

## On Being Conscious of *What* We Choose to Worship

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“There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship.”

- David Foster Wallace<sup>1</sup>

In one of the most moving pieces of writing that I have read in recent times, the novelist David Foster Wallace speaks persuasively of the importance of being *conscious* of what we choose to worship, for *what* we worship can consume us almost entirely. Worse still, we may not even be aware of being consumed by the object of our worship. It is therefore important that human beings are mindful of what they choose to worship. Wallace makes an interesting juxtaposition of the choices that are available to us: on the one hand, we have the choice to worship god, to pursue some kind of spirituality, or to adhere to a set of principles, and, on the other, to worship money, beauty, power, and intellect.<sup>2</sup> However, as the author reminds us, the grim reality of this juxtaposition is that worshipping anything mentioned in the latter list can “pretty much” eat us alive.<sup>3</sup> They become the monsters in our lives. Unless there is something that makes us conscious of the implications of our choices, we are in danger of being eaten alive by these monsters, and this is true for individuals as well as human collectives. Philosophers, writers, teachers, and interpreters of religious texts and visions often help us in the process of becoming conscious of *what* we choose to worship; they warn us about the implications of that choice, not just for ourselves, but for the human communities around us.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, Daniel is an interpreter of mysterious nightmares and visions. He can foresee things that can ‘pretty much’ eat kings and their kingdoms. But his visions are not always nightmarish; there are some visions that promise healing and restoration. Safwat Marzouk’s careful reading of Daniel 7 dwells on this difference between Daniel’s nightmares about the

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<sup>1</sup> David Foster Wallace, *This is Water: Some Thoughts Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life*, New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Wallace, *This is Water*, pp. 99 – 101.

<sup>3</sup> Wallace, *This is Water*, p. 2.

monstrous empires and his vision of the kingdom of God. Marzouk reminds us of the importance of meditating on these ancient texts in our own times so that we can learn to discern between powers that bring destruction to our world and the power that restores God's vision for human communities.

The capacity to reflect on the world around us is a special gift that we humans have. As one of the species that inhabit this planet earth, and as a species capable of consciousness from time immemorial, human beings know the importance of this gift. This consciousness as to who we are also helps us to understand that we cannot live *by* ourselves, nor *for* ourselves, because, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak so eloquently reminds us, to be "human is to be intended toward the other".<sup>4</sup> For those of us who identify ourselves with specific religious traditions, it is the mystery of faith, and our reliance on the beyond-the-human power that dictate our ethics toward the other. Ethical traditions and religious texts orient us, people of faith, to take our eyes away from things that 'pretty much eat us alive', and turn to the divine precisely because we are caught in a relational web, and hence, cannot simply exist by ourselves. If we are to go with Spivak's understanding of what it means to be human, even those who do not necessarily follow a religion are already born into a web of ethical relationships that reminds them that they are 'intended toward the other'.

In some of the oldest religious traditions, scriptures, doctrines, rituals, and practices act as directives for an ethical leaning toward the other. For the faithful, these directives are mediated through the divine presence. The great emperors of the ancient world had magicians, sorcerers, enchanters, as well as wise elders and prophetic teachers, to help them as they weighed in on pressing matters, especially when they could not make sense of nightmares and the writing on the wall. They also sought the help of gifted individuals like young Daniel who were 'ten times better than all the magicians and sorcerers',<sup>5</sup> in deciphering the signs of their times. Daniel, through his mediation of nightmares and visions, made his emperors become conscious of the difference between the values of the beastly empires and those of the kingdom of God. Safwat

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<sup>4</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, p.73.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel 1:20. All references to biblical passages are from the *The People's Bible*, New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009.

Marzouk's evocative discussion of Daniel 7 invites us to become discerning readers of the Scriptures as well as the world around us. It invites us to recognize and rely on the values of the kingdom of God even when, for many human communities, everyday realities have come to resemble nightmares.

Marzouk's reading examines the options that are before us: monstrous empires that often invoke God while destroying lives vs. the kingdom of God that is intended toward not just the human subjects but also the planet that they inhabit, inclusive of all creation. In this chapter of the book of Daniel, unlike the monsters that remind me of the genetically modified mouse with a big human ear on its back, the restorative vision reminds Daniel of someone "who is like a human being".<sup>6</sup> If all human attempts to understand the divine are closely tied to our ethical stance towards the others, then, it is indeed a travesty of religion – of *any* religion – when human beings from one religious group seek to defend their religion by denying or destroying those who identify themselves with another. "Worship power," says David Foster Wallace, "you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay".<sup>7</sup> It is a curious, and yet valid, observation: the desire to exert power over others is a clear indication of a sense of insecurity. Insecure faith can 'eat us alive', both as individuals and human collectives. Insecure faith, as history has shown us repeatedly, and continues to show us, can only unleash a cycle of violence and coercion on other individuals and other communities. It leads to a distorted imagination of power over others, and interrupts the "sacred seasons and the law".<sup>8</sup> It is only when we return to a human-oriented vision of the kingdom of God, and when we understand that the divine kingdom is intended toward *all*, that we can *consciously* distance ourselves from the other, distorted visions of humans acting like gods on earth.

Marzouk reminds us that the kingdom of God is an expansive enough concept that can include difference of all types. It is not about sameness, or about making others to be like us. It is also not about a rat race for gaining the upper hand in terms of power, money, beauty, or intellect, to use Wallace's alternative set of objects that we tend to worship. If it is not about all these things,

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel 7: 13.

<sup>7</sup> Wallace, *This is Water*, p. 109.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel 7: 25.

wouldn't an all-encompassing, difference-incorporating kingdom of God lead to anarchy and infighting? Apparently not, for Marzouk's concluding lines are very reassuring:

God's reign offers humans something common that brings them together, namely, [the promise that] they are all equal humans before God regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or socioeconomic status. At the same time, the kingdom of God does not attempt to make its members identical with each other. The members of the kingdom of God are called to embrace and celebrate cultural, linguistic, and racial differences, creating a beautiful mosaic of a community that seeks to worship God and to serve other human beings who are both within and outside of their faith community.

There is an invitation here to the devout readers of the scriptures to *consciously* take on their role as interpreters of a divine vision for human society; an invitation that persuades people not to kill and destroy, but to build and rehabilitate not merely buildings, but communities, so that they can live together, not necessarily always harmoniously, and perhaps not always without conflict, but definitely in such a way as not to annihilate creation, a creation that is inclusive of both human and other natural entities, a creation whose very fragile state of being compels all of us to re-imagine ourselves as 'planetary subjects,'<sup>9</sup> even as we belong to specific filial and affiliative communities.

To the eyes of a lay but devout reader like me, the book of Daniel is full of curious narratives, fancy dreams, and blood-curdling nightmares, but also of wisdom. My own slow reading of the text was helped by the exegetical discussions of Safwat Marzouk, who elucidated for me the note of warning and the promise of hope embodied in these revelations about the kingdom of God. When they were brought to King Nebuchadnezzar's court, Daniel and his friends were already "versed in every branch of wisdom, endowed with knowledge and insight, and competent to serve in the king's palace".<sup>10</sup> But this was not enough. "They were to be educated for three years, so that the end of that time they could be stationed in the king's court".<sup>11</sup> And we learn

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<sup>9</sup> Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, p. 73.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel 1:4

<sup>11</sup> Daniel 1:5

later that to “these young men God gave knowledge and skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom”. Among the four, Daniel “also had insight into all visions and dreams”.<sup>12</sup> Why this arduous training for three years? And why did Daniel and his friends need God to enhance this training by giving them “knowledge and skill”? Was it because they lived in extraordinarily difficult times?

Even with all these skills, knowledge, and wisdom, when faced with the terrible nightmares during the regime of Nebuchadnezzar’s son King Belshazzar, Daniel was not able to interpret his own dreams. His thoughts “greatly terrified” him and his “face turned pale”.<sup>13</sup> He turned to the attendant of the Ancient One for an interpretation of what he had seen.<sup>14</sup> There is a promise here that the faithful, when their knowledge and skills fail to help them, can always turn to the attendant of the Ancient One for the meaning of that which is beyond human comprehension. Daniel, who always reminded his emperor-employers of their own follies through his interpretation of visions, keeps in his mind what he saw of the monstrous kingdoms and the kingdom of God, just as Mary, the mother of Jesus, kept things in her mind. Does it mean that for those who seek the kingdom of God, every proclamation, and every action, needs to be supported by active contemplation and quiet reflection?

Daniel’s visions, and Safwat Marzouk’s reading of Chapter 7 of the book of Daniel, persuasively convince us that to opt for the kingdom of God amounts to allowing ourselves to be persuaded by the dignity of all human beings. It amounts to consciously distancing ourselves from powers that devour, break in pieces and stamp what is left with their feet.<sup>15</sup> In my own reading of these two interpreters, one, of visions, and the other, of ancient scriptures, I was helped by additional insights from a creative writer (David Foster Wallace), and a philosopher-teacher (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak), who reminded me that ‘to be a human is to be [consciously] intended toward the other’. Rather than being terrified by the nightmares of monstrous kingdoms that behave like gods in a human world, I will seek to *consciously* uphold that vision of the kingdom of God that is intentionally turned toward, and receptive to, the planetary subjects.

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<sup>12</sup> Daniel 1:17

<sup>13</sup> Daniel 7: 28

<sup>14</sup> Daniel 7:16.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel 7: 7.

***Questions for Reflection:***

1. What are the implications of the idea that everybody worships something and that the important questions have to do with whether what we worship deserves our worship rather than whether we should worship anything?
2. What do you think of the claim that human beings are "intended for the other?" How is the fact that we are intended toward the other revealed in our behavior? What behaviors conceal this fact?
3. What is it about the Kingdom of God that honors the dignity of all people? How might the church display a commitment to this dignity? How might we display this as individuals?