God As Moral Praxis

by

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What follows is a series of excerpts, with light editing and updating, of my 2007 book *God Is the Good We Do: Theology of Theopraxy*: "A critique of both traditional and modern arguments for and against the existence of God, with a discussion of the nature of good and the problem of evil, proposing that God exists only as human moral activity, that God is practiced: theopraxy."[1]

God Is the Good We Do is a work of theology written for the ideal reader whom academic writers like to call "the educated reader"— the educated reader, in particular, who is wondering why he or she should not abandon religious practice entirely, and with that, all serious talk about "God." It was also written for those presently committed to a life of faith, or who are contemplating such, but who feel the undertow of doubt, who cannot "believe" as fully as they would like to. So rather than a work, fully, of philosophy, wherein cool argument reigns, and rather than a work, fully, of religious studies, wherein theological questions are only anthropologically interesting (*their* gods, *their* purpose-serving rituals), *God Is the Good We Do*, wearing its claim on its sleeve, tries to understand God as though it were possible to get it right, for a while if not forever, and do no harm in the process.

It describes a theology that some committed atheists have found "interesting, but too religious still" and committed believers have found "interesting, but not religious enough." So far so good, no?[2] And it does so without advocating any of the three –isms (after deism, and process) that usually occupy the compromise-zone between old-fashioned faith and out-and-out atheism, namely, agnosticism, universalism, and culturalism.[3] The book argues instead that

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[1] Preface, contents, praise, and video at *http://www.godisthegoodwedo.com*

[2] May I dare to report too that many have found it enlightening?

[3] I would define these thus: Agnosticism: the belief that the whether or not God exists is undecideable, and that in order to live well and ethically one need not commit to either view. Universalism: the belief that all long-established faiths and wisdom traditions are equal in value in as much as they point to a single central Truth, or Way, which we don't *have* to thank God for, but should, in some open-minded way. Culturalism: the belief that

God actually exists (indeed that God exists only *act*-ually), that "He" can be seen all around *in* and *as* free acts of goodness (which are " 'His' body"); and it offers that this view—this insight—has fueled the pronouncements of many prophets and philosophers who have tried to say something true about the nature of God and live that truth.

The theology of theopraxy, I submit, "is monotheism at its least idolatrous. It is theism at the last stop in the line of abstraction that ends in God disappearing into the indifferent 'Process' or 'Ground of Being' from which God emerged but *in* which and *as* which God has no existence at all." It offers a vision of God, I submit, capable of inspiring the free doing of good because it offers no good reason to do so…except to bring God to life. God is in our hands, and we are in God's, if in a different way.

I do not imagine that readers of the following few pages will feel forced to agree. Nor, for that matter, do I expect readers of the entire book to entirely agree. The evolution of "reasonable religion" is proceeding on many fronts. My hope is that theology of theopraxy is one such front.

THEOLOGY AND COSMOGONY

Until recently, theology and cosmology—or actually cosmo*gony*, the study of cosmic beginnings—were closely related. When it came to understanding the origins of man and nature, of the earth, sun, moon, and stars, there was no science that was not also theology, no theology that was not also science. Today, nearly five hundred years after Copernicus broke with the theistic view of the centrality of the earth (which questioned, by implication, God's location in Heaven above the sky), and over a hundred years after Darwin made cosmogony all but irrelevant to the actualities of life on earth, the connection between God and the Beginning remains strong. Why?

Beyond the default historical connection, there are two reasons, I believe, that theology and cosmogony are still attracted to each other, and both are a little disappointing.

The first is because it serves the (dare one say professional?) interests of theologians in

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the purpose of a religion is not to promote metaphysical speculation or to achieve enlightened states, but to preserve particular cultural identity, family integrity, and personal morality.

their search for supra-Biblical, "scientific" support for God's authority.

Here is their tack: The more that science teaches us about the size and subtlety of the universe's design, the more reason there is to give credit to a—no *the*—Creator. So let science proceed. Just as the order we see everywhere in the tiniest things gives us a glimpse of God's intelligence, so the mind-boggling enormity of the universe bears witness to God's majesty. The better we appreciate this, the less we can reasonably refuse God's authority to give life and take it away in this corner of the universe, to judge us and receive our supplications. No one's authority is natural but God's. All are necessarily subservient to God's laws, which are everlasting and everywhere, rational and wise beyond questioning, the *sine-qua-non* of existence itself.[4].

The second reason theology and cosmology still cleave to each other comes from cosmologists' side. As they "scan the heavens" (but actually analyze radiation from stars), they can describe themselves seeking to understand "God's Design," or "the Mind of God," or some such lofty object. This allows these otherwise secular individuals to pursue their investigations unencumbered by the tricky moral considerations that God-talk properly engenders: the "oughts" rather than the "is"s of life. By understanding the *design* of the cosmos, they can say, are they not getting at the very *nature* of the Creator? Would (mere) moral and ethical problems not melt away once nature was scientifically understood, once God's recipes were deciphered?[5]

Deploying quasi-religious language also profits them by broadening audience. For whoever can speak with the authority of Science about such heady subjects as "Beginning of Time," the "Fate of the Universe," or the "Place of Man," deserves to be heard with the reverence due prophets of old. Did Newton and Einstein (they can point out) not look more deeply than anyone into the mysteries of nature *and* believe in the Creator? Did not Copernicus and Kepler? Physical scientists of late 20th century seeking to enlighten the general public on matters quantum and universal—I am thinking here of David Bohm, Frank Tipler, Paul Davies, James Trefil, John Barrow, and Stephen Hawking—borrowed the mantle.

[4] Nowhere is this sentiment expressed better than in Job 38–41.

[5] Darwin began his career under the thrall of this argument. Evolution, he then thought, was an expression of God's one and ineluctable Law, if not proof-sufficient of His existence. As is well known, later in life Darwin proclaimed himself "agnostic," a then-new term invented by his friend and explicator T. H. Huxley.

The God that emerges from the agreement between cosmogony and theology, however, is no Biblical or Qur'anic God giving moral direction to human history and everyday life. Nor is it the "existential" God of Martin Buber or Emmanuel Lévinas, the God who dwells in the mystery of human freedom, conscience, and mutual encounter. The cosmologist's God is an abstract entity embedded in the fabric of reality itself, from the stars all the way down to the quantum field, a God whose voice is the sound of mathematics and whose face is the ocean spray. The result is deism, not theism, and an impassive God addressible—if addressible at all—as It, not You.

Despite what Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens may tell us, very few believers today picture God as an ancient and powerful patriarch ruling earth from a place above the clouds. Indeed, they are likely to feel quite enlightened for *not* believing in this God, and thus safe from the barbs of atheists. The question for them, of course, becomes: "Well, who or what *is* God, really? How better should I think of 'him' or it?"

Two answers recommend themselves. One is: "No one knows. God is beyond human comprehension." This answer seems humble. It may be. But it can just as easily be used to evade the personal moral and intellectual responsibility that would come with knowing all too well what God wants (if not who/what "he" is).

The other answer, especially in this ecology-minded day, is "Nature." Here, God, fugitive from his throne as it were, and bereft of human visage, finds himself at one with the forests, the oceans, the stars. This second, deist (not to say pagan) answer is as medieval as it is New Age. Cosmologists who answer along these lines way might scoff at the astrologers of old, but they too look for our fate in the stars. The truth is that cosmologists are no more qualified to be religious seers than are veterinarians, and probably less so. For whether the universe began as a kajillion-ton, infinitely hot pea, or has always looked the way it does today (give or take a few million galaxies), whether it is headed outward to nothingness or back to convulsion a billion years hence, makes no difference at all as to whether you will stop for a tortoise crossing the road. Indeed, too cosmic a view of things promotes indifference to merely earthly goings-on (what does it *really* matter if a species disappears?), and it leads to too clean a partitioning of the scientific from the moral.

To get from the "is's" of science to the "oughts" of living, one must have the universe *desiring* something—something like more life, or greater diversity, more order, or more love. More than that: one must have "good" and "bad," and one must feel personally addressed by the choice. The problem for deists, A. N. Whitehead notwithstanding, is that there is no evidence of that desire existing at the time of the Big Bang. "Desire" is something evolved, a phenomenon of life, and probably exists nowhere within forty light years of us but here.

We are evolved from star-matter, no question. We are organized dust. But here is the marvel: after billions of years of witless life-on-earth, the *ethical* finally emerges as a phenomenon and a force. It emerges first from *human* being, and then more strongly from hum*ane* being, which involves the capacity and desire to do good simply "because."

Enter God.

Or to put it allegorically: Eve bit into the apple and understood for the first time that the existence of good and evil was up to her. It was then that God formed.

WAYS OF EXISTING

When we imagine something "existing," we usually imagine an object that we can see or hear or smell or touch. We think of trees, chairs, people...even planets. These are all solid, bounded entities. They have a characteristic shape; they hold their position or trajectory unless bumped, and they persist for a good while. In theory, each could have a unique proper name or identity code.

Upon reflection we realize that many things we know to exist physically are not so neatly bounded: the *atmosphere*, for example, which thins so gradually with altitude above the earth that we cannot really say where it ends. We might think of clouds, which continually form and melt away; or of the wind. Where does the wind begin or end?

Yet other things exist immaterially everywhere and always, like gravity or the electromagnetic field. These two "things," although quite physical, represent a distinctly different mode of existence. They have no outer bound or shape but they retain their integrity nonetheless, their inner continuity, their effects and character. They are rather like fabrics that run *through* everything, or layers that run *under* everything; they cannot be broken up

spatially, and they cannot be episodic in time (existing, then not-existing, then existing...). They are each, we can say, a *field* rather than an object, a field that has universal, continuous, and possibly eternal existence. (The field is the image that guides theologians like Paul Tillich, for whom God is The Invisible Ground of Being.)

Thoughts and feelings represent yet another "style" of existence. Most of us would vouchsafe that thoughts and feelings exist. We experience them vividly, we name them closely, and we talk about them all the time. They do not exist in thin air, of course, but in the minds and bodies of living people (and animals), and thus only when and where actual such individuals breathe and think. It is *we* who think and feel, after all, not the chair, not the rock, and not the air between.

While most philosophers at this juncture would direct attention to the apparently immaterial or "spiritual" nature of thoughts and feelings, arguing for or against their status as independent existents, I want to accept their basis in neural physical reality and direct attention, rather, to another just-as-interesting property: that of their spatiotemporal discontinuity. What do I mean?

Take the feeling of *jealousy*. Jealousy flares up in people who learn that their friends or lovers are being attracted to others. And yet there is no reason to think that the feeling of jealousy—the knotted stomach, the flush of anger, the obsessive daydreaming about what the other is doing right now, the new-found appreciation for the virtue of loyalty—is different in every person. It is a *universal* experience that is discontinuous in time and space, one whose identicality (one occurrence with another) is not due to being tied to any central *source* of jealousy or to being tapped into some deep "jealousy field" that runs through or under everything, but rather to our similarity to each other as members of the human species. In short, jealousy feels the same to all of us, but each person's experience of it is unique and localized. The same might be said of the pain of dental work or the pleasure of laughing at a clown.

Here is an analogy: all over the earth fires are burning. Let us guess that there are a billion fires burning right now—in hearths, in cigarettes, in forests, in just-bombed buildings. These fires know nothing of each other; they were not caused by the same cause. Nor are they one fire joined somehow, in some other dimension, to the Great Fire. And yet fire is fire, the same everywhere, nothing missing from any. So is God.

Another style of existence is exemplified by "abstract universals:" things like perfect triangles, whole numbers, logical and natural laws (like "entailment" and "causation"), and absolute ideals like The Good. Ever since Plato theorized an otherworldly realm in which these universals existed eternally and perfectly as Forms—of which the variegated actualities of this world are but imperfect shadows or projections—philosophers have discussed exhaustively (and to no conclusion) in what sense such universals exist. How or where, for example, do the elements of mathematics exist, things like triangles or numbers (or, for that matter, mathematics itself?). Where do colors or *words* reside? Transcendently? Only in minds? Only when seen, written, or spoken?

After Plotinus, most philosophically-minded Western theologians have held that *God* is a Platonic universal *and more*. What do I mean by "...and more"? This: God is The One; God is the Form of the Good as well as the Form of all Forms; God is ultimately real, changeless, manifest on earth only in broken reflections of his wholeness and perfection, all just as Plato wrote...w*ith the added feature* that God created everything, can be addressed personally, cares about us, rules over all events, and occasionally appears to people in person. Among modern believers, Plotinus's omnibus NeoPlatonist view is still widely held.

For non-Platonist philosophers, however, starting with Aristotle, universals exist in a different way. Universals exist only in *minds* that register the common *properties* of several—even innumerable—individual, actually-not-identical things, events, or actions. There are no perfect circles except in our imaginations, in the overlap, as it were, between myriad, experienced, differently-*im*perfect, real circles. "Arithmetic" exists only when and where a person is actually adding and subtracting using the rules of counting (which process, we often forget, discards large amounts of information about the things being counted); "white*ness*" only when someone is classifying objects among other objects with respect to their color; "justice" only when someone is being fairer than before, or defending rights, or righting a wrong. Until then, arithmetic, whiteness, and justice are just words—words that group phenomena and actions by common properties, chains of resemblances, rules of application, and so forth.

This is not to say that the world unperceived by humans is intrinsically chaotic, that we are *projecting* our ideas of order and commonness-of-property onto what is actually a hapless mess (although the world is certainly more complex than we can figure out

completely). Not at all. We both detect and create some of the order that is in the world because our brains are made of "world-stuff" too, because we grew up in it, and because the order is really there, shaping the chaos in this neck of the universe's woods. For Aristotle and those that followed in his line, the point was that there exists no otherworldly book, storehouse, or plane of existence that has the Ideal Order of our world written in it. Contra Plato, there is no place or time or realm in which "4" exists (presumably in the company of "5" and "6"...) apart from those four apples in a bowl, the four cardinal directions, the four seasons, or time for afternoon tea. By the same token, there exists no higher realm or God, that (or who) is the repository or source of perfect Goodness, Truth, and the rest.[6]

The theology of theopraxy agrees. God exists, and God exists in no other world than *this* one—the one that we see every day. True, God is not a thing or a person. Nor is God an abstract universal, a figment of the imagination, or a "common-or-garden" property of all things, like their color, size, shape, temperature, or mass. Rather (according to the theology of theopraxy), God is the quality of all human actions we rightly call "good." More deeply than this, God *is* those very actions, as, and when, and where they are happening. God is an activity: the doing of good.

This variety of existence ought not to be *that* foreign to us, except perhaps as it is applied to God. There are hundreds of "things" we happily refer to using nouns, which are not really things or feelings, ideas or abstract universals, properties or "spiritual beings" (angels or ghosts). They are, rather, *patterns*, and among them are patterns of human activity or behavior. What else is a *team*, a *home* (over and above a house), a *prayer*, a *bank*? What else is *love*?

And where exactly, we might wonder, do these "patterns" exist? Only in the mind? Try telling that to a football quarterback. Patterns come and go, become vivid and fade, emerge and dissipate, but are no less objective for it. You might just as well ask where your *fist* goes when you open your hand. Or where your *lap* goes when you stand up. Where do (the games of) tennis, football, or bridge go when the playing of them is over? Where does

[6] The fact that we can sometimes *picture* a universal in our mind's eye (as when we say "dog" and know that, without further adjectives, a generic, "Platonic" dog will come to the other's mind), does not mean that one such Dog exists in supernal reality. It would quite likely match a *real* dog somewhere, of median age, that just happens to average the features of several of breeds of dogs (as stray dogs do in Calcutta). Indeed, all nouns except proper nouns are quasi-universals. Like numbers, and like variable-names in mathematics (X, y…), nouns are essential to linguistic communication precisely because of their multiple instantiability, because of their incomplete specificity, their ignoring of differences.

love go? We cannot answer, of course, and should not need to. Fists and laps and games-in-play are patterns; they are "configurational entities," spatiotemporal arrangements of other elements that for a while (or repeatedly, or forever) create something stable and deserving of a name. What else is a *flame* or a *room*? What is a *wedding,* a *trial,* a *meal,* a *smile?* These are complex patterns of things, events, and behaviors, configurational entities that evaporate once they are "over" and their parts go back to some other arrangement (parts that are themselves arrangements, patterns, with their own cycles of formation and dissolution).

If you understand the sense in which the patterns of human behavior I have just listed *exist*, then you understand the sense in which the theology of theopraxy proposes God exists.[7] And, need I add, present patterns massively affect future ones?

Why, then, do I persist in personifying—indeed proper-naming—good-doing patterns of activity "God" rather than simply calling them "good" (an adjective) and being done with it? This is a fair question, and one to which I return. For the moment, however, I would like to argue for the proper-naming of God simply from the perspective of religious experience.

When believers offer that their faith is based not on reason but on a direct personal experience *of* God—let us even call it contact *with* God—it is usually in one of two distinct modes that this experience, this contact, is had.

In one mode the believer has a vision—something like God in Heaven, sitting on a throne or standing, but radiant, anyway, with beneficence, love, and power, breaking into this world like sunshine through clouds. Or one sees a marvelous apparition like an angel, or hears a voice from nowhere addressing one personally. The believer comes away from an experience like this feeling awe, feeling blessed, feeling saved, chosen to be one of a line of very few people who have experienced God directly—Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Isaiah, Jonah, Jesus, a prophet, a saint...

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[7] To scientists, all entities are "configurational." From organisms down to molecules, atoms, and subatomic particles...all things are mutable *arrangements* of smaller parts yet. Some would recommend that we think of the world more dynamically, as made of "processes" or "events," rather than concrete (or fleshly) things, as Alfred North Whitehead suggests in *Process and Reality*. They might then recommend that we follow Whitehead to Process Theology wherein God *is* the universe-in-process (more or less as Spinoza proposed) and disposed to realizing itself ever more beautifully. That is itself, a beautiful idea. The theology of theopraxy, however, holds that while God is indeed a "process" or "event," God is not *any and all* processes or events—macro, micro, and in between—just some. God is the inherently complex, late-evolved pattern of activity in which, and by which, human beings "do things" and "arrange matters" so that all forms and instances of life, not excluding their own, are preserved, honored, and promoted. This is the context in which one might undersand again Psalm 36:10: "For with Thee is the fountain of life."

In the second mode of contact, the believer simply has an experience of the profound rightness and beauty of certain constellations of events, things, or actions around them. These events, things, or actions are momentarily seen in a new light, as part of an eternal and lovely whole, or in patterns never to be repeated and yet, somehow, fully intended. The sounds of nature or of music might resonate with profounder harmonies. If the believer hears God's voice, it is *as* the voices of friends, or as his or her own voice. One comes away from experiences like this with feelings of gratitude, clarity, and hope.

Have the first experience—or trust that others have had it—and you will report belief in a Biblical (or Platonic) transcendent God who presides over this world from another plane of existence. Have the second experience—or trust others have had it—and you will report belief in an immanent God, soaked into this world, manifesting himself, herself, or itself more or less powerfully in a thousand activities and actualities all around.

Mainstream Western faiths base themselves largely on the first experience of God.[8] Deism, pantheism, and panentheism base themselves largely on the second, which is often called "mystical." The theology of theopraxy bases itself on something like the second experience too, but only when it is caused by the works and deeds of people who are inspired by the first experience of God, or the second, or neither, or both. Necessary only is that they could have done something else, something less loving, less lovely, less true.

In the view of the theology of theopraxy, neither the stars nor the moon nor the twitter of the rainforest proves God exists, but a bowl of soup, a loving hand, a genuine smile, a beautiful room, a pardon given does. These things are not so much God manifest as God *instanced*, and we are remiss when we take them for granted. Experiences of goodness-in-deed are experiences of God, as direct as they can be. If you live in peace and decency, they are not at all uncommon. We just have to know what to call them.

[8] I say largely" because Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all have mystical side traditions in which experiencing God's numinous immanence is regarded as proof-sufficient of God's existence.

THE PROBLEM OF GOOD

Unlike other forms of theism, the theology of theopraxy proffers that God has only one of the attributes traditionally ascribed to God, namely, perfect goodness. In the theology of theopraxy, what is *not-good* is simply *not God,* no matter how entertaining, useful, real, or even beautiful it might be. Crimes and cruelties, therefore, are never justified by the larger achievements in which they might eventuate, much less the esthetic qualities they might exhibit.[9]

The existence of evil is not a problem that the theology of theopraxy *has* to explain because it does not posit a God who knows all or who can do all in the first place. God, it argues, cannot break the laws of nature in order to divert certain trains of events from causing harm. Nor did God design or create the world as we find it, which is a world where rigidity, chaos, indifference, misinformation, mediocrity, and selfishness are common. In a world like ours, the miracle (if one wants miracles) *is that there is good at all.* Put another way: *God* is the miracle.

The problem for atheists, it follows, is not the problem of evil, which provides ready ammunition for an attack on traditional theism. The problem for atheists, rather, is "*the problem of good.*" For if there is no God in any sense, including the theology of theopraxy's, then whose image or what thought-patterns inspired Moses, Solomon, Isaiah, Jesus, Francis of Assisi, Gandhi, Schweitzer, Wallenberg, and Mother Theresa, to name a famous few, to do what they did? Set these heroes aside: how does everyday kindness, decency, and honesty arise? Whence supererogatory acts of philanthropy, altruism, and love? Whence honor in business and even war? These are not minor achievements, and situation-by-situation,

[9] Crimes and cruelties are by definition impositions on unwilling others, and so cannot be justified. Pain and suffering, however, can sometimes be justified. Two examples (1) when lesser pain *must* be endured in order to prevent greater pain (think of dragging a child to the dentist), and (2) when those who will feel the pain agree voluntarily, beforehand, to risk pain or to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the larger good envisaged, a good that they also voluntarily agree *is* larger, and good enough. Put another way: the end never justifies the means unless those to be used as a means (legally adult, and sane) *agree* that the end is worthwhile, and *consent* to being a means for achieving it.

Are these exceptions exploitable? Alas, yes. With regard to the first, one can falsely attest that a worse pain is inevitable unless the subject undergoes the presently proposed one. Religious fundamentalists turn the second to their advantage by advocating that everyone volunteer for *everything* that might happen to them, on the grounds that, since *whatever* happens to them is the will of God (and thus for the best), one should "beat God to it" as it were, and *will* whatever appears inevitable. Of course, this makes a mockery of God's gifts to us of *intellect*, which would include the right to question seeming inevitability, and of *freedom*, which would include the right to refuse, without penalty, to volunteer for suffering.

calculated-from-scratch self-interest does not explain them completely. The question is: how could a world without God—i.e., without (according to the theology of theopraxy) goodness exemplified and embodied all around in small and large ways—bring about any of these things? This is "the problem of good."

While it might or might not be a problem for atheists (we will look at their reply in a moment), the existence of goodness in a bad or indifferent world is not a problem for our theology. Or rather, it poses none of the *logical* dilemmas that the problem of evil does for theism. This is because the theology of theopraxy does not posit a single locus of dominion over all good or evil: God is present where good is being done and absent where good is not being done: God *is* good-being-done. Some long-lasting *idea* of God might be what carries some of us from one good deed to another, but only *in* the deed and *as* the deed does God literally come to life. God's job, as it were, is to redeem the world though us, and ours to redeem the world though "him," properly conceived.

If, then, there is no *logical* problem for us in the fact that there is goodness in the world, a mystery remains nonetheless. When God's power is our power and "his" wisdom is our wisdom, when God "sees with our eyes and hears with our ears" as Confucianism pictures it too, then the problem of good is better called the mystery or wonder of good. For truly, the radiance of the slightest genuine kindness is equal to the light of the stars. And it is harder to explain.

"Stop, stop," cries the atheist. "Why do you speak of 'wonder' and 'mystery'? There is no *wonder* in the existence of good; nor is there anything remotely divine or mysterious in any part of the process. 'Good' is merely what we call those behaviors, rules, and tools that have proven beneficial to the ongoing life of human beings, starting with ourselves and *our* people, but becoming more inclusive as we do better in our own, longer-term, best interests."

And the atheist might go on:

"Your theology should be content with *natural* explanations for morality, along the lines offered by sociobiology and evolutionary psychology. To wit: goodness, morality, ethics, law, religion itself...are instantiated in behaviors that are useful for the proliferation of the human species, that survive the selection process, that increase progeny who will repeat these useful—i.e. "good"—behaviors. There's no wonder or mystery here. Does the theology

of theopraxy itself not say God evolves?"

These are strong challenges. Here is our reply.

Our atheist is not wrong, just one-eyed. One can explain a thunderstorm in Texas as what happens when warm humid air from the Gulf of Mexico flows over a body of dry cold air coming from the north and condensed water droplets by the trillion fall to earth. There's nothing wrong with this description, ethically or scientifically. But it does not explain or begin to describe the experience of running through a summer storm with thunder all around and water seeping into your socks with every splashy step. Likewise, understanding the chemical composition of foodstuffs and their transformation by heat can help us be better cooks, as would knowing the history of world cuisines. But those same facts have another face when they become the taste of a sauce taken off a hot spoon. And it is actually this "face"—the experience—that is the culmination of the art of cooking.

Similarly, we can accept that our moral intuitions emerged from biological evolution and from tens if not hundreds of millennia of living together as human beings. Understanding the process will be rewarding. But evolutionary explanations of goodness yield facts that have the same two-sided character as the facts that describe weather and cooking do: one side that is all "fitness indicators," "genetic predispositions," "kin selection," "social utility," and so forth, and another side which is how goodness *actually feels to someone who is doing it or witnessing it.* One gets this from good novels and movies, and one gets it from living life oneself.

Such dual explanations are not the same as duelling explanations. Dual explanations support each other. Duelling ones do not. Evolutionary explanations of the roots of ethical behavior might well, if they are good in the scientific sense, help us do good in the moral sense.[10] But when naturalistic explanations come around to illuminate and enhance the experience of seeing, deciding, and enacting what is good, they have a much better chance.

[10] Steven Pinker and Daniel Dennett are at pains to make this point, as are all who realize that finding evolutionarily logical reasons for contemporary practices does not *ipso fact*o condone them. In fact, by and large, they do the opposite. Going *counter* to our natural impulses is most often the moral direction. There are, after all, evolutionarily "good" reasons why women have inferior social status to men (I shall not go into them here), just as there are evolutionarily "good" reasons why stepfathers are more likely to harm their stepchildren than fathers are their real children. There are reasons to exact escalating revenge that make perfect sociobiological sense. Etc. Being civilized, however, means *not* perpetuating these behaviors. Understanding the evolutionary origins and uses of these behaviors helps in not perpetuating them because it helps us devise practices and laws that avoid the circumstances that trigger them and/or that offer more tempting and less harmful alternatives: soccer, not war.

The experiential side of the coin is the side that counts as much if not more; it's the side that people recognize and the one that educates.[11]

One has to realize, in sum, that *evolution-in-process* feels like *life as lived*.

Evolutionary, biological, and even humanistic explanations of "where morality comes from" challenge traditional belief in God. But they support the theology of theopraxy's entirely. When God is a production of human experience as real as color, music, or democracy and "closer than the vein in your neck,"[12] God's mystery and wonder do not depend on revelation in the Biblical sense: no voices from thin air, no angelic light, no ladders into the clouds are required. It is simply the wonder of being touched by ethical action first-hand, up close. Here is a child offering her blood for transfusion into her sick brother; here is a man risking his life to lead a dog off a busy road; there is a woman anonymously channelling her wealth to charity; there is a man steadily forbearing insults to himself and offering goodwill in return. On such occasions a familiar amalgam of emotions is elicited: awe, gratitude, joy, hope, pride in being human. Just as the experience of being scalded is not nullified by knowing that it is "just" billions of fast-moving water molecules battering the nerve endings under our skin, so the wonder of goodness is not at all undone, and is perhaps intensified, by the knowledge that it emerged from billions of years of selfish, witless, life on earth becoming conscious—the light of stars becoming light of another sort. Think this, and the mystery and wonder of God can come from something as simple as the pleasure of realizing that one is alive, free, without pain, and at the same time of benefit to others who deserve the same experience.

And who deserves that experience? Every baby born.

The truth is that some measure of goodness is all around. Every iota of tact, every laugh among friends, every moment of patience and offering of help, is an instance of God. Every obedience to law, every washing of hands, feeding a pet, or letting someone sleep is

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[11] A great deal of science starts in phenomenology—i.e. starts with extreme sensitivity to the structure, texture, and content of actual experience, probably one's own—and only then moving to generalizations and quantifications. It takes a phenomenologist *extraordinaire* to compare, in all seriousness, the experience of a person in an closed, upward-accelerating elevator to the experience of a person in a gravitational field, as Einstein did for his Theory of General Relativity (calling it the Principle of Equivalence). The physics laboratory is a virtual haven for phenomenologists. Would that there were an equivalent for moralists.

[12] The phrase is Qur'anic (Sura 50:16). If traditional, Bible-based theism would let go of its objective-prior-'out there'-existence claims on behalf of God in favor of phenomenological, existential, produced-*by*-life claims for the existence of God, it too would be unfazed by evolutionary and humanistic explanations.

God at work. This is what it means to know that God is immanent *and* in our hands. That we can walk peacably and work respectfully among other people, that we tolerate their foibles and can expect the same from them, are miracles that do not appear miraculous because they are "normal." And they are normal because they are built upon millennia of learning and transmission of the Word of God (or Way of Heaven), which itself evolves over time. We need only contemplate with the existentialists our ever-present freedom to do almost *anything*—including lie, murder, steal, dishonor, and abandon—to see that good-doing is always up to us, that it is always a choice, and a choice of which we can later be proud even if we were not fully aware at the time that we were choosing.

Recall the hells-on-earth that dot human history. Bring to mind the ones that exist right now somewhere on the planet. Now look out of your window. Every bird not shot, every walker not carrying a gun, every car waiting patiently for a traffic light to change, every repairman writing up a job fairly, every person dying in a fresh hospital bed rather than on a battlefield or in a gutter, every street that is swept, every bush that is trimmed, every toddler studying a worm...is God evidenced and instanced.

Look upon these things and be glad. Rejoice at peace and decency. See that for the most part your "cup runneth over," and more: that by your actions *you* are one reason for that cup running over for others. Call it the wonder of doing. "The wonder of doing, " Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote,

> …is no less amazing than the marvel of being....and (it) may prompt us to discover 'the divinity of deeds.' (I)n doing sacred deeds we may begin to realize that there is more in our doing than ourselves, that in our doing there is something—nay, someone—divine. (It is) 'through the ecstasy of deeds' that we learn 'to be certain of the hereness of God.'[13]

[13] Quoted by Maurice Friedman (1987, p. 265, 266.).

RELIGIOUS RECONCILIATION AND "THE SEVEN TENETS"

Historically, attempts at conciliation between religions have taken two forms. One has been to adopt the liberal ideals of tolerance, fairness, universal human rights, and respect for all racial and cultural differences. When the object is interdenominational Christian unity, that tolerance is called *ecumenicism*. Extended to all religions, it becomes the Interfaith Movement.

The second form of conciliation has been more philosophical. It entails asserting that, beneath all apparent differences in ritual and language, all religions *really* worship the same unknowable God, i.e., the one and only God in whose eyes, conversely, all humanity is one big family. This view is propounded in some form by Universalist Unitarians, Bahai, by popular mythologists like Joseph Campbell, by historians of religion like Huston Smith, and by prime ministers and presidents (at least in public), as well as by most Jewish, Christian, and Muslim public intellectuals.

While respecting the virtues of these two approaches (when sincere), the theology of theopraxy looks for conciliation between religions on more meaningful grounds, grounds requiring more than live-and-let-live tolerance on the one hand or veiled assertions of the supremacy of you-know-whose God on the other.

The theology of theopraxy takes a more metaphysical stance: namely, that free moral praxis *is* God. This means that long-established religions, in their attempt to be modern, should not have to jettison their core rituals and narratives just to make them agree with the latest biological, cosmological, or archeological findings. Nor should they be forced to admit that their beliefs and rituals are merely "useful fictions," which has been the sociologist's view of them since Durkheim (and before that, Feuerbach and Nietzsche). Such admissions would be self-defeating, not to say injurious, for the greater number of their followers, who suspect it anyway, prefer it unspoken, and who are wise enough to see that these "fictions" are to be taken with considerable if not complete seriousness because the consequences of belief are at least as important as its reasons.[14]

[14] Most of us think that our ancestors *truly* believed while we "moderns" only try to believe, sort-of believe, or pretend to believe. But our ancestors thought the same about themselves and of *their* ancestors, and so on, all the way back. How do we know that? Well, first, because of how frequently classical texts, from Homer on, consistently praise the ancestors for being closer to the gods, or God. The ancients were like gods themselves, or

The theology of theopraxy takes this common sense a step further. The core narratives and beliefs of each religion, it says, are genuinely *constitutive* of God-in-idea and *conducive* to God-in-actuality if, as, and when good is done, or aided, because of them. Indeed, most ordinary, decent, non- and half-believing people are theopractitioners already.

Like George Santayana, John Dewey wanted to "emancipate the religious from religion." And what, for Dewey, is the "the religious?" In *A Common Faith* (1934, p. 31) he formulates it carefully: "Any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of conviction of its general and enduring value." As he also heard it argued by Ludwig Feuerbach and Marianne Evans (aka George Eliot), Dewey too argued that ideals such as love, compassion, justice, and so on could be pursued without belief in supernatural agency, i.e. without belief in God. Of course, Dewey is right: no all-powerful, all-seeing, and all-caring, creator God *need* be posited in order to bring out the best in humankind. And *forcing* people to believe in this God is certainly counterproductive.

But this does not prove that out-and-out secularism is the alternative. Nor does it prove that "natural piety" towards the kind of world that science discloses is the best alternative. There are other theisms—pantheism and panentheism, for example. And there is the theology of theopraxy, which says that the God to whom good and devout Jews, Christians, and Muslims pray, and whom they obey, *is real*—just not real in the *way* the literature of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam say God is.

How, then, *is* God real?

Earlier I tried to convey how in frankly poetic terms, then later in more discursive terms, casting the Biblical and Qur'anic God as a once-necessary, and perhaps still necessary,

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sons of God, *nephilim* (Genesis 6:1–4). But, second, because modern anthropological research shows that it is common for people hold to their society's beliefs *provisionally.* Even so-called "primitive" people do this—people who we think of as helplessly sincere, like children, and incapable of irony or pragmatism. As anthropologist Dan Sperber (1982, pp. 149–180) argues, primitives, just like we sophisticates (i.e. skeptical moderns), are perfectly capable of appearing-to-believe, of going along, of half-believing their myths, of acting as-if this or that superstition were literally the case...all the while appreciating the social utility of their cosmologies and enjoying the entertainment, seduction, and prestige-garnering value of religious occasions. Faith has its uses. And so does the *show* of faith. I can imagine half the Israelites rolling their eyes as Moses descended Sinai, and again as water spilled from a rock… This does not detract one bit from the profundity of what happened, in retrospect, and perhaps adds to it.

For another example in modern anthropology that does justice to the power inherent in myth while showing how those myths are understood less-than-literally and with good humor by their believers you could not do better than read Laurens Van der Post on the Kalahari Bushmen, e.g. Van der Post (1984).

personification, narrativization, and amplification of the strength of our ethical intuitions.[15] That we work best with those intuitions, I observed, when they are cast in the form of a drama among *selves*, including gods' and God's, is a matter to be taken seriously if we are committed to perpetuating good in this world. God is not so much a subject of science, of discovery, as the subject of *poeisis*, of making, in which the trope of personification, far from "mere," is an essential, functioning, and, one might even say neurological, part.[16]

But here let me reply in the light of what has been discussed since, and offer a first draft of what might be called the "seven tenets" of the theology of theopraxy:

1. God is not a person or thing or principle or spirit. God is activity of a certain sort: the free doing of good, where, by "good" we mean that which preserves, honors, or promotes all forms and instances of life.

2. God was not the Creator. Nor is God all-powerful or omniscient. God is the newest and weakest "force" in the universe, produced by humane humans, even as God produces humaneness in turn.

3. Freedom is necessary to doing good, and good-doing is necessary to producing more freedom.

4. Science is the friend of true religion, which is faith "justified by works" of goodness.

5. The development of ever fairer and more compassionate laws as well as more broadly life-sustaining social and cultural practices is God's mandate and our task, deed by deed.

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[15] Robert Wright in *The Evolution of God* (2009) comes close to making this point, but in positing the existence of a Platonic "moral axis" around which religions spiral, and closer to which they come, relapses into Teilhardian evolutionism.

[16] The question for intellectuals is an old one: is there a way of doing theology that does not avoid, but combines-by-understanding, apparently naïve personifications of God *and* dry analysis of the "psycho-social functioning of the thought of 'deity'", that melds delirious metaphors of transcendence or numinous presence *and* careful listings of God's necessary attributes? My own efforts are to think and write in this way: in encounter and embrace. Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, Abraham Heschel, and Henry Wieman, are to me (modern) models.

6. Long-evolved religions present powerful and highly specific rituals, images, arguments, narratives, and commandments whose purpose is to effect Tenet 5, and can be respected and practiced without significant alteration when and as they succeed in doing so.

7. Both the idea and substance of God remain open to evolution.[17]

Conciliaton between religions as well as conciliation between believers and non-believers could proceed apace if all sides saw common ground in goodness—goodness not in the abstract, but goodness in the living exercise of the virtues suggested by Tenet 5. The step I encourage, beyond the rather easy one of agreeing to the existence of common ground, is to enter it together and cry "This is where God is; this is what God has been all along."

THE SITUATION OF ATHEISTS

Atheists are convinced that God does not exist in any objective sense, which is to say, that God does not *really* exist. Like Feuerbach, they believe that people invented "God" in order to motivate each other to be good, to console each other in grief, and so on. At best (they say) God is a moral fiction.[18]

Believers, of course, would never go along with the demotion of God from fact to fiction, although the claim makes disturbing sense. Indeed, it is precisely in order to head off this always-possible demotion of God from resplendent-king-of-the-universe to salutary-

[17] Contrast this with the First Commandment. In places in *A Common Faith* (1934), Dewey flies close. For example: "It is the *active* relation between the ideal and the actual to which I would give the name 'God'" (p. 51). Or "Whether one gives the name 'God' to this union, operative in thought and action, is a matter for individual decision. But the *function* of such a working union of the ideal and the actual seems to me to be identical with the force that has in fact been attached to the conception of God in all the religions that have spiritual content..." (p. 52). Or "In any case...the meaning of ('God' as I would use the word) is selective. For it involves no miscellaneous worship of everything in general. It selects those factors in existence that generate and support our idea of good as an end to be striven for. It excludes a multitude of forces that at any given time are irrelevant to this function." (p. 53).

[18] It was expressed formally much earlier by William of Ockham. The term "moral fiction" should be credited to John Gardner's 1979 book *On Moral Fiction*.

figment-of-the-imagination that organized (Western) religion so strongly and insistently perpetuates belief not only in God-objective but in God-massively, grandly, objective: Creator of the universe, all glory and beyond comprehension (except that He *clearly* chose Israel, sacrificed His only Son for our sakes, made Mohammed his last prophet, etc., etc.).[19]

Say atheists: efforts to impress "God" upon *hoi polloi* using such overwhelming claims do more harm than good. When not serving the powerful or fanning hatred, they cloud reason, obstruct science, and breed passivity.

The atheist's worries are, alas, all too often justified. Having bad ideas of God can have consequences worse than having no idea of God at all. But seekers of the theopracticing life are likely to believe that the *good* done by belief in God has on the whole outweighed the harm. Absent religion, we ask, would the same wars, purges, and murders, not have been committed for other reasons?[20] We will never know. Perhaps religious differences have always been a cover for installing and then perpetuating ethnic and economic inequalities, a way of legitimating them, of sanctifying them. As the lives of Joseph Stalin, Mao Ze Dung, Pol Pot and a dozen other anti-religious warlords attest, however, there are many ways other than calling on God to keep the disadvantaged at a disadvantage, the credulous obedient, and the poor grateful for what little they have.

Atheists on the other hand, if they are intellectually honest, are obliged to be grateful for the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), of Hammurabi, Confucius, Lao Tse, Moses, Solomon and the prophets of ancient Israel, of Jesus and Mohammed, Aquinas, Augustine, and Maimonides, to name a few of the classic teachers. Most of their teachings are now written into secular law, into state constitutions, and into the social fabric as everyday human decency, *including the atheist's*. In more recent times, philosophers wrestled with trying to square religious faith with experience and with science, and in that striving have produced the very body of thought upon which atheists rest their case. Immanuel Kant, Tom Paine, John Stuart Mill, Thomas Jefferson, Bertrand Russell, William James, and John Dewey, to name just a few prominent non-theists of the last few centuries, wrote what they

[19] The paradox of the last attribute is often glossed over: for if God is ineffable—"beyond our ken"—then how can we be *sure* God is/was the Creator, is all powerful, loves us, etc., etc. "We have to settle for partial knowledge" is the usual riposte. Curiously heretical is the proposition that nothing/no-one could be more simple or closer at hand than God; although it was the view of Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed.

[20] Certainly, medieval society was rife with pagan superstitions and magical beliefs—astrology, alchemy, and witchcraft among them. We tend to forget that the relatively austere teachings of the Church were an advance at the time, or at least a simplification. See Keith Thomas (1971).

wrote and said what they said embedded in a Christian milieu whose basic moral principles they accepted and by whose narratives they were suitably moved. Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne were thus embedded and thus moved too. The ethical intuition is like a sense of smell, guiding us to the flower that could blossom right where we are.

And if die-hard atheists, trying to circumvent the Bible, were to go back to the philosophers of ancient Greece in search of examples of lives of pure reason, they would come upon Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle paying respect to the gods—*their* gods—smiling, and with easy hearts.

Ironically, atheists who really understood the traditions they oppose might be in a better position to reach an understanding of God through the theology of theopraxy than those who are unthinkingly faith-full. But ethical atheists—i.e. already theopracticing people—might well be prevented from reaching that understanding by an emotional, personal need to reject their religious heritage. Don't all smart teenagers scoff at the "lies" that civility is based upon? Don't they all smirk at the foolishness of ordinary people (read: their parents and their parent's friends) for not cottoning on to the contradictions of faith or the failings of church leadership? Atheists are wont to believe (1) that *intelligence* and *illusion* are simple adversaries, (2) that in this world there are only material things (or energy), and Nothing, (3) that what most people do with their lives doesn't amount to a "hill of beans" in the larger scheme of things (no all-seeing, caring God to tally minutiae), and (4) that commitment to human ideals in the face of life's absurdity is either pointless or misguided.[21]

How frozen in youthfulness these opinions are. For a start, intelligence is no protection against illusion. Indeed, as often as not, intelligence is illusion's sponsor. For another, the category of *information* is far deeper than that of "matter" or "energy." The universe is mindless and stupid—a cosmic screensaver, generated by a "line" or two of quantum-level code playing itself out over arbitrarily large dimensions. But the universe is smaller than a pea in the realm of what matters, which is what lies behind every pair of eyes, sees, and sees that

[21] Perfectly illustrative of the sometime arrogance of atheism is Joyce Arthur (1990). For the argument that "intense atheism" is chiefly the result of the atheist's fathers' cruelty, weakness, absence, abandonment, or early death, see Paul C. Vitz (1999), an interesting but unscientific study.

seeing. And finally: in fact, nothing is more Godly than *creating* meaning in a world that would otherwise be without it.[22]

Tragically, atheists tend not to understand the closeness of what they are rightfully calling for—rationality, intelligence, honesty-to-goodness, responsibility, creativity, and courage in an indifferent universe—with what they are inveighing against, namely, a relationship to a God. Theopraxy *needs* no theology to get it going or to back it up, although clearly (I think) it benefits from one. Theopraxy *needs* no faith in God, ordinary or extraordinary, although faith of *some* kind may help one to get going. In the view of our theology, atheists undo atheism with every good deed they do, just as believers undo God with every bad one.

GUIDANCE FROM GOD, FIRM AND GENTLE

All believers expect guidance or direction from God. Some expect that guidance to be firm; others expect it to be gentle.

Firm guidance or direction is easy to recognize. God presents "himself" to you in a vision or dream; or God speaks from nowhere; or from a fire or mist; or God temporarily undoes the laws of probability or of physics on your behalf. After a period of prayer, you might wake up one morning to find yourself resolved to do something you have never done before or even considered doing before—something good, something great!—and you know exactly how to go about it. Or, out of the blue, a weight feels lifted from your shoulders, or a chronic fear, obsession, or tiredness vanishes like smoke. Or in a jam, you find that you know things you never knew you knew, that you have strengths or talents you did not have before. In all such cases God most definitely demonstrates his power and his interest in *you*.

Gentle guidance or direction from God is harder to detect. God's "signs and wonders" are not as obvious, not as impressive. You cannot sort them from chance or luck. Very likely your patience will be tested. God might speak to you through anyone, in words that do not at first seem wise, or in actions that do not at first seem helpful. Like the philosopher, you are

[22] On the functional equivalence of God with Godliness, see Rabbi Harold Schulweis's (1984) proposal of a "predicate theology." I say "functional equivalence" because Schulweis still reserves a space, as it were, for a singular and ineffable creator God behind all manifestations of "him" in Godliness.

"condemned" to living in doubt, each evening sifting through the events of the day as though for gold: "Was God trying to tell me something there?" But you know you cannot be *too* meditative on this score because, like a warrior, you must often act while still uncertain as to whether you are doing the right thing, as to whether you heard God aright—or at all.

It would seem that the believer who expects firm guidance is in better position, psychologically: less confused, less doubtful. But, in fact, the expectation of either type—firm or gentle—has its problems.[23]

For example, if you expect firm guidance or direction from God, you might well spend too long waiting for it—waiting, say, for deliverance from the wrong job or a harmful relationship. You might hold on to damaging beliefs indefinitely because you feel unauthorized to change them without a clear indication from God that changing them would be good, and what beliefs to change them *to*. Advice from friends falls on deaf ears. The maxim "God helps those who help themselves" sounds callow, faithless. You might turn down reasonable offers and incremental opportunities because they do not solve your problem at a single swoop (as God surely *could* do if he wanted to, so "he" must not want to). In the absence of firm guidance, you might finally feel that the reason for God's silence is due to the weakness of your faith. And so you might re-commit yourself to the religious life, attempting to twist God's arm as it were, or at least get God's attention, by praying harder, getting baptized, changing churches, going on pilgrimages or performing some feat of charity or self-sacrifice. You might also follow some charismatic preacher who will tell you quite clearly what God is saying to you.

Can good come of expecting (and accepting) only firm direction from God and waiting for it? Yes. But only if you resolve to do better in some specific area of your life *while you wait*. Indeed you must be happy to wait, because, as every religion will vouchsafe, God cannot be persuaded, tempted, blackmailed, hurried up, or bargained with unless "he" feels like it.

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[23] The Bible often seems to want to have it both ways. Here, in an emblematic passage (1 Kings 19:11–13), God heralds his imminent presence with a show of strength, but actually manifests himself as a "still small voice" which, like the voice of conscience, is hearable only after the storm of emotion has passed through: "The Lord said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'."

God's judgment as to whom to direct, when, and how, is sovereign; and there is no higher court of appeal. Atheists laugh at how this proviso makes the proposition that God hears prayer un-falsifiable.

Expecting and accepting only *gentle* guidance has its problems too. Among them is uncertainty about what God is advising. Worse, perhaps, is developing hypersensitivity to *clues* as to God's will—worse, because it leads to a kind of paranoia. After all, if everything *could* be a sign from God depending on interpretation, how do you know you are *not* hearing God's voice? God can speak through anyone: the bum on the corner, a minister, a child...even your mother-in-law. God might speak in overheard remarks as well as ones addressed to you. Or "his" message might be scattered about in the silent conversation you carry on with yourself all the time.[24] Is this not maddening? One might as well read tea leaves! And after you have acted, there is always the problem of rationalization after the fact: Wanting to preserve the rightness of your reading of God's will, and the goodness of the advice itself, you are likely to judge *whatever* followed from heeding "his" voice as having been for the best.

And finally there is this problem with gentle guidance: social unreliability. Take chance encounters. If chance encounters are actually arranged by God, then why keep the appointments one has already made? If it is God who presents new opportunities at every turn, why fulfill old commitments and contracts? Does God not "move in strange ways?" Lack of confidence that we have heard God correctly can lead us to make safe choices or risky ones, but, in either case, choices to which we are not much, or not long committed.

To skeptics and atheists the solution to all these problems is simple: "Don't believe in God." For their part, deists can say "believe in God, just don't expect guidance, direction, or advice. God is not that sort of God." Both recommend that we rely for moral direction on reason, law, virtue, utility calculation, and philosophy. Consult with the wise, they would say; talk to the ethically trained, with friends. Get educated. Get used to uncertainty.

But the theology of theopraxy is neither atheism nor deism. It is more congenial to the gentle-guidance expectation and would work to combat its attendant problems. Enter the

[24] In Book 8 of *Confessions*, Augustine tells that his conversion to Christianity and the ascetic life came during a time of emotional upheaval from hearing a boy in the courtyard of a neighboring house chanting "take and read; take and read..." He took this as instruction from God through the boy to open the Bible at random and read; and so Augustine did, and this changed his life. For the whole story, visit *www.takeandread.org*.

metaphor, and the voice of conscience is indeed God's voice, as 1 Kings 19:11–13 and 1 Samuel 3:1–10 seem to suggest. And the advice of good friends is God's voice too. But this faith is tempered with the belief that people have ultimate authority and responsibility for their choices. When God is the good *we* do, and not the good any faraway, all-knowing, all-powerful, and entreatable deity would do on our behalf, we realize that we take the guidance we want to take, and must stand prepared to learn from its outcomes. Dipping into personification again, we can say God depends on our "good sense;" that God seeks out the same reasonable, far-sighted, and benevolent people that skeptics and atheists would seek out too. God expects *us* to take the initiative, always.

The theology of theopraxy understands that God's guidance shows up as a feeling that is more often delicate than dominant. But, dominant or delicate, firm or gentle, clear or ambiguous, one is never literally in dialog with any distant powerful being. The latter is a construction that atheists concede might be forgivable—even useful—because "ordinary people" (unlike themselves) are such deeply social creatures that they find it easier to *think* in a dialogical, dramaturgical terms, and because ordinary people (unlike themselves) are so dull that they *need* their consciences to speak to them as though it were a universal, singular, and powerful entity "outside of space and time." The theology of theopraxy rejects not so much the atheist's argument as the atheist's disdain.[25] Coming halfway back to traditional faith, it says this: that the feeling of "hearing God's voice" or of being guided by signs, which is entirely delusional to the atheist, is not delusional at all. The concept of God, even in its oldest formulations, is neither a mistake nor a waste of time. The voice we hear today might not speak from the clouds and it might or might not speak in the language of the Bible, but from whatever voice or text or action we are persuaded to do good or are shown how, it is God who speaks—or rather, the idea of God that speaks. Where there is good to be done, the idea of God emerges and precipitates in us the desire to realize "him," to bring "him" into actual *being* by our actual *doing*. This, after all, is what it means to love God with all one's heart, not promises of obedience sung to the rafters.

[25] For a recent example of that disdain, see Sam Harris (2004).

BEHOLDING GOD'S PRESENCE

God acts through us and in no other way. This is a fact to which we should become accustomed. The trouble is, of course, that we can never be *sure* that the course of action we have chosen will turn out well, let alone for the best, and nor can we be sure that the "voice" we listened to was God's. As though representing us all, Moses, in frustration, cries out to the God *he* knew to show Himself in full: "Let me behold Your Presence!" (Exodus 33:18–23). And in what is one of the most electrifying passages in the Bible, God answers:

> "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim...the grace that I grant, and the compassion that I show. But...you cannot see My face... I will shield you with My hand until I have passed by, and then I will take My hand away, and *you will see My back*."[26]

I should like to attempt an exegesis of this passage through the lens of our theology.

First: what is the lesson of the above passage? Could it be that we can only *know* we have done good after the fact (i.e. after God has passed by)? That we can know that God *was here*—we can "see His back"—but not that God *is* here.[27]

Perhaps. But this cannot be the last word. After all, God is here speaking to Moses in the present tense, as God does repeatedly throughout the book of Exodus. But Moses wants more than disembodied voices, fires, columns of smoke and other signs. He wants to see God. But God refuses, showing Moses instead what God *does*: 'I will make not My figure but My *goodness* pass before you; I will show you "the grace that I grant, and the compassion that I show," My figure detected only in motion: a sudden warmth over your face, a breeze, and then My vanishing back.'[28]

And so the subscriber to theopraxy, together with the liberal-minded believer, can ask: "When you and I, in good faith, deliberate the good, who is speaking?" and answer: "*God*;"

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[26] I have here used the *Tanakh,* in the new JPS translation of the Holy Scriptures according to the traditional Hebrew Text. (1988).

[27] Cf. Lawrence Kushner (1994, pp. 94, 95).

[28] The "passing by" and "breeze" trope is similar to the one in Genesis 3:8—another occasion in which God is heard and felt but not seen. That God's invisibility could be due to his placing his hand right in front of our face(s) is different, and an interesting image. Are we blinded by hubris the very moment we even *seek* His visage? The Bible is more daringly metaphorical, not to say inconsistent in places, about the consequences of seeing God's face. Exodus 33:11, for example, reads: "And the Lord spoke to Moses *face to face*, as a man speaks to his friend."

or: "When compassion, beauty, and justice are unfolding in the events around, who is 'passing by'?" and also answer: "*God*."

There is more, of course. "No man can see My face and live!" God declares in the same passage (verse 20). The usual interpretation of this verse goes like this: to see God directly, face to face, would be so terrifying an encounter that it would kill a mere mortal! There is another interpretation however, one that is more aligned to the theology of theopraxy's "kinder, gentler" view of God. It requires that I tell a true, not-at-all-religious story, and treat it metaphorically.

It was near the end of a long day touring the architecture of France. My wife and I, with another young couple, were barreling along a tree-canopied avenue in a (very) small Fiat when suddenly, between the golden leaves and boughs whizzing by, I spied a ravishingly beautiful white chateau. "Stop," I cried, "go back. I have to photograph that building." I was sitting in the back of the little two-door and so it took minute to get out with my camera bag. I ran back along the road peering through the trees. No chateau! I clambered up on a wall and walked along it, ducking up and down. No good. All I could glimpse here and there, between the leaves, was a patch of white an indefinite distance away (was it a wall?), and then...was it a window, a roof-line? Yes, but no picture was possible here. I returned to the car defeated. I realized that the only way to see this lovely building from the road was to travel past it at around 40 m.p.h., letting the slivers of view permitted by the dense foliage reveal it over time. Stop to stare, and it would be gone.[29]

And so it is with many things, including God. God is not invisible. But God's shape—God's "*face*"—is visible only as events unfold in a certain way next to us and around us—while God and we are in relative motion, so to speak, past each other. Stop to confront God and God vanishes. Demand that "he" show himself and you will be met by the sight of the good already in the world, proceeding without you. We see God through the way the world works and as we work, not *in* the world as an entity among others. We see only God's ever-vanishing back. And feel the breeze.

[29] The perception psychologist J. J. Gibson explained how we saw a stable three-dimensional world using the highly changeable, two-dimensional images that fall on our retinas in similar the same way. We detect the invariants (cross-ratio proportions, texture gradients, optical flow accelerations, shearing edges, and so forth) *in* the flux of images, and those invariants correspond to a stable world and reveal it. Stop the flux, and we literally go blind. See J. J. Gibson (1966).

KEEPING THE GOOD NAME

Consider Zen Buddhism. Flourishing in Japan from the 12th century on, Zen (for short) goes back to 6th century China, where it was known as Ch'an, and before that, to the very beginnings of Buddhism in India.

Now, in every Zen temple or monastery to this day there sits a statue of the faintly smiling Buddha, usually made of wood, sometimes covered in gold leaf. Acolytes bow briefly to this image of the Buddha before and after sessions of meditation and on entering or leaving the building. Incense is lit at its feet. And yet Zen is renowned for its irreverence to doctrine, for how little quarter it gives to theology, much less idolatry. When asked "Who was the Buddha, really?" the Zen master Unmon famously replied: "A shit stick!" To the same question the master Tozan replied "Three pounds of flax." How is this paradox in attitude accommodated?

For a start, it reminds us that Siddhartha Gautama, who founded Buddhism around 500 BCE, aimed to reform Hinduism, which was an ancient religion already. In particular, he aimed to rid Hinduism of its transcendentalism and supernaturalism as well its support of the caste system. Buddhism was to be down to earth. It was to be socially just. Enlightenment was to be sought in right living, i.e. moral, rational everyday life, not in violence or passivity, not in hedonism or asceticism. Serenity and moderation were the virtues to be cultivated. Of course, centuries of institutionalization turned the Buddha's insights into an elaborate religion, with prescribed rituals and doctrines and more doctrines erected upon those. Much the same became of Jesus of Nazareth's attempts to return Judaism to its covenantal roots.

Zen today is not a religion, and does not claim to be. In cleaving to the original meaning of Buddhism ("Buddha" means "one who is awake"), it lays down no commandments, offers no elaborate moral code. Rather, Zen is a *way*; it is a way of doing things, all things, a way of looking at life and of being alive. By its meditation practices, its mental exercises (*koans*), and participation in artistic endeavors, Zen offers a path towards sudden *satori* or enlightenment, which does not mean escape from life, but being able to live spontaneously and freely while living within the moral frameworks provided by the environing religion. It is from those environing religions—Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism,

Shinto—that some quotient of idolatry seems to remain, and in particular statues of the Buddha.

So far so good. But we still haven't limned exactly why Zen devotees bow to it.

Truth is, no Zen devotee is devoted to Zen. This would be attachment. No Zen master feels obliged to put his hands together and bow before Buddha, but he does so anyway, and he does so without inner conflict. In general, we find masters of Zen both polite and brusque, both a bit selfish and a bit altruistic, just as you and I are...but with a difference that comes from not being agonized. They know it is as much in their nature to be ethical as it is in a bird's nature to fly. Gracefulness is the prize: spontaneous appropriateness, ungrudging respect where it is due, and a lightness of being that is perfectly aligned with life's actual transience and absurdity.

In the mind of the Zen devotee, then, the seated Buddha is no God or idol, but simply a respected inheritance from an ancient religion, and a reminder of the man, not God, Siddartha Gautama, who long ago discovered how to live free—free not from suffering, but from suffering about suffering. Like the temple itself in its design and atmosphere, one does not dwell on this fact, but rather, *in* it.

Like Zen Buddhism, the theology of theopraxy offers no detailed moral prescriptions or proscriptions of its own. It leaves these to the environing religious, philosophical, and cultural traditions, as well as to individual creativity and conscience, *insofar as they carry out the general mandate to preserve, honor, and promote life in all its forms*—insofar, one might say, as they support right living. Theopraxy entails no distinctive life-style, no manner of dress, diet, or aesthetic, except, perhaps, a tolerance for complexity and serendipity, because these qualities are the *sine-qua-non* of evolution.[30] Zen also does not require that you leave off from practicing the religion of your family or past, since it cultivates an attitude that allows one to see ritual practices as not-serious in the way they advertise themselves to be.[31]

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[30] Complexity, that is, in amounts that reflect and promote the complexity of life itself. It may seem strange to inject aesthetic/stylistic concerns here, but like it or not, styles have moral overtones, and sometimes, in execution, moral consequences. A subscriber to the theology of theopraxy would have to be tolerant to many a culture's tastes in music, art, architecture, poetry, cuisine, and so forth, and would be naturally suspicious of styles that embrace and ideologies that promote universal asceticism. The theology of theopraxy suggests we enjoy color, spontaneity, subtle orderings, reflexivity, generosity, *lux*, *calme et volupte*...these things over efficiency, distillations, self-denial, or simplicity *simpliciter*.

[31] To my mind, Alan Watts was exemplary of a Christian Zen Buddhist. See especially Watts (1974, a and b). Many American Zen practitioners and teachers today are Jewish, from Philip Kapleau (1967] to Barry Magid (2002).

The theology of theopraxy is not Zen Buddhism, of course. But it asks for the same embrace of life, including life's traditionally religious dimensions, without succumbing to unnecessarily idolatrous beliefs and without imagining that there is a rigid relation between correct ritual behavior and God's approval. In obedience to the Second Commandment, it leaves the images that fill prayerbooks and sermons in place, and behind. It leaves these picturings of God behind for the feeling of God as the good we do anywhere, any time. It leaves them behind for knowing God as an image-less *activity* rather clumsily called "good doing," the fruits of which are all around, in every bridge that stands while cars roar over, in every bell that rouses the sleepy shop owner. Although it is more difficult to form a singular picture of this God than it is form a picture of a King on high, or even of a ghostly spirit, it is not impossible, as I have tried to demonstrate.

Theopraxy begins with seeing God first *in* and then *as* the otherwise unaccountable goodness in human eyes, words, and actions, first *in* and then *as* the choosing more life for the least of creatures when one could easily do otherwise, or a course of action that benefits others at least as much as oneself. It ends with understanding that God *is* not where good is not—and that God's presence, therefore, is up to us. God is at the core of the theology of theopraxy; not God of the Bible and Qur'an, as I have said many times, but a distillation of "him" that yields us, finally and merely, God's goodness and God's name. To change this God's name from *God*, or to call God "*It*" in the attempt to avoid accusations of anthropomorphizing, or of poaching on religion, would be to break the thread of the ancient quest to know God, to find God, in human history rather than in the stars. "God" is a good name and the right name for what religious seekers are after, preserving, in the theology of theopraxy, that faint trace of idolatry that must be kept for a religion to be a religion and "God" to be God.

The theology of theopraxy, I submit, is monotheism at its least idolatrous. It is theism at the last stop in the line of abstraction that ends in God disappearing into the indifferent "Process" or "Ground of Being" from which God emerged but *in* which and *as* which God has no existence at all.

The greatest of all early-modern Jewish sages and the founder of Hasidic Judaism, was Yisrael ben Eliezer of Okop, which is in the Ukraine. By time he was thirty six, in 1734, he had become known as the *Baal Shem Tov*, which means the "keeper of the good name." It is

easy to miss the profundity of this odd-sounding appellation: "keeper of the good name." For what the Baal Shem Tov kept from semantic harm, what he exemplified by his actions and transformative stories, was the name of the good, the *good* name of the good, which is: *God*.

Hasidism is a movement focused on the joy of living the ethically good life and accepting the possibility—no, the necessity—of an intuitive personal connection to (the Biblical) God in His fullness and mystery. The Baal Shem Tov taught, of course, within the framework of the theological language available to him. Like all great sages, he used the metaphors and images of his milieu to point to deeper truths. Like all mystical teachers he was unafraid of apparent paradox, unafraid of saying "dangerous things."

Now, among the most paradoxical and dangerous things the Baal Shem Tov said was this: "the Evil is the throne for the Good."[32] I close this chapter with an attempt to understand what it could mean.

The phrase ends a passage in which the Baal Shem is lauding the real-world one-ness of God, which includes evil things too.[33] Were his an ordinary theology, we would be forced to accept that evil is in God, and God in evil, as deists, vitalists, and process theologians must. But the Baal Shem's choice of the *throne* metaphor is crucial to understanding his meaning. After all, a throne is the *place* of the king, not the king himself, who occupies it, who sits in it, and who is the emanator of justice. A throne without a king is just a big chair, or an abstract "position." The throne awaits the king, then, and becomes a throne only upon his arrival.

In the same way (and now I make the transition to the theology of theopraxy), God, who is goodness *in action*, acts most strikingly where God is most needed—which is upon the bad, the indifferent, the chaotic, the rigid, the ill, the dying, the dark. God does not act conspicuously where God's redemptive action is not needed, where everything is already all goodness, light, and life. In those places God is already place, as it were, and at work, and it takes gratitude to notice. To say God's place is "in evil" is analogous to saying a nurse's place is "in a hospital."

"The evil is a throne for the good," then, is a paradox—a dangerous saying. But its paradoxicality dissolves when we see God as—when we see that God *is*—redemptive action,

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[32] Baal Shem Tov, "Instructions in Intercourse with God," translated by Martin Buber (1958, p. 208).

[33] "The indwelling Glory embraces all worlds, all creatures, good and evil. And it is the true unity. How can it then bear in itself the opposites of Good and Evil? But in truth there is no opposite: the Evil is a throne for the Good." Ibid.

when we that God is the "transformative doing" that can happen equally and identically and completely everywhere there is good to be done and *is* done—which is to say, everywhere life can be preserved, honored, and promoted, and is. "This is the mystery of the oneness of God," the Keeper of the Good Name said also,

> that at whatever place I, an insignificant bit, lay hold of it, I lay hold of the whole. And since all teaching and all Commandments are radiations of His being, so he who fulfills any one *mitzvah* [commandment from God]... by this single mitzvah lays hold of the oneness of God, and thereby holds the whole in his hand as though he had fulfilled the entire Torah.[34]

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[34] Op cit., p. 191. My parenthesis.

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