

## YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME: THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

JANUARY 27, 1996

Among all the commandments, the first is the most difficult to keep. We are forever worshipping strange gods. Idolatry, more so even than atheism, is what is natural to us. But how do we, believers, Christians, sincere churchgoers – break the first commandment? How do we have strange gods before us?

The answer is not easy. The idolatry that afflicts us has little to do with worshipping icons, misguided devotions, and other such things. It is subtler. It has to do with the false images of God to which we give obeisance. Allow me to name 10 such false gods whom we habitually substitute for the real God, Yahweh, the Father of Jesus Christ.

- 1) The arbitrary god of fear.
- 2) The insecure, defensive, threatened god.
- 3) The dumb, non-understanding god.
- 4) The exotic god of special places.
- 5) The ascetic god whose Christ does not proclaim feast.
- 6) The emasculated god of unbalanced piety.
- 7) The orthodox god of strict theological formulation.
- 8) The unholy god our own image and likeness.
- 9) The overly intense, wired, god of our own neuroses.
- 10) The anti-erotic god, anti-enjoyment, god of our guilt.

Space does not allow for a commentary on each of these, but allow me a few, more general, reflections. I apologise as well about the directness of some of the comments. They are not meant to be irreverent, but ... iconoclasm, smashing false gods, is never a gentle business.

In the Greek myth of Prometheus, humanity is punished for stealing fire from the gods. In ancient mythology, the gods have life and want to keep it for themselves. We, humans, are an unwanted pregnancy, unwanted children. Hence everything we do, especially anything creative, is threat to the divine realm.

We have never overcome this. By and large we still believe that God is petty, defensive, and threatened by us. We feel that God likes us better when we are uncreative and docile, when we don't steal his fire. It is no accident that many creative persons leave the church and that the church has so often been defensive about progress, evolution, and human creativity. The God we believe in is too threatened and defensive.

We also, habitually, worship a god whom, unconsciously, we consider to be rather dumb and non-understanding of our human complexity. Just one typical example: I once officiated at a funeral for a young man from a very religious family who, while away from the church and living rather dissolutely, was killed accidentally while drunk. The people at his funeral, good churchgoers all of us, were not only grieving his loss, we were also fearing for his eternal salvation. One woman

remarked to me: "He was good soul, underneath it all. I knew him. If I were opening the gates of heaven, I would certainly let him in, despite his irresponsibility." She was an understanding woman, but she was not giving God credit for the same thing. All of us tend to mirror that attitude. We do not give God credit for being as bright as we are.

The god we worship is also, most often, an ascetic, an anti-erotic, celibate who does not want his children to enjoy sex and who is less happy when his children are smiling than when they are suffering. This god sends us, as messiah, not a Jesus who declares that the kingdom is a wedding feast, but an ascetic who never says: "Weddings must increase and I must decrease!" Rarely do we worship a smiling, relaxed God, who makes forgiveness as easy to access as the nearest water tap.

We commit idolatry too when we make God more monastic than domestic, when we limit God's presence to churches and holy places and do not notice God in our kitchens. When I cannot see the wounds of Christ in the pained face of the person across the table from myself, then my crucifix is more gold calf than icon.

Finally, we break the first commandment when we make worship of God more a question of proper orthodoxy and correct doctrine than a question of letting the life of the Trinity, Love, flow through us. God, I suspect, prefers a loving, gracious heretic to person who is theologically correct, but bitter and unloving.

Whenever we conceive of God as somehow being defensive, exotic, anti-enjoyment, less compassionate and intelligent than ourselves, and preferring orthodoxy to compassion, we are breaking the first commandment. Such is idolatry.

<http://ronrolheiser.com/you-shall-have-no-other-gods-before-me-the-first-commandment/#.Vw1-ANTCaK1>

Used with permission of the author, Oblate Father Ron Rolheiser. Currently, Father Rolheiser is serving as President of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio Texas. He can be contacted through his website, [www.ronrolheiser.com](http://www.ronrolheiser.com). [www.facebook.com/ronrolheiser](https://www.facebook.com/ronrolheiser).