



# When Texts Become Idols

*What happens when the Bible becomes something more than revelation, and the Constitution something more than a tool?*

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. Ruden writes that, due to their established status in American public life, the Constitution and the Bible are “richly exploitable symbols.” What do they symbolize, and to whom? What are some ways to resist exploiting these texts?

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2. Ruden discusses a “reversal of meanings” in which “an important document, inherently the means to help inform, organize, benefit, and protect human beings, becomes the means to empty their minds, and to strew chaos, crime, and destruction.” What are some examples of this?

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3. Which cherished texts inform the way you choose to live? Are there any texts that you, or people you know, sometimes idolize? Why? How can we strike a balance between language as “a gift but not a god”?

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4. To avoid treating texts as idols, we might compare the context in which a text was created with the context in which we receive it. How do we discern this distinction?

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5. Ruden claims that “‘sacred literature’ is something of a misnomer when applied to the ancient world; all writing had a certain aura of prestige and wonder.” Do you think that same sense of wonder still applies to writing? If not, why?

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6. While Biblical idolatry has “manifested itself painfully through millennia of struggles for freedom of conscience and participatory governance,” as Ruden writes, “it’s really only the United States that is still suffering from [idolatry]—and, ironically, suffering the more that science, rationalism, and materialism prevail in general.” What about American society makes it more vulnerable to Biblical idolatry? Why do you think science, rationalism, and materialism have been met with the persistence of Biblical idolatry?

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7. Ruden concludes that texts, like all of Creation, “need our respect, love, and selfless care.... Precisely because they are *not* God, *they* need *us* to make sure they remain what they were meant to be.” What are some ways in which we can “care” for texts in our own lives and communities?

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## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Kevin Hughes, “Common Loves,” January 2021: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/common-loves>

Regina Munch, “A Textbook Case,” May 2019: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/textbook-case>

Burke Nixon, “Listen Humbly, Argue Lovingly,” February 2021: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/listen-humbly-argue-lovingly>

Massimo Faggioli, “The Corruption of the Word,” September 2020: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/corruption-word>

Regina Munch, “Worship of a False God: An Interview with Bryan Massingale,” July/August 2020:  
<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/worship-false-god>

William T. Cavanaugh, “Strange Gods,” January 2020: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/strange-gods>