinctly demonstrated in the last century in Germany's bout with demagoguery under Adolf Hitler. The potential for such tyranny still exists for Western societies because irrationality and spectacle — two major components of fascism — are also components of postmodernism; further, much like the ancient Greeks and Romans did, we too idolize and fashion images of our gods. Today, however, the advancement of visual technologies and the loss of a Christian consensus in Western culture have done much to foster the idolization process.

When the memory of the Christian consensus which gave us freedom within the biblical form is increasingly forgotten, a manipulating authoritarianism will tend to fill the vacuum."¹ — Francis Schaeffer

In September 1934, the medieval town of Nuremberg, Germany, was once again decked out — this time for the Third Reich's pageantry of power. A year earlier Adolf Hitler had become chancellor of Germany, and nothing could stop him now.

Nuremberg was made the heart of national unity and the site of the Nazi party's annual rallies for two reasons: First, it was conveniently located at the intersection of seven railway lines, allowing for the import of thousands of labor corps, SS troops, Hitler youth, and spectators. More importantly, the feudal setting reflected the glories of Germany's ancient past. Charlemagne, whose conquests had unified Europe more than a thousand years earlier, had fought there. To establish a psychological link between the First Reich (Empire) and what promised to be the third, the führer (leader) had recently presented himself with replicas of Charlemagne's crown, orb, and scepter. Everything about the Nuremberg rallies was designed to make a point.

Most of the rally ceremonies took place on Zeppelin Field, a flat terrain suited for large blocks of parading soldiers and for Hitler's oratorical gurgitations. Rally stage manager Albert Speer had replaced the old bleachers lining the field with stone seating 1,300 feet long and 48 feet high. The stadium was crowned with a gigantic eagle with a wingspan of 100 feet. From the stands hung a multitude of red and white banners with swastikas — crooked crosses that eventually replaced the Christian crosses inside Germany's churches.

Hitler had even greater plans for Zeppelin Field and had commissioned Speer to design a complex that could last a thousand years.² Mussolini had the city of Rome for his backdrop — the führer deserved even better. Under Speer's "architectural megalomania" the new stadium would be twice the size of Rome's legendary Circus Maximus. The field's name would be changed to "Marchfield" after Mars, the god of war. The stands would be punctuated with 24 great towers, each more than 130 feet tall. Towering over the field would be a sculpture of a woman whose 200-foot height would dwarf both Nebuchadnezzar's 90-foot statue and Nero's 119-foot colossus.

In addition, 130 anti-aircraft searchlights were positioned around the field to cast white pillars into the night sky. The beams merged into a general glow several miles up and formed a giant canopy generating the effect of a "cathedral of ice."³

From the clouds, Hitler descended upon Nuremberg in his airplane — a true Thor moment captured by actress and film director Leni Riefenstahl, who documented the rally in *Triumph of the Will*. Armed with a crew of 120 personnel, Riefenstahl devised shots from planes, cranes, flagpoles, and roller skates. She caught it all — boots at ground level — strutting storm troopers — smoking torches — forests of swastika flags — thundering mock battles — two hundred thousand spectators — salutes exploding simultaneously — "Sieg Heil!" — "Sieg Heil!" — "Sieg Heil!" The feature-length film was shown throughout Germany and was compulsory in every cinema and school.

From the consecration of the flags to the arrival of the storm troopers to the mock battles — every display was orchestrated to stir the emotions. Biographer Alan Bullock comments that the "sense of power, of force and unity was irresistible, and all converged with a mounting crescendo of excitement on the supreme moment when the Führer himself made his entry."⁴ The crowds could hardly wait for him. Even before Hitler's keynote address, ten thousand people surrounded his hotel, the Old Rathaus, chanting, "We want our führer!" At last, Hitler appeared on the balcony to appease them. American foreign correspondent William L. Shirer commented that their faces reminded him of the crazed expressions on Holy Rollers in Louisiana.⁵

Hitler liked giving speeches around eight o'clock at night, when, as he once wrote, "man's resistance is at its lowest."⁶ When his time came, Hitler entered Zeppelin Field, accompanied by a Wagnerian overture. Starting off in a reserved tone, he slowly worked his way into a theatrical fit. His speeches were always doctrinal, hammering the hatreds of pan-German Nazism: Versailles, Marxism, Judaism, pacifism, and democracy. No one can say the world had not been warned. "We are strong and will get stronger," he proclaimed.

"And there, in the floodlit night, jammed together like sardines, in one mass formation," wrote Shirer, "the little men of Germany who have made Nazism possible achieved the highest state of being the Germanic man knows: the shedding of their individual souls and minds...until under the mystic words of the Austrian they were merged completely in the Germanic herd."⁷

BEHIND THE NAZI MACHINERY

The Holocaust never would have happened if Germany had not first been prepared for Hitler. Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl noted that the gas chambers were not prepared in the offices of Berlin bureaucrats but in the lecture halls of Europe.⁸ Several decades earlier, German rationalist theologians announced to Europe that the Bible was merely a collection of human scribbles and that Old Testament monotheism was a product of religious evolution. It did not take long for the conclusions of higher criticism to trickle down to the German populace, transforming the Bible into a dry history book.

Hitler was well aware of how liberal theology would pave the way for his movement. Even before the Nazis came to power, he boasted in a press interview how German Christianity would have little difficulty swapping out the cross for the swastika:

Will the masses ever again become Christian? Nonsense. Never again. That film is worn out. Nobody wants to see it anymore. But we'll help things along....Do you

really think they won't teach our God in their churches, these liberal priestlings who have no belief any longer, merely an office? I guarantee you that, just as they turned Haeckel and Darwin, Goethe and Stephan George into prophets of their Christianity, they will substitute our Hakenkreuz [swastika, hooked cross] for their own cross.⁹

And of course, they did.

In addition to the progressive liberalizing of the German pulpit, the growth of the Nazi Party can be attributed to two other factors. On one hand, brute intimidation was applied on all perceived opponents, but that was not enough and was by nature inadequate under a democratic system. One of the greatest assets of the Nazi Party was a sophisticated propaganda machine capable of tapping into public sentiment. Journalist Konrad Heiden, who carefully studied Hitler's rise to power before his exile in 1933, explained the mystery of his success: "One scarcely need ask with what arts he conquered the masses; he did not conquer them, he portrayed and represented them. His speeches are day-dreams of this mass soul; they are chaotic, full of contradictions, if their words are taken literally, often senseless as dreams are, and yet charged with deeper meaning."¹⁰

Today, scholars of human communication and spokespeople for the entertainment industry discount the influence of the mass media, but Hitler and his minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, did not. To the contrary, once Hitler became chancellor, he sought to lay his hands on every media form in Germany — art, radio, the press, and film. Goebbels, whose doctoral thesis analyzed Romantic drama, declared, "In propaganda as in love, anything is permissible which is successful."¹¹ Two days after his appointment to the "Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda," the little sophist said, "It is not enough to reconcile people more or less to our regime, to move them towards a position of neutrality towards us, we would rather work on people until they are addicted to us."¹² Goebbels made this statement in March of 1933. Two months later he stood before a bonfire of burning books and declared, "The age of extreme intellectualism is over...the past is lying in flames...the future will rise from the flames within our hearts."¹³

Book burning was one manifestation of the anti-intellectualism associated with Nazism. It was an attitude especially cultivated among Germany's youth. A member of the exiled Social Democratic Party observed: "[The] new generation has never had much use for education and reading. Now nothing is demanded of them; on the contrary, knowledge is publicly condemned."¹⁴

How did one of the most educated populations on the planet become so utterly credulous? One way this can be explained is by the circumstance of the *vanishing word*. Germany's bout with demagoguery is a story of the vanishing word, both the *Word* of God and *words* as meaningful communication. The rejection of the Jews, and ultimately the dissenting Christians, was really a rejection of a transcendent God and His transcendent laws. Hitler found little merit in God's Word or in words because Hitler himself became the *Word*, and *images* naturally made him a better object of devotion.

To understand the Hitler phenomenon one has to look at the nature of idolatry and the vast bulk of human history. Next to God's dealing with His own people, the allure of idolatry is the oldest story in the world. Feminist Camille Paglia correctly observes that pagan idolatry is more than the adoration of images; it is best understood as a "fascism of the eye": "pictorialism plus the will-to-power. It is ritualism, grandiosity, colossalism, sensationalism."¹⁵

Hitler's propaganda could not have worked unless it reinforced existing attitudes and beliefs already within the German populace. Hitler appealed to something at the subconscious level, something deep within the human soul, something unspoken but felt in all of us, something dark, barbaric, and demonic: the idolizing of the creature over the Creator.

UNDERSTANDING IDOLATRY

Paul's epistle to the Christians at Rome is perhaps the most perceptive critique of human nature ever written. The epistle's opening discourse exposes the crux of humanity's turning away from God: the deliberate refashioning of the Creator into the creature:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man — and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. (Rom. 1:18–25; NKJV)

All humanity has an awareness of God; God's eternal power and divinity (Godhead) are seen in creation. Humanity, however, fails to honor God as Creator; instead, it suppresses this knowledge and goes the other direction. The Bible calls this *unrighteousness*. People even create entire religious systems in order to walk in unrighteousness. As theologian James Montgomery Boice said, "The religions that man creates are actually attempts to escape having to face the true God. We invent religion — not because we are seeking God, but because we are running away from Him."¹⁶

Humans turn to *futile thoughts*, or, as the Authorized Version renders it, *vain imaginations*, for the simple reason that they do not like the God who has been revealed to them in nature, conscience, and the Bible. Having rejected the God who is revealed in nature and conscience, humanity is left with its own imagination to recast God as it pleases.

The passage in Romans teaches that humans *exchange* the truth for a lie. This is what happened in Germany. The honorable devotion due to a holy Creator was directed toward a mortal creature — Hitler. The seduction of the land of Luther in the first half of the twentieth century involved getting the German people to reject what was left of their Protestant heritage so they could follow the führer as a living god. Hitler's magic lay in his ability to reach back into Germany's mythological past and recast himself as a thaumaturgic king from the Middle Ages. English professor Gene Edward Veith observes in his book *Modern Fascism: Liquidating the Judeo-Christian Worldview*, that the "fascists sought to recover the mythological consciousness...the old pagan order of divine-king, the sacred community, the communion with nature, and the sacrifice of blood."¹⁷

Nazism was simply a nostalgic longing for the old pagan system. The idolatry was evident — a god-king exercising supreme power, a propaganda machine that magnified and distributed the image of that god-king, and a willing populace.

OUR OWN IDOLATRY: LIVING IN A HOUSE OF MIRRORS

The rise of the entertainment industry has dramatically altered our leisure-time habits. Industry estimates indicate that the average adult spends more than half of his or her waking life with the media. (Television alone takes up an average of four hours a day for adults.)¹⁸ The enormous amount of time and energy devoted to electronically produced images constitutes a kind of ritual. Media images are pervasive, emotionally captivating, and — dare I say it? — *sacred*. Electronic images are sacred not because we associate them with the true and living God, but because we associate them with *ourselves*. We pour our own meaning into them and receive that meaning back. We follow the sordid lives of celebrities both on and off the screen, develop "personal relationships" with them (though having never met them personally), buy their products as if they were religious relics, and make pilgrimages to their shrines (e.g., Elvis).¹⁹ To have the fortune to actually *become* a celebrity, says cultural critic Neal Gabler, "is widely regarded as the most exalted state of human existence."²⁰ Celebrities are visual hope chests of the *self*. We enjoy looking at ourselves as we run away from God. Our polytheism is not directed at stone idols or marble statues. Our polytheism resides in a house of mirrors.

American historian Christopher Lasch has written that we have become a narcissistic culture that worships at the altar of *self*. In Greek mythology Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection in a pool of water and was turned into a flower that now bears his name. Lasch believes a fundamental change has taken place in the structure of our personalities, derived in part from the proliferation of images around us: "We live in a swirl of images and echoes that arrest experience and play it back in slow motion. Cameras and recording machines not only transcribe experience but alter its quality, giving to much of modern life the character of an enormous echo chamber, a hall of mirrors. Life presents itself as a succession of images...recorded and reproduced by means of photography, motion pictures, television, and sophisticated recording devices."²¹ To these words, written almost a quarter of a century ago, we must now add cable, Internet, and various forms of virtual reality. Idolatry — worshiping the creature over the Creator — is made easy with a camera and a willing audience.

We are not too different from the Greeks and Romans who idolized their gods — mere images of mortal humans with mortal passions. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, a student of the Greek imagination and a favorite philosopher of Hitler, wrote in *The Birth of Tragedy* that once the gods had been cast into their various roles and placed upon the stage of Mount Olympus, the Greeks began to emulate them. For the Greeks to glorify themselves, they had to "feel themselves worthy of glory; they had to behold themselves...in a higher sphere....This is the sphere of beauty, in which they saw their mirror images, the Olympians."²²

Art was the vehicle whereby the Greeks worshiped themselves. The aesthetic experience and the religious experience were one and the same. Unlike the Hebrews, who were strictly prohibited from making any type of representation of God's likeness, the Greeks, with their highly visual imagination, perfected the art of representation. To them, man was the measure of all things.

Camille Paglia argues, as did Nietzsche, that the themes in Greek myth and art reflected the tension between the artist's imposition of form on the wild and chaotic forces in nature, or the Dionysian dynamic. (Dionysus, the god of wine and revelry, was worshiped in a cult festival given over to sexual display, where passion "overwhelmed all family life and its venerable traditions; the most savage nature instincts were unleashed, including even that horrible mixture of sensuality and cruelty."²³) Paglia shrewdly defines pagan beauty as the "brazen pomp of sexual personae."²⁴ Nietzsche called it the "logic of sensuousness"²⁵ in which the indispensable aesthetic precondition is that of *rapture* — rapture of sexual arousal, of the feast, of daring, of movement, of nature, of cruelty, of great desire, and of the will.²⁶

COULD HITLER HAPPEN AGAIN?

There are those who say that we do not have to worry about Hitler's kind anymore because such a one easily could be recognized and tagged before rising to power. I say that this would be true if the West still possessed a Christian conscience, but the Christian conscience is fast fading. Francis Schaeffer's warning must be taken seriously: once the Christian consensus is forgotten, a manipulating authoritarianism will tend to fill the vacuum.

Our postmodern culture has more in common with fascism than with its totalitarian competitor: communism. Postmodernism is a turning from rationality, and at the same time, an embracing of spectacle. Postmodern irrationality is grounded in a rejection of absolute truth that is perhaps as dangerous for us as it was for Germany. Veith explains that when transcendent values are excluded, the political arena is reduced to sheer "will-to-power": "If there are no absolutes, the society can presumably construct any values that it pleases and is itself subject to none....Without moral absolutes, power becomes arbitrary. Since there is no basis for moral persuasion or rational argument, the side with the most power will win. Government becomes nothing more than the sheer exercise of unlimited power, restrained neither by law nor by reason."²⁷

Our postmodern irrationality, furthermore, is coupled with a dependence on images. Violence, sex, and the cult of celebrity — all pagan ideals — pervade Hollywood. The *image* exalts itself not only against words but ultimately against the transcendent *Word* (*Logos*). Since the law of the entertainment industry is now applied to the way we elect leaders — style over substance — the American political process is

seriously compromised. *The letting go of transcendent truth, coupled with our love of spectacle, cracks open the door, as it did with Germany seven decades ago, for a future führer.* As Veith points out, the replacement of rational debate with media manipulation, the subordination of logic to emotionalism, and the trivalization of politics — all tenets of our popular culture — form a fertile breeding ground for a new kind of fascism.²⁸

Consider for a moment the American university. Institutional critic Martin Gross comments that our colleges are now ground zero for anti-intellectualism, that the minds of graduates are “full of idiosyncratic, isolated bits of knowledge,” but with no “organization of thought, no plan, no basics, no foundation....This gravely weakens their ability to think constructively and to distinguish truth from falsehood.”²⁹ Legal scholar Robert Bork says our universities have abandoned “logocentrism” (traditional notions of rationality) to make room for the politicization of “new intellectual fields” in the same way European fascists rejected rationality in the first half of the twentieth century.³⁰

Today there are more reasons to fear fascism than communism. The spirit of the age, because it is anti-intellectual, conforms more to fascism (communism is supposedly predicated on “scientific” theories). Fascism requires no rational basis other than the acceptance of a charismatic leader riding on sheer will-to-power, but it is also true that fascism likes to prey on demoralized and desperate societies. Fascist demagogues feed off “desperate times that require desperate measures”; while America is becoming more anti-intellectual (irrational), we are not yet demoralized or desperate. A strong economy and a high standard of living have both spoiled us and kept us from danger. It would appear that we are safe for now, but the future arrives much faster these days because of technological advances and a rapidly shrinking world.

This is not to say that if a severe economic depression or something worse (like our major cities being nuked by fanatical terrorists) should befall us, that a political sophist, should he arise, would necessarily remind us of Adolf Hitler. More than likely he would not. To a large extent Hitler inoculated us against other Hitlers. Parody helped make Hitler a comic figure — sort of a cross between Charlie Chaplin and Count Dracula. What was charismatic and believable in 1934 for Germany would not necessarily be charismatic and believable in 2003 for us. Hitler would look somewhat ridiculous on television, a medium that requires a cool savviness as opposed to Hitler’s hyperelocutionism. Hitler was cinematic but he was not telegenic. Politicians today know they must master television to be elected.

Fascism does not have to put on the same face that it had in 1934, however. Postmodern fascism might take a form resembling what we are now seeing on many university campuses — mindless relativism, a rejection of Judeo-Christian spirituality for New Age earthiness, a whiney victimization, a trash-and-burn mentality toward America’s Western heritage, and an intolerance toward all perceived opponents.

THE TRIUMPH OF SPECTACLE IN POLITICS

Brazen pomp is now an integral part of American politics. This is because in an electronic age the visual personality of the candidate is more important than his or her political platform. When television was born, the party boss died. The most popular politicians are the ones the populace can best identify, but the identification is more akin to celebrity worship than it is to party identification.

Case in point: Bill Clinton. (Political columnist George Will wrote that Clinton was not our worst president, but rather the worst person we have had as president.) On taking the oath of office, the president-elect promised that he would “have the most ethical administration in the history of the Republic.” How then, did this man, who wagged his finger in the face of the American public, saying, “I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Monica Lewinsky,” knowing full well he had, manage to rank first that same year in a Gallup poll as the person Americans most admired?

Despite lying to his staff, his wife, and all of the American people; despite the fact that he perjured himself; despite his affairs; despite his impeachment — President Clinton received a standing ovation at the 2000 Democratic National Convention.

Late on arrival opening night, as if the whole world should wait for him, the president's appearance preceded a video tribute to himself, narrated by himself — a truly “postmodern Napoleonic moment,” reflected one journalist.³¹ While Clinton walked through the modern amphitheater's corridors, the television cameras followed him for what seemed like several minutes. In the background Fleetwood Mac's “Don't Stop Thinking about Tomorrow” blared away. As Clinton walked onto the stage, the cameras captured women crying and delegates dancing. “The roar gave way to the kind of high-pitched screaming usually reserved for rock stars,” wrote another journalist.³² After a self-celebrating speech that made half-hearted references to the Democratic nominee, Al Gore, the president lingered on stage, blushed-face, enjoying every minute, not wanting to leave, soaking it all in. This was a man who several weeks earlier made a provocative pose for the cover of *Esquire*; a man whose private life became the center of public controversy; a man whose aides, it is said, affectionately called him, of all things, Elvis.³³

On the surface Clinton's popularity seems like an obvious incongruity for a nation with deep Puritan roots. When one understands the power of sexual personae in an image-saturated culture floundering in moral relativism, however, little irony is to be found.

NOTES

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7. *Ibid.*, 145.
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13. *Ibid.*, 28.
14. *Ibid.*, 63, based on a Sopade report. Sopade reports were underground communications of the Social Democratic Party.
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16. James Montgomery Boice, *Romans*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 156.
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25. See Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche: The Will to Power as Art*, vol. 1, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 83.
26. *Ibid.*, 96–97.
27. Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 159.
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32. Bob Jones IV, “Can't Stop Thinking about Yesterday,” *World*, 26 August 2000, 17.
33. Washington Whispers, *U.S. News and World Report*, 18 June 2001, 6.