

False Idols

After Reason, by Arianna Stassinopoulos,
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IN THIS SIGNIFICANT, illuminating, well-written, and trenchantly-argued work, Miss Stassinopoulos sets herself against the false but powerful idols of modern man, arguing persuasively and forcefully the need for moral and spiritual regeneration. She rightly observes that we are everywhere confronted with the seven false idols of modern man: utilitarianism, functionalism, triviality, quantification, mediocrity, fetishism, and fragmentation.

The pernicious effects of utilitarianism are pervasive: Can anything have value unless it is useful, or is able to bring, to acquire or to produce money? Utilitarianism means that we measure the worth of everything—even human lives—by the criterion of utility, of usefulness. It becomes easy to adopt a favorable attitude towards abortion and euthanasia. For example, if we measure an elderly person's worth by his "usefulness" to his family or to society, then of what worth is a person who cannot provide for himself? Why bother to spend money to provide food and clothing for someone who is of "no use" to his family or to society? And if he becomes ill, why should doctors and nurses make an effort

to preserve his life, since he has already outlived his "usefulness"?

Suppose expectant parents are reasonably sure that their unborn child will be born mentally or physically handicapped. This child will be a "burden" to his parents; much money will be spent on special medical support and education for him; he will lack the mental and physical abilities to be of "use." From the utilitarian perspective, it would make "sense" to rid society of this child, and to relieve his parents of the burden of caring for him. Mentally and physically handicapped persons are considered to be of little "use." So why not abort the unborn baby before he becomes a burden? Clearly, we can see the pernicious effects of utilitarianism.

Functionalism, another false god of modern man, reduces everything—including man—to its *essential* function. Viewed from the perspective of functionalism, man is simply, say, an economic animal. He is a buyer or seller or property owner. He is just an employee or employer. The philosophy of functionalism causes human beings to view the worth of others materialistically. They might even associate with one another for economic reasons: Joseph befriending Jim because Jim is able "to get things wholesale"; Mary attending Saint Peter's Church to meet bankers and corporation executives who also attend the church.

At work we too often are satisfied with mediocre workmanship and products because we are just too lazy to do a good job. Mediocre TV programs draw huge ratings and profits; mediocre actors and actresses are given awards for "excellence"; their photographs appear on the front covers of all the popular magazines. Mediocre executives are pushed up the corporate ladder, because truly gifted individuals arouse too much envy. Mediocre writers are rewarded with "made for TV"

movie contracts, while one seldom even reads about the truly creative artists who produced the classics. Mediocre students are rewarded with high grades by mediocre teachers, who feel threatened by and envy their brilliant pupils. And spiritual mediocrity causes one to cultivate and manifest just once or twice a week the virtues of faith, hope, courage, and charity.

To rectify or to alleviate the present state of affairs, Miss Stassinopoulos proposes a moral and spiritual regeneration rooted in a reawakened sense of the sacred, of moral authority, and of the enduring truths about man and his place in the ultimate scheme of things, as contained in the religious heritages of Confucianism, Judaism, and Christianity. We must eschew "the illusion of salvation through technological materialism and the conviction that through politics and government action, through the right policies of regulation, control, allocation and provision, society will be made rational and just." Instead of misplacing our faith in such false idols as politics and technology, insists Miss Stassinopoulos, we should engage in "the rescue of man's religious sense. Only when men stop blinding themselves to their own religious promptings because of their childish passion for narrow mental enlightenment will we be able to understand that the peril which threatens us all comes not from nature, but from man himself." In short, as Edmund Burke so trenchantly observed, we cannot resolve the persistent and agonizing problem of evil by merely decreeing that monarchies shall no longer exist. For the perennial problems of the human condition—envy, pride, lust, greed, hatred—are, at bottom, moral and religious. As such, they cry out for religious solutions.

Reviewed by HAVEN BRADFORD GOW