**Coda**

We worship things as naturally as we breathe and speak.

But that is the problem – untutored, we set our hearts on *things*:

on forces, elements, ideas; on people, dreams and institutions;

on the world or on some item of its furnishing.

We are spontaneously idolatrous.[[1]](#footnote-1)

*Nicholas Lash*

But the refrain of idolatry endures forever … at least as long as anything akin to the thought or image or melody about divinity comes to human mind. Idolatry: unspeakable sin, chief crime of the humankind, summit and summary of all sins, the model sin, or the great metaphysical error? Is it not the perennial temptation of monotheism, ever new and lively in as many forms as human mind can name it? And is it not the most chronic disease of human religious consciousness which, precisely as chronic, can be managed, can be lived with, yet not cured by any shock and awe therapy once and for all on this side of the eschaton?

Idolatry as a critical category is supposed to serve as the chief sentinel of orthodoxy for monotheistic worship, life, and belief. Classically, idolatry is a “verb” in the Christian context. Idolatry is a “verb” in the sense of engendering acting and thinking, imagining and believing, feeling and willing in a dissonant key. It is a derailed and misplaced doing, thinking, believing, feeling, willing, and imagining with reference to God. Idolatry obtains through “the trust and faith of the heart alone make[s] both God and an idol” so that “anything on which your heart relies and depends … is really your God.”[[2]](#footnote-2) It lives and moves under the aegis of “a skewed passion for the eternal” and “an absolutized attachment to the sacred as something at hand in the world (a nation, for instance) that is at work in such things as cruelty, hard-heartedness, and oppression.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Idolatry thrives on substitution[[4]](#footnote-4): pious deference, veneration, desire, attachment, dependency, obedience, and allegiance are misguidedly vectored toward creations and creatures not the Creator. In this regard, idolatry is defined by the worship – in the broadest possible sense of the word – of a wrong object, a wrong god. Idolatry is about wrong relationality; it is about being related wrongly to wrong objects and objectives. Similarly to ethics being the quiddity of right relations, idolatry can be said to engender the quiddity of wrong relations.

But there is another, rather unnoticed, dimension to idolatry in mainstream theological discourse. To alleviate this deficiency, it is prudent to converse with Judaism. In rabbinic Judaism, the opposite of the divinely ordered worship, its idolatrous and forbidden counterpart is *avodah zarah* or an “alien,” “strange,” or “unprescribed” worship.[[5]](#footnote-5) *Avodah zarah* is the rabbinic definition of idolatry. But worship and divine service as *avodah zarah* can be strange, or alien, in terms of its object as well as in terms of its how-ness, its quiddity, its mode of performance. It matters equally what or who is worshiped and how. Hence, idolatry is truly an “adverb.” Theologically, the critical function of the whole discourse on idolatry is to interrogate the qualitative configuration of God-world relationality, its doxological *and* ethical ecology. As a lived “adverb” of religious practices, idolatry is a codeword for a profoundly distorted and distorting constellation of relationality and religiously disordered desire. Moreover, idolatry is not something that exclusively happens when the “right” believers suddenly find themselves in “wrong” temples. Nor is it a perverted relation that can be set right once and for all, swiftly and neatly without fears of relapse. Rather, it is like a chronic disease to be kept under a discerning eye with a profound appreciation of its twists and turns.

Certain rabbinic traditions, as well as certain Christian voices – starting from Tertullian’s *De Idololatria* – have insisted on the “verb” aspect of idolatry. Thus, idolatry is done, performed, and embodied and not merely thought of. Idolatry is embedded in the most common, most mundane interpersonal contexts and social situations as a chronically disordered relationality that indwells all these contexts and situations. Cultic rituals and its shrines are not the only locus of worship and service to God – or of its derailment. It may well be that the whole discourse on idolatry is yet another discerning indication that there is no such realm or context to be designated as “secular” or “neutral,” as Alexander Schmemann would put it.

Idolatry as an “adverb” constitutes a challenge to recognize the significance of “how” for all things religious and theological, especially if theological imaginary remains loyal to the arduous relational ontology of incarnation sacramentality. This theological imaginary finds an interesting ally in Martin Buber who passionately insisted on crucial marker of the “right” worship and service being the “how” of relation to God vis-à-vis a relation to an idol. The very identity of the fitting or “right” relation to God is at stake here and not merely a substituted object or objective of some cultic rituals. In other words, if the quiddity of the God-world relationality is “wrong” then it ultimately does not matter which God is being worshiped. Idolatry as the question of “wrong quiddity” concerns the “how” of this relationality as it is enacted in worship and life of stewardship and service. The “right quiddity” consists in “first learn[ing] to serve *differently*”[[6]](#footnote-6) – not just serving a *different* God. For Buber, similarly to Emmanuel Levinas, the religious worship and ethical service across the interface of divine-human relationality coincide since “he who knows the world as useable does not know God otherwise.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Idolatry – as well as ethics and sacramentality – is about relations, about non-accidental and non-adiaphoric relations at the very source, shape, and *telos* of reality. And idolatry must be managed like a chronic debilitating disease primarily “not on account of its errors, but on account of the moral degeneracy that accompanies it.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Would it be pertinent to wrap up the final cadenza of this project with a final harmonic resolution, mercurial as it is, by positing ethical relationality – such as exemplified in an incarnationally scored sacramental counterpoint – in a curious opposition to idolatry as skewed relationality? Even if I could argue, from the perspective of contrapuntal diasporic imaginary, that such an opposition would not smuggle in yet another unproductive dichotomy, something more important deserves to be mentioned instead. Namely, as critically useful against contemporary imperialism, sexism, racism, neocolonialism, ethnocentrism, and as liturgically embedded in the nexus of worship and service as the category of idolatry may be, it also warrants a particularly postcolonial caution. Idolatry has indeed been the chief sentinel of orthodoxy for monotheistic worship, life, and belief – but not without its “dark universalism that turns other gods into idols.”[[9]](#footnote-9) The rhetoric of “the extirpation of idols” has accompanied and even fuelled the brutal and unjustifiable colonial escapades of Christianity, even though Judaism (rather foundationally) and Islam as monotheistic religions are by no means strangers to similar “dark universalisms” of their own. Be it the notion of exclusive worship and allegiance with its tragic principle of managed scarcity cast as the idea of Oneness,[[10]](#footnote-10) or the “logic of the One, which has governed the era of European expansion… only very lately dubbed monotheism,”[[11]](#footnote-11) the monotheistic discourse of idolatry has influenced the unrelenting ideologies of cultural and political separation and superiority, racial and sexual possession and violence. It has been instrumental in the self-justification of colonial conquest and cruelty as well as in the development of the epistemological imaginary of competitive dualism in Western Christian theology. Of course, the notion of idolatry has also inspired prophetic critiques of all the above despite “monotheism’s totalitarian limitations.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Thus the idea of an uncreated uniqueness of God vis-à-vis everything and everyone sourced *ex nihilo* does not necessarily prefigure monotheistic violence. However, amidst the ongoing loaded tenure of idolatry as the sentinel of monotheistic orthodoxy still looms its subtle and subversive appeal for binaristic habits of epistemological imagination so innate within Western modernity. Therefore, in a postcolonial milieu, to move beyond the divisive and abusive hierarchies of dualistic relationalities of “either/or” in thought and action into the terrain of hybrid relationalities and “polluted” imaginations and allegiances is to pose the question about the nature of codependent relation of monotheism with the Western, particularly modern, logic of “either/or.” As Rita Nakashima Brock underscores, this Western dualistic logic so attached to the Western monotheism, or the “logic of the One,” has already issued in the immensely convoluted intertwinement of “polarization in Christianity between good and evil, true and false, black and white, insider and outsider, and margin and center.”[[13]](#footnote-13) The issue is about the possibility of modulating the codependency of monotheistic religion and the modern Western apotheosis of oppressive and agonistic dualism into a peregrination toward where there is “place for all in the *rendezvous* of victory” (Aimé Cesaire). What kind of monotheism without “dark universalism” could emerge without the perilously beloved Western rationale of binarity? Namely, without conquest, competitive exclusion, displacement, oppression, marginalization, subjection, deprivation, detraction, all of them coercive and hegemonic, all of them cutting right through the religious imagination of race, gender, class, ethnicity, language, sexuality, immigration status, and ultimately, faith? It is beyond the scope of this project to add my voice to those fellow *peregrinantes* who have already looked far and wide for inspiration. Suffice it to say that a non-idolatrous way of orchestrating a theological imaginary beyond the dualistic rationality of displacement, enclosure and brutality would seem to benefit from a renewed attunement to pivotal relational mystery of which sacramentality is perhaps a most fitting analogy under the sun – in other words, with an attunement to the counterpoint of Trinity.

1. Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and the End of ‘Religion’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Martin Luther, “The Large Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther,” *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000): 386. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Edward Farley, *Good and Evil: Interpreting a Human Condition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990): 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Lash in *The Beginning and the End of ‘Religion’* states that idolatry “is the matter of getting the reference wrong: of taking that to be God which is not God, of mistaking some fact or thing or nation or person or dream or possession or ideal for our heart’s need and the mystery ‘that moves the sun and other stars’,”134. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. José Faur, “The Biblical Idea of Idolatry,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 69 (1978): 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Martin Buber, *Ich und Du* (Heidelberg: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1977): 126. Buber’s italics. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid*., 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Emmanuel Levinas, “Religion and Tolerance,” *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (Sean Hand, trans.; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990): 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997): 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Schwartz’s *The Curse of Cain* offers incisive critique of the Hebrew Scriptures’ imaginary of monotheistically inscribed violence as a “nexus of exodus, conquest, monotheism, and possession” (60) that is profoundly preoccupied with purity and separation as a hallmark of holiness. “Monotheism, then, is not simply a myth of one-ness, but a doctrine of possession, of a people by God, of a land by a people, of women by men,” 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Laurel S. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007):1. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Ibid*., 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Rita Nakashima Brock, “Interstitial Integrity: Reflections Toward an Asian American Woman’s Theology,” in *Introduction to Christian Theology: Contemporary North American Perspectives* (Roger A. Bradham, ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997):187. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)