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For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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“A Lie in My Right Hand” Idolatry and Empirical Apologetics John W. Robbins

I will begin by quoting from the prophet Isaiah:

Those who make a graven image—all of them are useless, and their precious things shall not profit; they are their own witnesses: They neither see nor know, that they may be ashamed. Who would form a god or cast a graven image that profits him nothing? Surely all his companions would be ashamed; and the workmen, they are mere men. Let them all be gathered together, let them stand up; yet they shall fear; they shall be ashamed together.

The blacksmith with the tongs works one in the coals, fashions it with hammers, and works it with the strength of his arms. Even so, he is hungry, and his strength fails; he drinks no water and is faint. The craftsman stretches out his rule; he marks one out with chalk; he fashions it with a plane, he marks it out with the compass, and makes it like the figure of man, according to the beauty of a man, that it may remain in the house.

He hews down cedars for himself, and takes the cypress and the oak; he secures it for himself among the trees of the forest. He plants a pine, and the rain nourishes it.

Then it shall be for man to burn, for he will take some of it and warm himself, yes, he kindles it and bakes bread; indeed he makes a god and worships it; he makes it a carved image and falls down to it. He burns half of it in the fire; with this half he eats meat; he roasts a roast, and is satisfied. He even warms himself and says, "Ah! I am warm, I have seen the fire." And the rest of it he makes into a god, his carved image. He falls down before it and worships it, prays to it and says, "Deliver me, for you are my god."

They do not know nor understand; for he has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see. And their hearts, so that they cannot understand. And no one considers in his heart, nor is there knowledge nor understanding to say, "I have burned half of it in the fire; yes, I have also baked bread on its coals; I have roasted meat and eaten it; and shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?"

He feeds on ashes, and a deceived heart has turned him aside, and he cannot deliver his soul, nor say, "Is there not a lie in my right hand?" *Isaiah 44:9-20.*

We in the United States, professing Christians most, have prided ourselves on being free of idolatry. But our religion has been far from pure; idolatry in many forms, both gross and subtle, has flourished in America. One thinks not only of the ubiquitous images and statues of tens of thousands of Roman and Eastern churches, but of the latest religious fad as well, the idolatry of angels. A few months ago in a gift shop in the state of Washington I found a necklace on which were strung ten small ersatz silver plates containing the Ten Commandments. This necklace, the box informed the buyer, would protect the wearer from harm. As America becomes more religious, it is becoming more obviously idolatrous.

The irrationality—what the Bible calls foolishness—of idolatry is vividly illustrated by God through the prophet Isaiah: The craftsman cuts down a tree, burns part of it in the fire for warmth and cooking, and from the same wood makes an idol that he worships as a god. The people who do such things are useless, the prophet says. They—both the idol and the idolater—neither know nor understand. The craftsman worships, and prays to, a piece of wood. It is not the case that the idolater does not know and does not understand the situation because he is stupid—although there is evidence that idolatry does affect the intelligence of any people who practice it for extended periods—Isaiah's point is not that the craftsman is stupid, but that he is deceived. He does not, because he cannot, recognize the idol as a lie. The idolater is not unintelligent—he is foolish. This fool has said in his heart, Behold, *here is a god*.

God tells us that the blacksmith and the craftsman take part of creation, improve it, deify it, and worship it. Had he continued his illustration, God might have included the empirical theologian and apologist alongside the craftsman and blacksmith, for they, like the craftsman and blacksmith, take part of creation—motion, order, physical existence, to use three actual examples from the history of theology and apologetics—and from them extract, infer, invent, craft, shape, whittle, or design a god. This god, just as much as the iron god of the blacksmith or the wooden god of the craftsman, is a god of their own making, amenable to their own wishes, agreeable to their own desires, and

completely false and unprofitable. The carpenter has been replaced by the scholar, but the method and the result are the same.

The empirical theologian and apologist, like the craftsman and blacksmith, are blinded by their own creations—deceived by their own creativity and ingenuity, fooled by their own cleverness, misled by the beauty of their work, persuaded by the plausibility of their own arguments—so that they do not and cannot see that the god whom they have "proved" or rendered "probable" is not the God of the Bible, but merely an attenuated and tenuous part of creation, a god of their own making.

Sinful man, inveterately religious, has always worshiped gods of his own making, gods of his own imagining. Many times—though not always—those gods have been idols made of wood or gold or silver (or in the twentieth century, plastic); many times the idols have been mental images (the current use of visualization as an aid to "worship" in many churches is a contemporary example of such mental idolatry, based on the philosophy of empiricism); and many times the idols have been theological and philosophical speculations, constructs of foolish minds who have taken some element of creation and shaped it into something that is deified and worshiped. What all these forms of idolatry have in common is their source: They worship and serve the creature, as Paul said, rather than the Creator. It is no accident that the ecclesiastical organization that makes the most extensive use of images and statues in its worship, and whose members are most fascinated by apparitions and wonders and relics, is also the church officially committed to Thomas Aquinas' empirical philosophy. The false epistemology and the false theology logically fit together. Their empirical god is worshiped empirically.

Isaiah's craftsman, beginning with wood, does not understand (for he is deceived) that however he manipulates it, smoothes it, shapes it, and polishes it, he must end with only wood. Apparently he believes that his skill and efforts somehow transform the wood into something divine or something that represents the divine. Isaiah's blacksmith, beginning with iron, does not

understand that he must end with only iron. The goldsmith, beginning with gold or silver, does not understand that he must end with only gold or silver. All are deceived; none either do or can realize that their labors cannot take something mundane, something of this world, and transform it into something divine or representing something divine. Their idols, which they regard as gods, might be precious, things of beauty, pleasing to the eye, but they remain mundane: wood, gold, and iron.

Both the crude idolaters and the more refined scientific and philosophical variety seem to believe in some sort of alchemy or transubstantiation: They believe that their work, whether it be physical or intellectual, transforms a mundane object into a divine object. Indeed, the idolatry of empirical apologetics is a good deal like the idolatry of Roman Catholicism. The Romanist, after the priest pronounces the "*hoc est*," believes that the bread is no longer merely bread and the wine no longer merely wine. The empiricist, after performing his intellectual *hocus-*, believes that "its" become persons, physical causes become immaterial creators, and cosmic designers become the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This philosophical alchemy is at the heart of empirical apologetics.

How smug we are in America—especially American Christians, especially those who call themselves Evangelicals—and how foolish. We look down our educated noses at the primitive savages who worship their wooden idols, while we worship the philosophical idols created by the empirical philosophers and theologians: the Prime Mover, the First Cause, the Ground of Being, the Supreme Being, the Grand Designer, the Architect of the Universe. These gods, no matter what they are called, are idols. Our empirical apologetics have confounded Heaven and Earth, the creature with the Creator, the name of God with that of the Prime Mover; they have done no less than what the ancient Israelites were punished for.

The first and by far the greatest empirical theologian was not a Christian, but the pagan Aristotle. Aristotle's god (or gods) was not the God of the Bible, but an intellectual idol. His arguments

are examples of what Paul means in *Romans* 1 when he refers to unbelievers suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. The arguments are attempts to evade or pervert what Aristotle knew about God.

Nevertheless, there are many professing Christians who follow Aristotle, thinking that they can start where Aristotle started, argue as Aristotle argued, and end with something different from Aristotle's idol. They may give it a different name; they may imagine, as did the Israelites, that they are worshiping God, but they are in fact worshiping an Aristotelian idol.

To be sure, our empirical apologists do not work with their hands as Isaiah's craftsman did, but with their minds. Their tools are not hammers, compasses, fire, and chalk, but sensations, abstractions, observations, analogies, and fallacious arguments. Awed by their own (or Aristotle's or Thomas') ingenuity, blinded by their brilliance, overwhelmed by the beauty of their creation, they cannot understand that the product of all their apologetical labors must remain mundane. Our educated, sophisticated, highly intelligent empirical philosophers and theologians are idolaters like the most primitive savages in the most benighted lands on Earth. They are as blind as the most ignorant savage falling prostrate before his wooden idol. They do not say, because they cannot say, "Is there not a lie in my right hand?"

The idolatrous craftsman thinks that he can transform a piece of wood into a god. Had the craftsman been satisfied, God says, to use the wood for warmth or for cooking, he would have profited from it. But his illegitimate use of the wood condemned him. He tried to change the creature into something divine, something it could never be, no matter how dexterous his hands, no matter how glorious his vision, no matter how ingenious his execution.

So, too, the empirical theologian. The empirical theologian thinks that he can—by mental, not manual, manipulation—transform a sensation, an observation, or an abstraction into a god. Had he been satisfied to use his observations to subdue the Earth, to tend the garden and keep it, he would have

profited; but he turned the use of the creature in an illegitimate direction by trying to discover or invent a god. Natural science has a proper place in a Christian view of men and things: The purpose of science is to enable men to subdue the Earth. But science cannot lead us even to truth about the universe, let alone truth about God. The history of empirical philosophy and apologetics is the history of the attempt to climb from Earth to Heaven, of building a tower from Earth to Heaven, of confounding Earth and Heaven.

The Christian faith—including the most fundamental doctrines of God and Scripture—is not constructed out of materials we find in creation; God reveals it from Heaven in propositions. Propositional revelation, not sensation, is the source of truth. Christianity, just as it has a unique theology, has a unique epistemology. The empirical apologetes do not understand that. Even at this late date they continue to gather Aristotelian and Thomistic logs and whittle them into gods.

It is not my purpose here to list, let alone discuss, the dozens of problems in any empirical epistemology; time will not permit it. I here simply point out that the empirical enterprise stumbles at the beginning on two truths: (1) One cannot validly infer any proposition from something non-propositional; and (2) a *tabula rasa* mind is a contradiction in terms. Logic concerns the relations between propositions. If there are no propositions—if there are simply sensations or perceptions—no inference is possible. And a consciousness conscious of nothing—a *tabula rasa* mind—is a contradiction in terms. Furthermore, there are not the necessary propositions in the universe from which we may deduce God. Unless we start with the Bible as the Word of God, unless we take the original motto of the Evangelical Theological Society as our axiom, we neither can nor will get to God or to the Bible. The diligent and ingenious labors of the empirical theologians will always be vain. Their arguments will always be fallacious. Their confusion will always be fatal. And unbelievers, let me emphasize, will always be correct in rejecting their arguments. Unbelievers, not being confused by their hopes, understand that

wood remains wood; iron, iron; motion, motion; and physical causation, physical causation.

The worse fate that can befall any cause, wrote a nineteenth century economist, is not to be skillfully attacked, but to be incompetently defended. Empirical apologetics is a logically incompetent defense of the Christian faith. Much of the contempt in which Christianity is held in academia is due to the incompetent defense offered by empirical theologians.

The First Experiment

The historical account in *Genesis* 3 is a graphic illustration of the sinful error of empiricism: Adam and Eve, who had received God's propositional revelation about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, decided to perform the world's first scientific experiment. They were faced with conflicting hypotheses and predictions about the consequences of a certain course of action. God had told Adam, who then told Eve, that if he ate of the tree, he would surely die. The serpent told Eve, while Adam watched, that they would not certainly die, but would be transformed from mere men into gods (rather like the wood of Isaiah's craftsman).

Rather than accepting God's Word on its own authority (as they and we should, for it is the only authority, and it is irrational to accept anything else in its place), Eve the empiricist observed the fruit, noting that it was good for food, pleasant to the eyes, and desirable to make one wise. (Here we seem to have the first appearance of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.) Trusting her senses rather than God, Eve ate the fruit. Adam, it seems, watched her eat, for she gave the fruit, we are told, to her husband who was with her. Since Eve did not die as God had predicted, God's hypothesis was wrong, and the Devil's hypothesis was right. Adam also ate the fruit. The entire misery of the human race began with Adam and Eve not believing God's revealed Word, with Adam and Eve relying on their own observations, and with Adam and Eve subjecting God's revelation to an empirical test, a scientific experiment. Our empirical theologians and apologists are doing the same still today. Their efforts to prove or render

probable the existence of God or the reliability of the Bible on the basis of experience have no other foundation. They simply do not understand that proving God or his Word is foolishness.

God and his Word are the highest authority; they are the basis of all proof. There can be no greater authority, no more fundamental axiom. It is impious to suppose that the evidence of one's senses is in any way superior to the propositional revelation of God.

Some—both atheists and Christians, I suppose—might wish to argue that Adam and Eve were substituting their own judgment for that of God. The atheists might see that as commendable, and the Christians as sinful. But that is a serious misreading of the temptation. As rational creatures, Adam and Eve—and you and I—must always use our own judgments. We cannot escape doing so. The question is not whether we must judge, but on what basis or ground we should make judgments. Adam and Eve chose to make their judgment based on sense experience rather than propositional revelation. That was fatally foolish. Ever since, their children, as part of the noetic effects of their sin, a sin that began in their minds, have been enthralled by sense experience and hostile to propositional revelation. They would rather do without truth than accept it as a gift from God. They would rather search for truth, endlessly and futilely, than receive it freely from God. Those empiricists who claim to be Christians pride themselves on allegedly discovering the really important ideas—the existence of God and the reliability of the Bible—on their own steam. They do not need propositional revelation, thank you very much.

There are many examples that one might give of empirical apologetics as idolatry, but I shall mention the work of only two contemporary theologians, one American and one Briton, the first a more orthodox Thomist, the second a less orthodox Thomist: Norman Geisler and Alister McGrath.

Norman Geisler

In his book, *Christian Apologetics*, Geisler writes of a necessary being (which he for no good reason spells with a capital B) as an "it," just as Thomas did in his famous five ways (239-249). For example, Geisler writes:

... the cause of all contingent existence ... cannot itself be contingent. If it were contingent, then it would not be the *cause* of the contingent; it too would be an *effect*. But it is the cause of the contingent. ... Hence, the very first cause of my contingent existence is non-contingent, that is, it is a necessary Being. ... 1

The first cause of all else that exists must itself be un-caused. It cannot be self-caused ... and it cannot be caused by another. ... It is literally the not-caused cause of all that is caused. It is the not-affected effecter of all effects. It is the necessary ground of all actualized possibility. ... 2

... this infinite³ cause of all that is must be all-knowing. It must be knowing because knowing beings exist. I am a knowing being, and I know it. ... If my mind or ability to know is received, then there must be Mind or Knower who gave it to me. ... 4 The cause of knowing, however, is infinite. Therefore, it must know infinitely.⁵ It is also simple, eternal, and unchanging. Hence, whatever it knows—and it knows anything it is possible to know—it must know simply, eternally, and in an unchanging way. ...

The only thing such a Mind cannot know is what is impossible for it to know. For example, an infinite mind cannot know what it is like to be finite or changing in its knowledge or experience (246-247).

Now this philosophical manipulation of mundane being (and the contingent being could be wood or iron, plus the intelligence of the craftsman, please note) by which it is transformed first into Necessary Being, and then into Infinite and Infinitely Knowing Being, is a tissue of logical blunders. It deceives

many people who want to be deceived. They already believe or desire to believe in some sort of god, and they are willing to accept any argument so long as it is plausible. The cosmological argument has been analyzed and refuted many times by philosophers and Christians much more proficient than I. But what comes next in the argument is most interesting: On page 248 Geisler slips (or smuggles) and refers to this First Cause, this Necessary Being, this Ultimate Ground, as the Creator, and he begins using the pronoun "him" instead of "it." How does the First Cause become the Creator? Geisler does not tell us. How does "it" become "him"? Geisler is silent. As Barth said—and here Geisler would have done better to read Barth than Tillich—the conclusion of the cosmological argument no one understands to be God. Certainly Aristotle did not. As Christians we can rejoice that Aristotle's and Geisler's arguments are fallacious, for if they were valid, they would prove some god other than the God of the Bible. Note, for example, that Geisler writes that this god cannot know what it is like to be finite or changing. But the God of the Bible certainly knows such things. He is not the anchoritic god of Aristotle. The immutability of God is no impediment to his knowledge of limit or change. Apparently Professor Geisler's god, as well as Professor Geisler, has only empirical knowledge. Professor Geisler has made a god in his own image.

Alister McGrath

Another contemporary example of empirical theology may be found in the work of Alister McGrath. Unlike Geisler, McGrath does not think that Thomas offered his Five Ways as strict proofs for the existence of God, but as merely probable arguments. McGrath's misunderstanding of Thomas is definitely in the minority. Nevertheless, he may be classified as a Thomist—or at least as an empiricist—because of his use of and high regard for Thomas.

In his book *Intellectuals Don't Need God and Other Modern Myths*, subtitled *Building Bridges to Faith Through Apologetics*, McGrath begins with a false view of Christianity, but one that is quite consistent with his empiricism: "Christianity is not a verbal religion; it is experiential. It centers on a

transformative encounter of the believer with the risen Christ. From the standpoint of Christian theology, however, that experience comes before the words that generate, evoke, and inform it. Christianity is Christ-centered, not book-centered" (21). In short, McGrath denies that "in the beginning was the Word" and asserts instead, "in the beginning was the encounter."

Now, one might be forgiven for thinking that the apostle John, who used the word *Logos* to identify Christ, taught that Christianity is a verbal religion. But the apostle John, unlike McGrath, was neither a neo-orthodox nor an empirical theologian. John said the word is basic. McGrath says Christianity is not a verbal religion. Words, says McGrath, are not only secondary at best, they are inadequate: "Even though human words are inadequate to do justice to the wonder and majesty of God, they are nevertheless able to point to him—inadequacy does not imply unreliability" (19). First encounters, now pointers: Will the neo-orthodox claptrap never end? Christ, need I point out, did not say that words were either inadequate or pointers: He said that his words are Spirit and life. Christ, of course, was a man who used human words, which fact destroys all the empiricist drivel about the inadequacy of words.

A few pages later McGrath writes: "Apologetics is able to use words in such a way that they become pointers for those who have yet to discover what it feels like to experience God. It uses words that try to explain what it is like to know God, by analogy with words associated with human experience" (22). Quite frankly, Christianity has nothing to do with what it feels like to experience God. That is the language of unbelief, the language of empiricism, the language of idolatry.

McGrath's experiential religion is quite different from Biblical Christianity. Ignoring Christ's repeated statements that he spoke to people in parables in order to confuse them, McGrath, blinded by his empiricism, writes:

The parables of Jesus are a superb example of the way in which the gospel is presented in terms of the common life of the people. . . . Here was an insider [Christ

was an insider?]) talking to them as one of them and explaining new ideas in such a way that their strangeness was minimized. The ideas may have been new or unsettling, the language and imagery in which they were expressed were reassuringly familiar. An important potential obstacle to the gospel was brilliantly circumvented (27).

Well, McGrath has certainly circumvented the truth of the Gospel by his sophomoric misunderstanding of the purpose of Christ's parables. It is absolutely amazing what passes for scholarship and learning these days.

McGrath tips his hat to Thomas, who offered not strict proofs, McGrath says, but probable arguments for the existence of God. Indeed, probability is all there is:

Those who lack psychological maturity may need to cling to the illusions of certainty; the rest of us [that is, we who are psychologically mature] are content to learn to live in a world in which nothing important is certain and nothing certain is important (155). Probability, not certainty, is the law of the life of experience (79).

All our knowledge about anything that really matters is a matter of probability. The things that we can be really sure about seem rather trivial and petty (80). When it comes to the big things of life—like believing in the Christian faith or believing in democracy—we live on the basis of probability, not certainty. Anyone who disagrees probably has not given it very much thought. . . . (81).

Irrefutability might seem to be a virtue; in reality, it is a vice (83).

Having started by rejecting words, including, by definition, Scripture; having begun by accepting observations, encounters, feelings; and having proceeded by silly analogies and fallacious inductive arguments, McGrath concludes by designing a god to his own liking:

God is neither masculine or feminine (174).

The New Testament proclaims the universal saving will of God. God wishes all to be saved. . . . He very much wants all of us, as his creatures, to respond to his love. But God has created us with freedom to accept or reject Him (142).

God respects our God-given freedom. The offer of salvation is real. God's desire that we accept it is real. But the ball is in our court. A response is needed, but that response need not be forthcoming. It is our decision (143).

McGrath's god, like Aristotle's and Geisler's gods, is not the God of the Bible. McGrath's god is, at best, a Pelagian or Arminian god, a pathetic god thwarted by his creatures' freedom of choice. Made of mundane material, empirical gods remain mundane. Feminists are not the only ones who are manufacturing gods after their own image, gods that they prefer, gods whose powers, characteristics, and duties are what they want: Aristotelians, Pelagians, Romanists, and Arminians have been fabricating gods for centuries. But it is not yet generally recognized that the gods fabricated by Aristotelians, Pelagians, Romanists, Arminians, and other empirical theologians are philosophical idols. The philosophical craftsmen themselves cannot recognize the idols for what they are.

McGrath, making explicit his empiricism, appeals to the imagination in his apologetics: The human imagination, he writes, is "perhaps one of the most powerful allies at the disposal of the apologist."

Argument will always have its place in Christian apologetics. But it urgently needs to be supplemented by an appeal to imagery. . . . Arguments are precise; images are suggestive. We need to meditate on those remarkable words of some Greeks who came to Philip: "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" (*John* 12:21). Here is our task: to help people see Jesus Christ with their own eyes. Let us learn from Christ, who opened his parables, not with

a definition ("The Kingdom of God is. . ."), but with an image ("The Kingdom of God is *like*. . ."). The parables themselves are remarkably effective in inviting their hearers to step inside their narrative worlds and in stirring the imagination. The parables excite; too often, arguments dull (194).

If we listen to Christ, who is not an empiricist, rather than to McGrath, Christ explained in words, not images, that he used figures of speech in order to confuse people, not to enlighten them. One wishes that those who disapprove of words and approve of images would bring out the sort of books that their method requires: comic books—no words, just images. Then their ideas would get exactly the respect they deserve. (One also wishes that those who advocate speaking in tongues would also write in tongues, rather than in intelligible prose.)

According to McGrath, definitions as well as words and arguments are suspect and ineffective:

Definitions are closed off and imprison people in formulas; images are open-ended and invite their hearers to imagine them and be captured by them. We must avoid sounding like theological dictionaries and instead be able to appeal to the imaginations of those to whom we speak (195).

Throughout his book McGrath is enthused about and enthralled by imagery and images. It is these that must become the central tool of apologetics. The unbeliever must be hit with images. Words, definitions, and arguments are inadequate and their use counterproductive. Images are exciting, inviting, and effective. By his emphasis on images, by his attacks on words, definitions, and arguments, McGrath is more consistently empirical than are some other empirical apologists. And for that reason the idolatry of empirical apologetics is more obvious in McGrath than it may be in some others. All of them however, to quote Isaiah, feed on ashes. None say, "Is there not a lie in my right hand?" They do not, because they cannot, recognize the lie. They are deceived by their own idols.

Conclusion

God did not conclude his message through Isaiah by illustrating and condemning the foolishness of idolatry. He continued by describing himself—a description that all who worship idols find disturbing because it is contrary to their own notions of what God ought to be like. Let all other descriptions of God conform:

I am the Lord who makes all things, who stretches out the heavens all alone, who spreads abroad the Earth by myself, who frustrates the signs of the babblers and drives diviners mad, who turns wise men backward, and makes their knowledge foolishness. . . .

I am the Lord, and there is no other; I form the light and create darkness; I make peace and create evil. I, the Lord, do all these things. . . .

Woe to him who strives with his maker! . . . Shall the clay say to him who forms it, "What are you making?" Or shall your handiwork say, "He has no hands"? Woe to him who says to his father, "What are you begetting?" Or to the woman, "What have you brought forth? . . .

Draw near together, you who have escaped from the nations. They have no knowledge, who carry the wood of their carved image, and pray to a god that cannot save. . . .

Look to me and be saved, all you ends of the Earth! For I am God, and there is no other. I have sworn by myself—the word has gone out of my mouth in righteousness and shall not return—that to me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall take an oath. . . .

To that God, and to that God alone, be glory and honor and power, for ever and ever. Amen.

I am the Lord, and there is no other;

I form the light and create darkness;

I make peace and create evil.

I, the Lord, do all these things. . . .