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STRANGE GODS

Unmasking the Idols in Everyday Life

Elizabeth Scalia

The Anchoress at Patheos.com

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* Renowned in the blogosphere as The Anchoress and as Catholic portal editor of the highly trafficked Patheos.com, Elizabeth Scalia brings her iconoclastic vim and vigor to this, her debut trade book. Scalia offers a powerful critique of the gods +- we worship today, reminding readers that life AZs deepest desires can only be satisfied in Christ.

Strange Gods: Unmasking the Idols in Everyday Life Details

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From Reader Review Strange Gods: Unmasking the Idols in Everyday Life for online ebook

Jean says

As captivating and as provocative as her blog posts, Elizabeth Scalia's StrangeGods: Unmasking the Idols in Everyday Life, is an eye-opening account of how we, as believers, who think of idolatry as ancient practice, have made idols out of many things in our lives – technology, coolness and sex, and even our plans.

Although it was a little shocking to discover these idols exist, at times, even in my own life, I was also comforted by the fact that there are ways to eliminate them.

Scalia writes in a clear, comprehensible manner, explaining lofty theological concepts in easy to understand terms. She draws the reader in with relevant and fascinating personal examples to illustrate her ideas, which heightens the reader's interest. Although StrangeGods is a quick, easy read, it leaves the reader with some big ideas to reflect on and some helpful recommendations to assist us in detaching from these idols.

I enjoyed reading StrangeGods – it was relevant, informative, enlightening, provocative, and entertaining. It is a little gem of information that will help all adults find peace and joy by turning away from their false idol(s) to the love of the one true God.

Kathleen Basi says

From the moment I read the teasers online, I knew this book was saying everything I've been thinking for years and wanting to have the courage to say aloud. Having read it now, I can say that she said it far better than I ever could have. Everyone who calls themselves Christian, whether Catholic or Protestant, needs to read this book.

I need to read this book again--because although it's very easy to recognize others' idols, it is more important (and much trickier) to identify my own.

Ellen says

I've been reading Elizabeth Scalia (aka The Anchoress) for a number of years. She is always thoughtful and insightful. Normally I read at white hot speed, but I have been slowly savoring this book a bit at a time. It is superb.

Julie Davis says

The "you shall nots" are less a list of restrictions and limitations than an invitation to keep turning back to God, who will "satisfy the desire of every living thing." (Ps 145:16). The "shall

nots" say, "Don't steal that, look at me. Don't objectify her with lust; look at me. Don't nurse your anger unto death! Look at me. Do not look out over there, not even to your past, be it good or bad; and do not look to your earthly desires. look at me, and let me love you, and you will have no need of the rest.

[...]

By instructing us to look at God with love and do the same with everyone else, Jesus is telling us, "Take your eyes off yourself." God does not say, "Love me first," because God has rejection issues, and Jesus does not add, "And then love your neighbors," because he simply wants us to play well with others. These commandments are, in fact, deeply personal ones. They are meant to lead us away from those empty depths of our being where the idols are formed and polished and brought to the fore of our regard.

Of course, Elizabeth Scalia is here discussing the Ten Commandments, especially in the context of the idols we make for ourselves in everyday life. We tend to think of idols as being as identifiable as a golden calf but the simple truth is that our idols often are set up without us noticing that we've turned away from God and are worshiping something else. Scalia examines the ways we idolize ideas, prosperity, technology, sex, and more. These sound remote and intellectual, but there is nothing remote about them, as we can see from this excerpt.

The Internet is a tool of staggering power, and it's a great gift for the gleaning of information and ease of communication; but the Internet might well be the greatest tempter to ego gratification since the hissing serpent of Eden. As such, the Internet is a most cunning inducement to idolatry. Like any good trap, it seems so very passive. We discover it with delight; we engage, we become adept (in some cases addicted), and are perpetually distracted. The evil one loves distraction--aims for distraction--because it is the means by which we lose track of God and dwell among the idols.

[...]

On the Internet, we are in many ways like gods. Using the Internet makes us identifiers of what is good! We are able to banish what is evil from our sight by banishing it from our site with the click of a button. ... We feel great while we are there, particularly when our tweet is noticed and passed around with approval, or our drop is liked and shared. ... When we are online, some of us feel more alive than at any other time of the day. That is an insidious illusion, beloved of Satan who wants us to be delighted, engaged, addicted, and distracted. How can we be alive to God and to the workings of the Holy Spirit, if we are spending hour after hour alive to only ourselves, reveling as our ideas, opinions, and words are reflected back at us, forever and ever, Amen?

Note that she's not saying any and all use of the Internet is bad (so you're safe to keep reading here!) but that it is whether our use is intentional or not, whether it is mindful or not, whether we are in danger of putting it before God and the people in our lives. I myself had already identified the way I get lost for hours on the internet. However, that is a particular problem I have. If it were not the internet, it would be a book, a computer game, and so on. For me, the struggle is to notice what new idol I am allowing to suck my time away so I can be mindful.

Your idols will vary, of course. If Scalia doesn't touch on one of them then you are not being really honest. Don't worry that she is shaking a nay-saying finger at us. She uses her own life and experience as the

examples to bring her topic alive. Written in an accessible, conversational style, this book is for anyone who ever enjoyed Scalia's blog, The Anchoress, but without the politics. It is the best of how she writes, focused on a topic we need to consider for our own lives. Get it. Read it. Highly recommended.

Note: this was a free review book by a pal ... but if I didn't like it, you'd never have heard of it from me.

Chanticleer the Bard says

The central idea of this book--that idolatry is the most common sin, and the source of all other sin--is something that has been on my mind for some time.

Fundamentally, I think we tend to approach the First Commandment as something that became obsolete a long time ago--as Christianity outlawed and suppressed older forms of pagan worship. The thought being, "I don't worship Thor, or Jupiter, or anything like that--so I'm doing a pretty good job keeping the First Commandment at least."

I am convinced this is a grave error. The First Commandment did not suddenly become obsolete a thousand years ago. Only the violations of the First Commandment have become more obscured--the idols are hiding in plain sight, but no longer as graven images, or as gods.

Frank Roberts says

Recommended.

Scalia exposes the major "gods" that many of us worship in today's society: the gods of Self, of Coolness, of Ideology, of our Plans, of Technology. Truly much of what ails us is the result of our having placed these other gods before (that is, in interference between us and) God.

Julia says

Elizabeth Scalia does not disappoint.

Luke says

Everything in our lives has the potential to become an idol, usually unintentionally. "The most painful truth is that the first and most difficult idol to dislodge is the idol of oneself." The idol of the idea, or the god of "we've always done it this way." The idol of prosperity. The idol of technology including the internet. "The internet might well be the greatest temper to ego gratification since the hissing serpent of Eden. ...the internet

is a most cunning inducement to idolatry." The idol of coolness and sex. The idol of plans. Super idols such as ideologies. An idol can make us think we see God in our hatred. Idols of social virtues such as tolerance and compassion and justice and mercy. "An idol is all about distortion and untruth." "When we have cleared away the idols we have placed before God, we open up a direct line to the God who is all in all. He is all love, all mercy, all light, all power, all compassion, all goodness, and all wealth." "Everything in life had the potential to become an idol: anger, past injuries, praise, pride, possessions, politics, patriotism, porn, poetry, ...human love, family relationships, hate, the fetus, the baby, abortion rights, gay rights, constitutions, careers, ...even religion and its trappings. ...We will never live an idol-free life ... but we can at least be aware of our common tendency to create idols unintentionally. We can recognize the havoc everyday idolatry can play in our personal lives and our spiritual lives if we do not constantly try to knock the idols aside, before they stand too completely in the way of God's constant and consoling love."

She is a strong Catholic and quotes quite a bit from popes, whom I can respect as fine theologians. There is much we can agree on. A very fine, thought-provoking book.

Darren says

Excellent book on modern idolatry. I think it could profitably have been longer. Scalia uses many personal examples, and she's a very engaging writer.

Steve says

A very readable, short book that gets right to the point: Anything that gets between us and our relationship with God is an idol. Even the seemingly innocuous, mundane and everyday thoughts, feelings & especially our ideas can become our idols. Read it and see for yourself...

Sarah says

I'm no expert on Elizabeth Scalia, except that every time I take the time to read her or listen to her, I'm struck to the core.

I'm not a newsie, so I often find myself not reading her blog. Even so, I'll catch her commentaries on things that not only hit the nail on the head but pull my heart from my chest in a recognition that I can only call frightening.

Truth, though a pursuit, isn't necessarily comfortable. Truth, though a goal, isn't necessarily easy. Truth, though a fine thing to talk about, isn't necessarily anything I'm gonna do more than blather about.

I knew I'd have to read Scalia's new book, *Strange Gods: Unmasking the Idols in Everyday Life*, when I heard she was writing it. I didn't expect to be in the first wave of reviewers, because, well, the topic seemed...distant.

And then I heard her talk about it on Catholic Weekend.

There I was, innocently mowing my lawn, grooving with a favorite podcast when BAM. I knew I NEEDED

TO READ HER BOOK.

Because, you know, it was written for me.

Lucky for me, the Patheos Book Club plays a role in my reading such that I have books land in my lap with the demand to be read just at the point when I need to read them.

It's no surprise that *Strange Gods* is well-written or thought-provoking. Anyone who's come across one of Elizabeth Scalia's columns or blog posts knows she's articulate and masterful with the written word. She writes through life as a boy pokes through the mud, examining each and every thing she finds and bringing it to the light or stashing it in her pockets to bring out later.

What surprised me was how relevant I found *Strange Gods* to my life.

Consider this:

Do we stop to think of what it means to put something "before God"? It means to put something "first," yes, but more fundamentally, it means to put something "in front" of God, as one might put a screen in front of a fireplace and therefore place it "before" the fire. What is before God, then, is also before us; it stands between God and us; it separates us from him. Just as a covenant of marriage cannot grow in closeness and oneness—cannot become one flesh—if something is put between a couple, the covenant between God and humanity cannot grow and survive if our strange, self-reflective idols are placed between ourselves and him.

Idolatry isn't just putting up a statue and kneeling down in front of it in a literal sense. Scalia continues, less than a page later:

We dismiss the golden calf story and its lessons at our peril. It's true that we are no longer literally flinging our precious metals into a crucible and buffing up stolid beasts of burden to worship. In some ways matters are worse, for we do not know the idols we bow down to. Our present-day idols are much less obvious, but they are also less distant and more ingrained within us. Idols begin with ideas. From there, we shape them in the psyche, grow them in the ego, and then engage with them intimately, throughout our lives, in our families, our culture, our entertainments, and our political discourse. We create idols out of our norms of behavior, our material possessions, and social status. We even create them out of our faith.

This is the kind of book that gets so marked up and dog-eared as I'm reading it that it's twice as thick when I'm finished. Not only does Scalia write colorfully and clearly, in language that even an oaf like me can understand and relate with, but she pushes the edge of the issue of idolatry with each chapter. She begins with a large idea, one that seems so distant. It takes her less than a chapter to bring it home, and with each following chapter, she circles around it and brings it in closer and closer.

To be honest, I wasn't sure how an entire book about idolatry could speak to me or even make sense. I'm no theologian, and I don't have time for real noodling. (I fall asleep too quickly.) And yet, in under 200 pages, Scalia has defined and demonstrated the concept so well that I can't go through my life blindly any longer.

Do you think it's any accident that, as I was reading this book, that my iPad (aka my "Preciousssss") was baptized in red Kool-Aid? Do you think it ironic that I haven't been able to read blogs for a few months

because of some weird scheduling priorities?

I don't have to think very hard or look very far to see the idols in my life. Arguably, my fingers are pecking away at one of them...

I considered, after finishing this book, writing a letter to Scalia to thank her for this book. It's just what I needed...and I suspect it's what I'll continue to read. This book is equal parts conversation, reality check, and theology lesson. It's filled with personal insight, hard-earned wisdom, and Spirit-inspired prose.

I highly recommend you buy two copies: one for yourself (and don't lend that one out) and one for a friend. If we called our idols what they were, how would it change the world as we know it?

Pat Gohn says

The Ten Commandments first declare, "I am the LORD your God... You shall have no other gods before me." (Ex 20: 2-3 rsv). And yet, we do. This thoughtful and thought-provoking book, *Strange Gods: Unmasking the Idols in Everyday Life*, exposes to our chagrin, yet ultimately to our benefit, that this premiere command of the Decalogue cannot be overlooked if we are to ever dare to live the other nine. Armed with faith in the graces that sustain us in our failures, plus witty sensibilities regarding the nature of fortitude and wisdom, author and blogger extraordinaire, Elizabeth Scalia, offers us mortals in search of grace, a thorough reality check:

"We dismiss the golden calf story and its lessons at our peril. It's true we are no longer literally flinging our precious metals into a crucible and buffing up stolid beasts of burden to worship. In some ways matters are worse, for we do not know the idols we bow down to. Our present-day idols are much less obvious, but they are also less distant and more ingrained within us. Idols begin with ideas. From there we shape them in the psyche, grow them in the ego, and then engage with them intimately, throughout our lives, in our families, our culture, our entertainments, and our political discourse. We create idols out of our norms of behavior, our material possessions, and social status. We even create them out of our faith."

Who among us has not bowed down to something we have really wanted? Or maybe we've used different language for it -- we might be flinging ourselves toward someone or something, or actively achieving something that consumes us -- even the seemingly good things in life? Or what about all the trophies we line up for ourselves -- the way we make plans, use time, or even play or work with technology? Whatever captivates or demands our attention has the distinct potential to become an idol standing between the verity that is our true life with God -- an encounter we may miss, delay, or betray in favor of our strange gods. Ouch! Do you really want to read this book? Yes and yes.

Yes, open this book, and prepare to feel, perhaps momentarily, panicked that all of your life is an unexposed idol minefield, fraught with spiritual missteps that you can never avoid. But, YES, take courage! Like an experienced special ops mission commander unlocking the mysteries of night vision goggles and other tactics to detect the presence of The Enemy at close range, Scalia teaches plebes and veterans alike how to see more clearly so they can wisely navigate the previously unseen dangers of modern idolatry.

A particular strength of this book, and why it will be successful in furthering the new evangelization, is that Scalia offers a self-effacing demeanor and candor in describing her own idol worship. But more than that, Scalia affirms, ultimately, that Christianity as a yes -- at its heart is a benevolent and loving God Who really is worthy of all attempts at idol smashing. Scalia writes of G.K. Chesterton who believed "the curtness of the

Ten Commandments is an evidence, not of the gloom and narrowness of a religion, but... of its liberality and humanity because most things are permitted." Scalia explains,

"We are so conditioned to think of religion as being a bunch of rules -- of the commandments as being a sometimes sensible, sometimes irrelevant, sometime annoying list of restrictions... [but]... There is nothing wider than God's mercy or deeper than his love, if we consent to bend to him, rather than toward our own inclinations."

When we are willing to throw off the things we have purposely or inadvertently consented to place between God and ourselves, we begin to live more open to God's best for us. And the more we experience that, the better we detect the early warning signals of would-be idol building and avoid it.

This book's underlying theme is the great hope that God's commands really do have our eternal good in mind, and when we become aware of our propensity for false idols and seek to eliminate them, our soul's' vigor to live all the commandments grows proportionately.

Perhaps, over time, Elizabeth Scalia will grace us with a series of books delving into each of the Ten Commandments as she has with this first one? Until that time, Strange Gods, is highly recommended.

J says

I had never heard of this author before, but the book was recommended to me by Goodreads based on other Catholic books I've read. Is she related to the late Justice Scalia? I liked the idea of the book and the format (large font) was friendly.

However, when I started reading and saw the multiple pages of recommendations from people I didn't recognize, I grew suspicious. What kind of a Catholic was she? (The one exception - Jennifer Fulwiler, who I love, gave a recommendation. But she does sometimes have eclecticc taste.) Then in the Introduction, the author makes anti-Patriot Act statements. She also states that George W Bush was the first republican she ever voted for. I love Bush, but this means she is/was a democrat? Later she says she loves Palin (who I like too) because she is a bold outsider (not the reason I like her - actually her worst quality). I really started to wonder who this lady was and if I should trust her. There are lots of "faithful Catholics" with messed up ideas.

The author came across as uneducated. She says proudly that she didn't need college to write - her "expertise" is "grounded in experience". Ughh. One of those people who gathers a following on the internet by appealing to the ignorant masses and mirroring their ignorant opinions. I am generally not a fan of bloggers and that seems to be her one claim to fame.

She also seems to write in an annoyingly vague style - too vague for any errors to be identified but also not specific enough to contain actual truth.

It was so distasteful and unpleasant for me, I didn't get to page 25 after a couple weeks of trying to force myself. During that time, I heard an interview she gave on Teresa Tomeo's radio program. I love Teresa and I was glad to see that she endorsed the author. But during the interview, this author talked about how she

wrote her latest book in two weeks. Two weeks? Why should I waste my time reading something you put so little effort into? And how smart are you to publicly air how little time and thought you put into the book? I guess 2 weeks seems like a long time to reflect and craft language to a blogger.

This author was not my cup of tea. There were a lot of little triggers that made me really dislike her.

Maureen Kosa says

A lot to think about; the first chapter was extremely timely for me. I highly recommend this book.

Deanna says

Lots to think about. It is so easy to make idols without even realizing it. The Anchoress nails quite a few idols and gives great examples of how our world today encourages idol making. She also suggests why we should not have idols and how to make God first.
