



**TOXIC
IDEAS
POLLUTING
YOUR MIND**

Anthony Selvaggio



Worldliness infects us deeper than our clothing or music. It seeks to inhabit our perceptions and desires. Indeed it starts in the heart. Anthony Selvaggio puts his finger on the pulse of a worldly age, and his diagnosis reveals the crippling idolatry of our hearts in such reigning ideas as individualism, consumerism, relativism, obsession with the new, and contempt for the past. Like a good doctor, Selvaggio does not rail at us about our illness; he aims to heal and so offers solutions in Christ. Whether you are a teenager, a mother, a businessman, or a pastor, this book will bring health to your soul and equip you to live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world.

—**Joel R. Beeke**, president, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids

Anthony Selvaggio's topics are timely and will certainly be of help to many. His writing style is engaging and easy to read. While popularly written, he demonstrates a depth of research in the footnotes. Selvaggio underlines the importance of a consistent biblical worldview and warns his readers against false worldviews that are attractive. Highly recommended.

—**Richard C. Gamble**, professor of systematic theology, Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh

By making good things ultimate things—love becomes lust, rest becomes sloth, and so on—we fall into what used to be called the seven deadly sins. We have a harder time spotting the seven modern idolatries that Anthony Selvaggio outlines for us, but the process is similar: individuality becomes individualism, equal opportunity becomes egalitarianism, and so on. *7 Toxic Ideas Polluting Your Mind* helps us to spot those current tendencies and, with God's grace, contain them.

—**Marvin Olasky**, editor-in-chief, *WORLD* magazine

Anthony Selvaggio's book should not be overlooked by thoughtful Christians. He challenges the incorrect notion that "worldliness" constitutes merely overt behavior, and he rightly reminds us that our thoughts and ideas end up shaping our behaviors far more than we think. He rightly uncovers seven common ideas/values in American culture that are contrary to the principles disclosed in Holy Scripture.

—**T. David Gordon**, professor of religion and Greek, Grove City College, Grove City, Pennsylvania

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P U B L I S H I N G

P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Selvaggio, Anthony T.

7 toxic ideas polluting your mind / Anthony Selvaggio.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-59638-196-4 (pbk.)

1. Ideology--Religious aspects--Christianity. 2. Christian life--Reformed Presbyterian authors. I. Title. II. Title: Seven toxic ideas polluting your mind.

BR115.I35S45 2011

261--dc23

2011037275

To my friend
Russell Pulliam

for his editorial and journalistic insights,
which significantly improved this book

Contents

Foreword	11
1. Ideas to Idolatry: Ideas Have Consequences	13
2. Technopoly: The iPod Nation	19
3. Neophilia: “History Is Bunk”	35
4. Egalitarianism: “We’re All in Charge”	53
5. Individualism: “Every Man Is an Island”	67
6. Materialism: All That Matters Is Matter	81
7. Consumerism: “Shop Till You Drop”	99
8. Relativism: “What Is Truth?”	115

Foreword

CHRISTIANS HAVE ALWAYS been concerned about the problem of worldliness. From Athanasius' ancient cry, "*Contra Mundum*" ("Against the World"), to the modern evangelical cliché, "Be *in* the world, but not *of* the world," Christians have long struggled to resist conformity to the world around them. In modern evangelicalism, however, the tendency has been to see this struggle as dealing primarily with external behavior. That is, as long as Christians avoid a specified list of external behavior practices, then they are not conforming to the world. But this approach to avoiding worldliness has had a devastating impact on the church. While external behavior practices do matter, the real battle to avoid worldliness occurs internally, in our hearts and minds. While we have been consumed with external matters, worldliness has gained a foothold in our thought processes. Satan has been very successful in getting us to *think* like the world. This book is an effort to counter Satan's attack on our minds. It's a counterinsurgency aimed at thwarting the evil intentions of our adversary.

Ideas to Idolatry

Ideas Have Consequences

Absorption in ease is one of the most reliable signs of present or impending decay.

—Richard M. Weaver

HE WAS BORN on April 20, 1889 in what was then known as Austria-Hungary. As a young man, he fought in World War I and was decorated for his valor in service to his country. After the war, he entered politics and launched a failed coup against the leadership in Germany. For this transgression he was imprisoned. After his release, he wrote a book bearing the title *Mein Kampf*. That man, of course, was Adolf Hitler, and his little book, and the dreadful ideas it contained, altered the course of the entire twentieth century and led to the death of millions.

Ideas are powerful things. On the one hand, ideas can lead to wonderful developments such as democracy, cures for illnesses, and putting a man on the moon. But ideas can also lead to devastating atrocities such as Communism, Nazism, genocide, and slavery. While ideas can be both good and bad,

they are rarely, if ever, neutral or indifferent. As the twentieth-century philosopher Richard M. Weaver reminded us in his 1948 book, ideas have consequences.

The consequences of ideas become even more powerful when these ideas morph into a comprehensive ideology, or *worldview*. A worldview attempts to provide a comprehensive understanding of reality. When an idea becomes a worldview, it can alter the entire course of a civilization. Consider, for example, the altering power of such worldviews as Nazism and Communism.

For Christians, this matter of ideas and worldviews takes on an even greater significance because embracing the wrong ideas or worldview can lead us to worship and serve false gods. In other words, ideas can lead to idolatry. Ideas become idolatrous when they are contrary to God's Word. When worldly ideas replace God's Word as our intellectual and moral guidance systems, we are heading down the path to idolatry. Ideas do have consequences—even eternal consequences.

The purpose of this book is to expose seven particular ideas that are undermining our culture, the church, and the Christian mind. These seven ideas are akin to the golden calf that Israel crafted in the wilderness. They are opportunities for idolatry. The question for us is whether we will choose to embrace these ideas indiscriminately or take every one of them captive for Christ.

Of course, every Christian will enthusiastically endorse the latter of these two courses of action. We all want to reject ideas that are contrary to a God-centered worldview, but unfortunately this task is not as easy as it might seem. Bad ideas often come in attractive and subtle packaging. They are not like cigarette packs: they do not have black-box warning labels describing their hidden dangers. In addition, behind these ideas stands a great foe who longs to seduce us into accepting ideas that are contrary to God's Word. Satan is ultimately behind all ideas that attempt to undermine

our minds. He is, after all, the Father of Lies, and he will try to deceive us. He also has the benefit of having two great advantages over us that make our efforts to resist his lies even more challenging.

The Advantages of the Adversary

Advantage #1: He's Crafty

The first advantage that Satan has over us is his cleverness. Genesis 3:1 notes that the serpent was “*more crafty* than any of the wild animals that the LORD God had made.” In other words, Satan is shrewd, cunning, and manipulative. In fact, he is so crafty and persuasive in presenting his worldview that he was able to deceive Adam and Eve *before* the fall when their minds were not yet disabled by sin. The point is that Satan is “more crafty” than we are, and we must not underestimate his ability to deceive us. Remember, unlike Adam and Eve, our minds *are* disabled by sin. If Satan was crafty enough to deceive Adam and Eve before the fall, just think how easy it is for him to deceive those who are impacted by the fall. Our minds are darkened by sin. We see through a glass darkly. Our minds are not enlightened like noonday; rather, they are in the fog of twilight. Satan is crafty and we are disabled. Never forget that he is a master of disguise. He is gifted in making evil take on the appearance of good. He masquerades as “an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14). This is why we so easily conform ourselves to the principles of this world, to the worldview of Satan.

Advantage #2: He's Got a Foothold

Satan's second advantage over us is his tremendous foothold on the mind-set of this world. The world accepts Satan's bad ideas as truth, and this means that you must engage in an offensive mental war that involves tearing down his strongholds. Paul describes this advantage of Satan in Ephesians 2:2, where he refers to Satan as the “ruler of the kingdom of the

air.” Now, Paul is not saying here that Satan and his minions are floating around in the air; rather, he is telling us that Satan’s worldview pervades our very atmosphere. His worldview is in the air we breathe. We cannot escape it because we live in it and the people around us accept it. His worldview is all-pervasive. It is preached from pulpits, it echoes in the chambers of government, it resounds from the lecterns of the university, and it is broadcast through every conceivable form of media. In other words, we are constantly being inundated by Satan’s worldview—we are utterly surrounded.

This advantage of the adversary not only means that we must take ground from him, but also means that we must be on guard against absorbing his worldview by mere mental osmosis. Because we are surrounded and inundated by his worldview, it is very easy to simply accept it without any active mental choice. Buying in to his ideas requires only that we take the lazy path of least resistance. As Richard Weaver noted, all we need to begin on the pathway to idolatry is “absorption in ease.”

The challenge for the Christian is to avoid being taken captive by the worldview of Satan. We must avoid being fooled by a foe that is much wiser, and more cunning, than we are. We must also filter the very air we breathe so as not to assimilate into our thinking the subtle wickedness of the kingdom of the air and the spirit of this age. Our challenge is to avoid being conformed to this world. The apostle Paul summarizes this challenge in Romans 12:2: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” This is the essence of our challenge.

Meeting the Challenge: A Strategy for Success

To meet this challenge, the Christian must go on the offensive. We simply can’t be passive in this struggle. Passivity will lead to defeat. As Christians, we are called to pick up intellectual arms and join the battle for the mind. But before

we enter into battle, we need a plan for victory. Thankfully, the Bible gives us such a plan, and it is a simple one. In order to secure victory, we must first identify the enemy and then demolish him by taking his ideas captive to Christ.

Identifying the Enemy: Understanding the Times

If we are to properly identify the enemy, we must become like the men of Issachar. Who were these men? The men of Issachar joined in support of King David as he asserted his kingship over Israel in opposition to Saul. The men of Issachar recognized that David was Israel's true ruler. They were wise men. Scripture describes them as men "who understood the times and knew what Israel should do" (1 Chron. 12:32). The men of Issachar were able to see through the fog of current events and discern God's will. They were able to decipher the code of the world in which they lived, and they understood how to respond to it. We must become like the men of Issachar. We must become like Moses in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon. We must realize that we live as sheep among wolves and thus must be as shrewd as serpents (Matt. 10:16). We must read our culture and understand our times to identify the enemy. This book will assist you in doing this with each of the seven ideas it presents.

Demolishing the Enemy: Taking Every Thought Captive

Once the enemy has been identified, we must then demolish him. The apostle Paul issues the following rule of engagement in 2 Corinthians 10:5: "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." Here Paul tells us that after we identify the enemy, after we discern the arguments and ideas that are contrary to the knowledge of God, we must then "demolish" them. Paul's command, however, is not tantamount to a "take no prisoners" policy. Rather, he calls us to demolish our enemy by taking his ideas captive and making them submissive to Christ: "we

take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” We demolish the enemy by dismantling his arguments and exposing the wickedness of his pretensions. Our calling is to intellectually disarm, neutralize, and transform the enemy.

To do this, however, we must not rely on our own wit because, as we have seen, the serpent is “more crafty” than we are. Therefore, instead of relying on our wit, we demolish our enemy by employing the only offensive weapon in Paul’s inventory of the armor of God in Ephesians 6—we use “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph. 6:17). We can demolish the enemy only when we engage him as Jesus engaged him. During his temptation in the wilderness, Jesus confronted the Scripture-twisting and lies of Satan, and he demolished his arguments not with his own clever argumentation, but with the very Word of God. Each time Satan confronted Jesus with an argument and pretension that was contrary to the knowledge of God, Jesus demolished it by responding with these three words: “it is written” (Matt. 4:4, 6, 7, 10). The only way we will be successful in destroying the enemy, demolishing his arguments, and taking them captive to Christ is by wielding the weapon of the Word of God. This book will assist you in doing this with each of these seven ideas.

Engaging the Enemy

As we’ve seen in this chapter, the Christian is engaged in a constant and epic intellectual struggle against a formidable adversary. The call to the Christian in the midst of this great conflict is a call to arms. It is a call to join the battle, to engage in the war of the worldviews. God calls us to identify the enemy by understanding the times and to demolish the enemy by using the Word of God. He calls us to resist allowing ideas to become idolatry.

Now that we have our marching orders and understand our mission, it’s time for us to engage the enemy.