

God is the Good We Do

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God is The Good We Do:

The Theology of Theopraxy

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This paper was first published in Sea of Faith Newsletter No. 80 (January 2009). You are not likely to find this book in a bookshop, but online sources such as Amazon .com are likely sources.

A short video version appears at

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zw9tScdg_0

There are many objections to the assertion that 'God exists' and this book addresses two of them very well: the so-called 'problem of evil' and the accusation that God is merely a human construction.

To take the view that there is a God but that there is only one God puts an awful lot of responsibility on that God. He (always "he") has got to do everything – even the disagreeable things. The prophet Isaiah underscored this by having God say (45:7) that he makes the bad as well as the good. Some scholars confine the bad to natural evils and not moral evils but nonetheless the problem of theodicy arises. Wikipedia puts it like this "The goal of theodicy is to show that there are convincing reasons why a just, compassionate and omnipotent being would permit debilitating suffering to flourish."

So we have always asked this: if God (the only God) is all-knowing and all-wise, then why does he permit rapes, murders and thefts from pension funds? In this book Michael Benedikt offers a radically novel answer: We make God and God is only as good as the God we make. Why did God permit Auschwitz, the Twin Towers, Stalingrad, the Inquisition ... and the myriad other obscenities? Because he wasn't present – and that was because humans were doing evil and not doing good. God is (only) the good we do. As the author puts it:

"Whether or not God exists is entirely up to us. For God comes into being by what we do and do not do. Neither you nor I are God, but what we're doing may be. This God, who lives as deeds not creeds, is the God we know firsthand. This God whose shape is action, not image, is the God we witness every day. This God's presence is not guaranteed. "God is good, and God does good" the Talmud says, and Augustine said too. "God is what God does" we might add – or God does what God is, which is good. Goodness-of- deed is less God manifest than God instanced. God is in our hands and we are in 'his', as we choose the good and do it. Do good again, and again, and you "do God's will". "Do God's will" and you bring God into being."

Rather than God being ancient and all powerful, God is "the youngest and weakest force in the universe, the force of the good." And goodness is "self-evidently desirable".

Whatever we each make of this thesis, it is a novel response to those who criticise religious faith with the accusation that we invent God out of a feeling of insecurity.

Benedikt agrees that we invent God but insists that it is our best invention. Our theopraxy (“god-making”) is not weakness but instead a passion to fully-realise the gift of our humanness. God, therefore, exists as ‘goodness-in-action personified ... and sanctified.’

Could atheists buy into this description? We might ask first, do they need to? Isn’t the morally responsible life sufficient in itself without another layer of explanation? That is the choice open to us all. But for those who want to wrap cardinal values in narrative then this approach could appeal. If an atheist (of whom SoF contains a few) or a non-theist (who flock in abundance to SoF) want to assign a top-level value to life then it is likely to involve goodness of some sort – compassion, justice, fair-play and the like. Many such might give

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the name ‘Goodness’ to this set of virtues which inspire us and which hold us to account. A few might follow Michael Benedikt and use the name ‘God’, despite the wide spectrum of inconsistent and some downright unpleasant associations that have accrued over the centuries. (A dip into Karen Armstrong’s *A History of God* will give examples).

Over on the other side, red-meat theists might see this book as a bit thin. Where the thundering Jehovah who “mounts the storm and rides upon the wind”? Where the quasi-historical narratives of escape from Egypt and covenant-forming at Sinai? Not to mention the Apocalypse. (Please don’t!) Benedikt is laid-back about that – any story or dogma or liturgy that entices one to do good is itself good. Note, here as elsewhere, that a story doesn’t need to be historical fact to be valuable. It’s a question of “deeds note creeds” with ‘works’ trumping ‘faith’ every time because, as Benedikt writes, “God begins and ends with us.”

Michael Benedikt is Australian by birth but has lived in Texas for many years. He is a university professor and an architect, a “not very observant Jew”, son of “parents who struggled with faith ever since their liberation from Nazi concentration camps in 1945.”

The book is nearly 300 pages in length with a rich set of footnotes (not, as is too often the case, endnotes). The chapters are short, the writing style an easy elegance. The only quibble is that there is no index.

Reviewed by Noel Cheer

