

Imprinted on idols

Like goslings, we tend to attach ourselves to the wrong things—like political parties.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [July 18, 2018](#) issue



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Geese love the lagoon in the park across the street from our church. Each spring, a new set of goslings, whose parents must be decidedly Christian, take up residence in the bushes around our building. In their first week or so of life, these little chicks sometimes attach themselves to whatever large living creature is nearby, essentially mistaking that creature for their mother. Years ago we had a gosling that fell in love with a church staff member and wanted to be wherever she went. Scientists refer to this attachment process as imprinting. A gosling's brain gets irreversibly stamped with sensory instincts that drive attachment—even if it's to another species.

We might say that humans possess an imprinting capacity as well. We fall in love with what strikes us as big and attractive. Although we're made distinctively in the image of God, created to worship this true and living one whom many of us know

best in Jesus Christ, we're highly susceptible to attaching ourselves to idols of all types. Like a gosling that finds comfort in whatever in the vicinity happens to be large and moving, we take refuge in all sorts of things that dazzle our hearts, yet have nothing to do with abundant life.

Everybody worships; it's just a question of what we love enough to worship. And what we love and put our heart into ends up informing our faith more than what we believe. These loves shape and fashion us to the point where we actually become infatuated with what we worship. Much like the cross-species imprinted goslings, we start to resemble the idols to which we attach ourselves. Our deep desires, strong affections, and great fears become disordered; we start loving God less than other things. Idolatry quickly governs.

Such is the case in our culture right now, I would argue, with respect to our partisan attachments. Americans are increasingly defining themselves by their partisan identity, and doing so in an idolatrous manner. For reasons that may have to do with the loss of deeper purpose, the disintegration of traditional communal bonds, or a general indifference to religion and the church, tribalism is spiking. People on the left and the right are turning to politics as their deepest source of moral meaning. Holding sharply different views and values, different camps ascribe an almost sacred purpose to their party or tribe.

Most of us think of ourselves as wise, logical, smart, and discerning. So when the "other side" is for something, our superior perspective must necessarily be against it. We decide we must devalue, dismiss, or demonize the other's idea. And our preferred news networks and social media loyalties demand that we stand our ground and fire back.

It's time we name and unmask this idol. Our daily default to partisan identity does us no favor. Like all other idols, it offers promises it can't fulfill, assumes powers it was never meant to have, and leaves us empty in the end. If the charm of partisan identity doesn't eat us alive, it's surely going to keep disappointing us, especially as we step back and look for what makes for lasting meaning and abundant life.

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