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IDOL FACTORIES

1 I know almost nothing about the sport Europeans call football and North Americans call soccer, but my grandsons in Lexington KY are great fans and players. Like a dutiful grandfather I attend their home games when I'm with them, so I was puzzled at a recent game when, right in the middle of the action, all the players – on both teams! – suddenly stopped playing and dropped to one knee to kneel in silence for some moments on the field.

2 I asked what was going on. They said a player had been injured. This was a little secular liturgy, a ritual of concern for an injured fellow player. A kind of tender, even admirable, secular ceremony, honouring a fellow participant in a sport.

3 And it convinced me once again of something I've been arguing for fifty years: that everyone has a liturgy, that there's no such thing as an atheist. Your values, your ideas, what you believe and treasure -- your spirituality if you'd like to use that word – will always find ways of working itself out in religious forms.

4 So everyone, all human beings, without exception, are not only spiritual. They're also religious. No matter what they say.

5 Here's a terrific quote from the great Reformer John Calvin: "The human mind is an idol factory." That's I-D-O-L: The human mind is a factory that produces idols, false Gods. If you're not worshiping the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Jesus, that is, you're not an atheist. You're simply worshiping some other God.

6 That's been true in my experience. And there are as many false gods as the human mind can invent. There's Sports. That's a God for some. There's Patriotism or Nationalism. That's a God for many, many others. There's Sex, or Science, or Technology. or Medicine, or Law, or Finance, or Popularity.

7 Now I admit I'm stretching the definition of the word religion. But I think legitimately. And I'd be willing to challenge Calvin and admit that many of these secular religions – these idols – have some value. They give purpose and meaning and cohesion to human life that would be pretty barren, even inhumane, without them.

8 So how would I define religion, I hear you asking? If people are irrepressibly religious – not just Homo Sapiens but also Homo Religiosus – then what shape does that take in human life?

9 Well, everyone has – as I call them – some version or other of the Four C's: Creed, Code, Cult, and even Constitution.

10 Creed: That's your beliefs or convictions, your value system. There's not a human being without some set of principles to live by. Even if they're strictly self-centred or self-serving. You don't have to call them doctrines or dogmas or even beliefs. But there's no one without them.

11 Code: That's your set of ethical principles, your code of conduct. How you act out the beliefs you profess. How you live out your Creed.

12 Cult: That's a technical term from religious studies at the University, and it includes the rituals, the ceremonies, private and corporate, that support your Creed and your Code. How you ritualize. The "religion" called "Sports" is full of them. So are the "religions" – the idols – of Patriotism or Law or Finance or Science or Sensuality. Christian liturgy is essentially this kind of thing.

13 Constitution: This is my shorthand for how you organize all the above. If you don't have a Pope or Bishops or Presidents or District Superintendents, then surely you have FIFA or the NHL or the IOC, or Parliament or General Assembly, or the Corporate CEO. This is yet another example of our basic human religiousness. (Jesus says "Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there I will be..." And I would add: "There you will also find...a President, a Secretary, and a Treasurer." Hah!)

14 Now: What has all this to do with you in your daily life? I see three things.

15 First. You don't have to apologize for being religious. Everyone is religious, whether they know it or not. Everyone has a religion. If it's not the religion of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Jesus, then it's simply an idol, a false religion. Remember Calvin: "The human mind is an idol factory."

16 Now I wouldn't advise going around and reminding people of that. That would be bad manners. But it should give you, personally, some comfort. You're not a freak. Remember that.

17 Second: You don't have to apologize for being a Christian. The Christian faith holds up very nicely against all those other religions out there: Sports, patriotism, popularity, sex, science, technology. If you ranked the four C's of those other religions against the four C's of Christianity, why, I think the Christian witness would come out pretty good.

18 Take that third C: worship. The Christian faith honours and celebrates the natural world, the world of the molecules in its weekly worship. You can call it the Mass, or Holy Communion, or the Lord's Supper, or the Eucharist. But whatever you call what we do on Sunday morning, it needs molecules. Our weekly worship needs bread and wine. Christian

worship honours the material world. The world of stuff. The world of nature. I don't see that honour in other religions. That's an enormously persuasive and important ecological witness, today.

19 And our weekly worship is a picture of God's justice. Everybody who comes to this meal gets the same; Rich and poor, black and white, women and men, gay and straight, left wing opinions and right wing opinions. They all get the same. A little piece of bread, a little sip of wine. That's a picture of the world our God intends. I don't see that scrupulously even-handed justice in the witness or worship – the Cult – in any of those other religions. I don't see that out there in the world either. Not yet.

20 Third and last. Be prepared to “give an account of the hope that is in you.” Again, you don't have to be pushy about it. You can take your place at the foot of the table. Let the others push each other to sit at the head of the table. This is Jesus' wonderful advice in Luke 14:14.

21 I don't have to remind you that these are difficult days for the Christian church in the West – in North America and Western Europe. The Christian church is no longer sitting at the head of the table, as it was even a generation ago. With power, and prestige, and privilege. The days of Christendom for us are over – that 1700 year period that began in the Fourth Century when Constantine made Christianity first legal, and then his successor made Christianity the Religion of the Empire, the State Church.

22 Big mistake. That all ended, for Christians in the West, about the middle of the last century, a generation ago. And I won't shed a tear. Christendom gave us some marvelous gifts, in music and architecture and literature. But those days are over, for now, and others are sitting at the head of the table, and Christians are sitting way down the line.

23 But that's happened before in human history. So we should not lose heart. And we should be prepared to give an account of this hope that is in us. The day will almost certainly come when you will be asked to make that testimony.

24 Can we still sing the songs of Zion? These wonderful hymns in our hymn books? Sure we can. And – who knows! – that may be a terrific witness to those who hear us..

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