
THE DEMOLITION OF THE IDOL

AN INEXORABLE EFFORT THAT AFFECTS LIVING PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES

by Luigino Bruni

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“The ideal of good faith ... is, like that of sincerity ..., an ideal of being-in-itself. Every belief is a belief that falls short; one never wholly believes what one believes.”

J.P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (English translation by Hazel E. Barnes)

Those who have made faith - any faith, not just religious faith - the foundation of their lives, those who have made it *the* existential theme of their life and not one theme of the many, live constantly in fear of having founded their lives on deception, of having built an admirable building on nothing. For a long time this fear remains latent, especially when we are young: it

appears from time to time and then waves us good-bye to let us live the time of enchantment in full, which is necessary to make our crazy flights possible. But, under the surface, it grows together with faith. Until, in an adult phase of existence, it emerges and imposes itself with an invincible force. It surprises us, it disturbs us a lot and it doesn't let us sleep.

We suddenly realize that that fear was well-founded, and the possibility of nothingness becomes a real experience. We had deceived ourselves, *effectively*. It is the experience of the lack of foundation, total misalignment, the *bewilderment* of the exile. We find ourselves in a complete new land, as inhabitants of the empire that we feared and hated for so many years. At first we try to orient ourselves in the new landscape, we look for the signs of the landscape of the country where we grew up. We look for the tower, the bell tower, the clock in the ways in which we have always known them. We don't find them, and *we get lost*. They're actually even there, but we can't see them.

In other words, we realize that we had not believed in God but in an idol. And it is here that the spiritual journey must become an experience of *demolition*. On the day of his call, the voice reveals to the prophet Jeremiah his mission and destiny: “I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, / to pluck up and to break down, / to destroy and to overthrow, / to build and to plant” (1:4-10). In the beginning there is planting and building. The knocking down phase, when it comes, comes later.

The most important reality that is destroyed during a vocational journey is the *idea of God* and the *ideal*. Before being a destruction of the "I", a vocation is a destruction of God, a demolition of the image that we have made of him and in which we believe. The Bible has placed as its first commandment the prohibition of making images of God because *every image of God is an idol*. But already from the day after that of our vocation, we all construct our own image of God, and *therefore* our idol. We aren't aware of it, so we are innocent. Destruction is therefore essential to be able to leave the age of idolatry - in the Bible the destruction of the temple and exile made it possible for that different faith not to become idolatry.

Here lies, perhaps, one of the many meanings of that mysterious and paradoxical phrase (*koan*) of the Zen tradition: "If you meet a Buddha on the street, kill him." The "Buddha" along the adult stretch of the road is not only the teacher who made us discover the spiritual path. It is also the idea-image of God that that master or community had given us at the beginning.

This demolition takes various forms. Sometimes that first image disappears little by little like a statue consumed by the wind and the rain (which we continually try to restore, however). At other times it is an earthquake in our land that makes it implode, and it is not uncommon for us to remain under the rubble. Sometimes, and these are the most interesting but difficult to understand and say, *it is we* who take the pickaxe and start to hit that statue, because we understand that it was an idol that, like all idols, was devouring us day after day. Because we realize that if we do not destroy our statue of God, it will destroy us. Faiths are authentic places of liberation if one day they become experiences of destruction.

When this process happens in a community, a spiritual movement or an ideal-driven organisation (IDO), the community also gets involved in the destruction. If we learned the first idea of the ideal from the community that gave it concreteness and words, the need to destroy the statue of God inevitably becomes also the *demolition of the community* that had given and taught it to us. Together with the image of God, the image of the community that guarded it - its practices, faces and prayers - also disappears. We demolish it because it has the same idolatrous signs. This destruction - which never remains entirely intimate, and is expressed in public criticism, sarcasm, in judgments towards everything and everyone - also contains some hidden but precious messages for that community, because it tells it about the vital need it has for self-subversion. But in every community there is the terror of its own destruction, because it is very difficult for it to understand that if it does not destroy the idol of the ideal it has built, it is condemned to death - and so along with all of itself it preserves the idol confused with the ideal.

The decisive element that often prevents the beginning of demolition works is the absolute lack of guarantee that a new faith will take the place of what we should and would like to demolish. It is the terror of losing God for ever along with the image we had of him that leads many people who had received an authentic spiritual call not to destroy the idol and to remain forever in the idolatrous stage of faith (we like idols very much because they do not ask us to take any risks).

For many, this phase of the God of the call becoming the idol of adult life takes place in perfect, absolute and innocent *good faith*. For others, instead, it takes the

form of what Sartre calls *bad faith* (a word that he uses in a different sense from the common one): they renounce exercising the radical risk of freedom, and thus remain stuck in a sort of moral limbo, where they are both believers and idolaters, faithful and atheists, true and false. Those in good faith are on a theatre stage to recite a comedy-tragedy, but they are convinced that the stage is life; the ones in bad faith know that they are reciting a script that is not life, but they don't want to go off the stage anymore because elsewhere they would be attacked and destroyed by *anxiety*. But those who manage to overcome bad faith (or at least to recognize it and decide to want to overcome it) and then carry out this demolition of the idol of God, find themselves within one of the highest and most extraordinary human experiences. They precipitate in a condition very similar, if not identical, to that of atheists. They perceive - see and feel - nothingness underlying all things, a *vanitas* that with its dense smoke envelops the full interior and exterior landscape. But, unlike those who do not believe because they have never believed, when the experience of this nothing comes after a true life of faith, the confrontation with this desolate land is almost always devastating.

In reality, the radical experience of the absence of God is ethically preferable to idolatry, because the nothing that comes as the maturation of faith is an evolutionary, spiritual and anthropological leap, but the person who finds themselves within the experience does not perceive any evolution, only an infinite solitude in a world without gods. The same disorientation is almost always experienced by those who observe and accompany those who live these experiences. In fact, they are the first ones to be afraid facing the first blows, and then do everything to remove the pickaxe from our hands.

Then there are some typical challenges that are little explored though crucial - it is not easy to explore these abysses of life. When this demolition phase takes place within a community, the inner exile is joined by the outer exile. You live with fellow citizens who go through different stages of life, some in good faith, others in bad faith, and you feel totally strangers in your own house. Also because in communities there are very few people who remain after the demolition. Many of those interrupting an authentic community journey are those who feel exhausted at the end of the demolition - perhaps because that first statue was too imposing and robust - and have not found the resources to continue. For these demolishers of idols life becomes very hard in communities. The discussions around the table, the liturgies and the many activities that they continue do not only become uninteresting but also cause new pain to them. One remains in one's job, as always, in a destitution of answers and light, in which one remains for years, even decades. It is very likely that when we hear different and truer words about life and spirit from someone, this person is in this phase of life - but they do not tell us, they would not know how to tell us, because words cannot be found for that (going through and telling about what you live are two different "skills", especially at certain times in life).

But if we manage to get to the bottom of this demolition, a splendid phase of life can begin, the most beautiful and true of all. We truly become a brother or sister to all men and women, rediscovering the same integral human condition that precedes faith and non-faith. We become beggars of meaning towards all those we meet, in the street, in books, in poetry. We go back to being a child and ask

everyone: "Why?", and a new ignorant and enchanted kind of listening is born. We esteem all those who, without having the faith that we had, manage to work, bring children into the world or die without despair and love. And our anger becomes strong because we do not succeed. We come to curse that image that has prevented us from learning the job of living, because we discover ourselves much less competent in this fundamental art than "normal" women and men are. But if you still want to read the Bible, you finally begin to understand a few pages of Job, Isaiah, some of the psalms which remained foreign to us or bothered us before. Without the experience of destruction much of the Bible and life remain inaccessible. And we begin to thank for this new epiphany of life and word.

After a life spent in an environment populated by God, the disappearance of the sacred frees our sight to begin to see man, finally. The place cleared of religion becomes a kind of humanism. By chasing away the money changers from the temple, the doves and goats from its altars, the earth was freed to welcome a different kingdom. Sometimes, after the destruction, a new faith and a new community of faith returns - which will then leave us again, to take us back to other exiles where we will become even more human. Sometimes prayer blooms again, crying out for the pain of men and women. At other times faith does not return. We enter the church not to pray but to hope that it will come back and surprise us from behind while we are sitting in the pews watching an empty tabernacle. But we do not regret having destroyed the fetish, and we would not go back for anything in the world. The job of living is what remains. The same expectation of God is what remains.