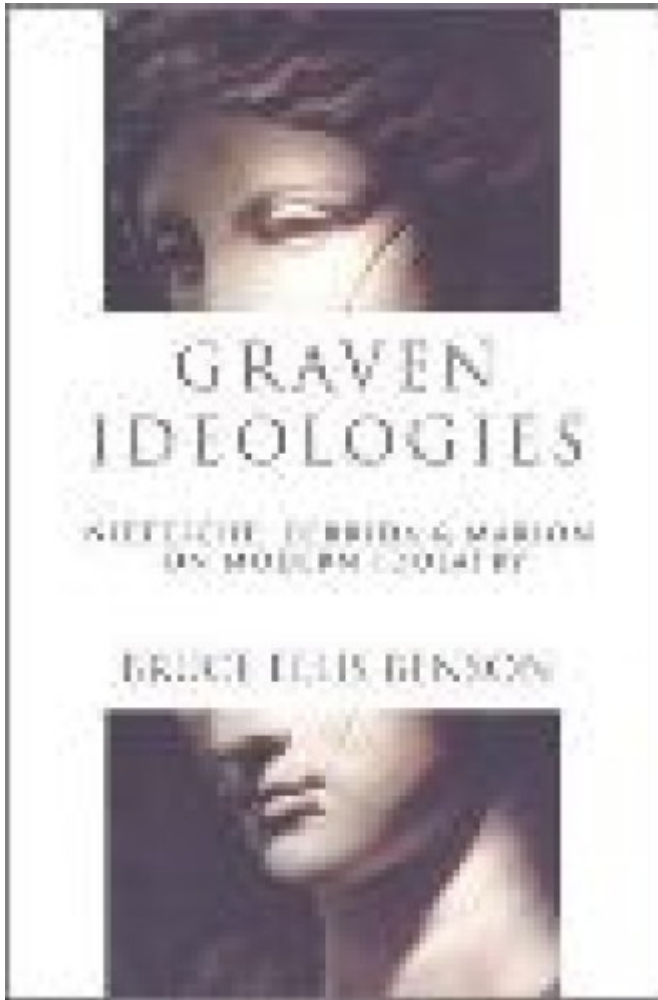


Graven Ideologies

reviewed by [Steven Young](#) in the [January 27, 2004](#) issue

In Review



Graven Ideologies: Nietzsche, Derrida and Marion on Modern Idolatry

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Because Idolatry has never really been about the worship of stone and wood, the mere prohibition of graven images is not enough to prevent idols from usurping God's place in the lives of the faithful. According to Bruce Ellis Benson, a professor of philosophy at Wheaton (Illinois) College, the most popular idols today are ideologies—conceptual idols, human creations passed off as divine and thus beyond question or challenge.

Like Merold Westphal and John Caputo, Benson sees French postmodernists as iconoclastic, not nihilistic, voices. He examines Friedrich Nietzsche, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion (with strong back-up analyses of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas) as voices that may make more transparent, and thus less seductive, the self-serving, self-deifying ideologies that often usurp God's place.

Benson begins his exploration of the iconoclast tradition with Nietzsche, who attacked the pretensions of philosophy, proclaimed the death of God and celebrated and hastened the demise of Christendom. However, Benson cautions, the Christianity that Nietzsche rejected was actually the anemic rational religion of Kant and the divination of humanity's finest attributes by Feuerbach. What Nietzsche rejected was a false understanding of Christianity. Therefore, contemporary Christians may find his critique useful in countering misrepresentations of the good news that are really disguised forms of bad news.

Benson is most perceptive and sure-footed when he is on his home turf of phenomenology. For Heidegger the pronouncement that "God is dead" means that metaphysics—that is, the human attempt to construct a system of foundational knowledge, a *theoria* or *logos*, that makes sense of reality—is at an end. The end of metaphysics is demonstrated by Derrida, who uses deconstruction as a tool to demonstrate how reader and text conspire to create meaning, and thus ignore and sidestep everything in the text that points away from coherence and comprehensibility. Text and reader attempt to collapse the distance between *logos* and reality. Derrida undermines our attempts to make sense of the world (and other texts), arguing instead for the undecidability of all decisions. Make meaning we must, but we must also remain vigilant, recognizing the risks and dangers inherent in our meaning-making.

Derrida's deconstruction points to a problem with our conceptualizations of God. Our grasp of God is a grasp of other-than-God. This raises the question, Can God really encounter us as God and not merely as our conception of God, our construction of what God is? The French Catholic philosopher Marion thinks the answer is yes. He distinguishes the icon—which is transparent to the divine reality beyond it—from the idol—which is a human construct of God that passes itself off as adequate to God. Can our phenomenological experience ever be iconic experience rather than idolatrous experience? Do our attempts to comprehend, to grasp (note the inherent violence and domination of the language here) necessarily shape, mold and express in human categories and conceptions our experience of God? If so, is all God language inherently idolatrous?

Benson artfully contrasts Derrida's reticence to speak of God with Marion's Catholic courage in doing so. At the same time, he raises key questions that expose potential trouble spots in the arguments of each thinker.

Historically, iconoclasts have always believed they were destroying idols, thus blurring the icon/idol distinction at the heart of Marion's philosophical defense of God's self-revelation. (Why do we have a word for icon-breakers but not for idol-smashers?) Those of us who identify with iconoclasts yet tenaciously affirm what we interpret as our experience of the deity need assistance in distinguishing idols from icons. Not only can icons devolve into idols, as Benson warns, but what are true icons for some may function as idols for others, even in the same setting. All of which makes identification and expurgation tricky and dangerous.

Benson rightly concludes that "it is impossible to 'get beyond' idolatry," and that some admixture of "boldness coupled with circumspection" is called for. Perhaps only the true lover of wisdom can discern what the appropriate portions of each would be in the recipe for faithfulness.