“Acting Morally”
Transcript of interview of Michael Benedikt by Rachael Kohn on *The Spirit of Things*, ABC Radio National, Australia, August 31, 2008.[1]

(Music)

Rachael Kohn: Belief in God doesn't always solve the moral problem, for example, the Mafia famously loves its church. Piety and prayerfulness can go hand in hand with diabolical deeds. So where's the good, or the God, in that? Michael Benedikt has been reflecting on this paradox for most of his life, and although he's an architect and holds the Hal Box Chair in Urbanism at the University of Texas at Austin, he's also written an inspiring book called *God is the Good We Do*. It begins with thirteen “Declarations.” Here's the first one:

Michael Benedikt (reading): ‘Whether or Not God Exists:

‘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 first-hand. 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 good and do it. Do good again and you do God's will. Do God's will and you bring God into Being.’

Rachael Kohn: Michael, that's a wonderful declaration; it is certainly one focused on the human. I wonder whether you're sweeping aside the whole furious debate between scientists and theologians about whether God exists; or are you just re-framing it?

Michael Benedikt: Well, I think ‘re-framing’ is the better metaphor. I think both sides are wrong, because they're tussling over a bone that is purely imaginary, a projection of what *they* think the *other* thinks is true. The God that atheists are scoffing at (or scoffing about) is not the God that mature and intelligent believers believe in. Then again, neither are atheists ‘godless’ people, or wicked, or wrong. The whole battle I think, is quite adolescent. It would evaporate if they read my book (laughs).

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[1] **It can be heard at** http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/spiritofthings/acting-morally/3202410, starting at 24:45.

Rachael Kohn: Well then, is the existence of God up to us, and if that's so does that mean we're the author of God and not the other way around?

Michael Benedikt: The answer to that has to be 'yes and no.' Certainly, if you read people like Karen Armstrong or Jack Miles, you learn that 'God' changes in concept throughout the Bible, and before that time and since those times too. But I would say that God also changes in *reality*, that is to say, that God evolves. God evolves in complexity as moral life increases in complexity. One might think of, let's say, the transition between (and this is an analogy, of course) noughts-and-crosses (tic-tac-toe), drafts (checkers in the US) and chess. I think God 'himself' actually evolves with us. We start (say) with Ra and we go to Yahweh; we have a God of judgment and war, we have gods that bring rain and fructitude, and eventually we have God that simply listens to our prayer, who wants gentleness and gratitude. We go from Isaiah and justice to Jesus and love. I think that 'God' is actually a very involving idea, and evolving concept, that has consequences in the world, and in that sense, is real. The idea of God and the reality of God, in turn 'author' *us*, who we are and what we are likely to do. It's a back-and-forth, kind of chicken-and-egg, relationship.

Rachael Kohn: Well, if God is manifest in the good deed, then you're upsetting another sort of typical belief, which is that God is the author of good, and humans are the source of evil. You're actually saying that it is humans who author good, as well as God.

Michael Benedikt: Absolutely. And that view, maybe, talks to my own Jewish heritage. I would not say that God is manifest *in* the good deed; I would say that God is manifest *as* the good deed. That's what it means to say that God is entirely good. Humans are the source of good *and* evil. In fact we're pretty much the *only* source of good *and* evil (although some think animals are too, and that nature produces good or evil. I don't agree). In that sense, people are the 'authors' of God…when they do good and *not* evil. As I say in the book, God is 'in our hands,' meaning that whether God exists in that moment is entirely up to us. But note, this heretical statement can also be turned around, since humans would not be human if we didn't evolve a moral sense: we would at best be animals. So it took God—it takes God in the operative sense, in instances, memory, and principle—to bring humanity out of animality and out of barbarism into the light of justice, and understanding, and wisdom, and beauty, and truth, and compassion... God is as contingent upon us as we, in our humanity, are upon 'him.' This lifting up, this emergence of God from the matrix of a thoughtless and automatic life, is an incomplete and ongoing process; and it goes on to this very day.

Rachael Kohn: Well I think it's time we defined what you mean by 'the good,' because that's certainly contentious. If one looks at religious traditions as they are lived out today, one could see some variations between what is considered good.

Michael Benedikt: That's true, and as I wrote the book, I realised it's no good (meaning, it's ineffective) to say 'God is the good we do,' unless you have an idea of the good that doesn't simply go back and say: 'Yes, well, good is whatever God says is good,' because that's circular reasoning, meaning that 'good' and 'God' sort of bounce back and forth uselessly from one to the other. So one wants to look for a definition of good in which God (and therefore everything associated with 'God', like creatorship and power) is *not* brought in. In the book I try to define good like this.

'Good,' I say (or rather, I write), is what we call all free human actions that preserve, honour, or promote all forms of instances of life. This is a 'life' definition of good. Now, in the book I follow that with several qualifications and provisos, which probably this isn't the time to get into. But just to cut a long story short, I define good in terms of *increase of life*—increase in quantity and quality, neither at sacrifice to the other. And as I look through moral philosophy and religious philosophy, I find that this 'life principle' is probably the guiding one behind, really, all morality (if not esthetics too).

Rachael Kohn: Are we also to assume that God is absent, totally, in the absence of good deeds? And if that's the case, then of course God is not this omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient sort of being.

Michael Benedikt: Yes, I think that's exactly right. Where there's no good happening, there is no God. God is the good we do, *as* we do it, *when* we do it, and *where* we do it. And because God (i.e. good-doing) inspires more good-doing, we can say that God in fact *causes* good—if not directly or mechanically then by ('his') example, which requires memory.

God is potentially everywhere good can possibly be done, which is not everywhere. I don't think God exists on the moon for example, I don't think he exists on the sun or in outer space, but 'he' does exist here and now in this room because we're alive and because we're conscious and because we're free, because we have memory, and are educable.

Rachael Kohn: Well that certainly puts paid to the idea of God in the cosmos, which has been a very popular view, certainly since the 19th century. I think you'd call that Deism.

Michael Benedikt: Yes, it is. Under the influence of science and the Enlightenment, theism—belief in a God who understands and cares for people, and who you can pray to, and so forth—became deism, which is the idea that God created the universe perfect and left the scene. It's the answer we hear from God in Job, which is: the universe is of such fabulous design and beauty and size, all credit due to God, that Job should keep his peace. Deism itself, I think, began to suffer under the theory of evolution, because with evolution, things with simple beginnings can end up in massively complex phenomena, like life itself. And so I think even deism today is shortly to expire. I think we have to adopt a concept of God that does not involve *ex nihilo* creation, but rather cosmic evolution.

Rachael Kohn: Well I think your view certainly explains the presence of evil, because it squarely puts it in the hands of man, things like Auschwitz or Pol Pot's killing fields etc. But doesn't it also result in a weak God?

Michael Benedikt: It does result in the notion of a weak God, and I think we simply need to sort of reassess what we mean by 'weak,' because obviously 'weak' is a value-loaded term: 'strong' is good and 'weak' is bad. But there are many virtues, and many things, which are weak that we value a greatly: children, flames, breezes, gravity as a force (compared to others). I think we can understand God as a weak force, or tender too.

In the book I discuss the image of the child Jesus, which is an image of God as innocent, of God as something (or someone) to be cherished and not feared. Certainly my idea is that God is not the God of thunder and lightning, an entity that can hurl planets around and explode stars at will, and who seems rather male. But I do think God could be thought of as being as gentle as a breeze, as easy to wave away as a balloon, but persistent, and gently insistent like the force of gravity—or something, as I said, like a flame that can be put out, but if you put it out, it just ignites again a few feet away. I'm very impressed by God's persistence and by 'his' insistence. in a way, on existing. That brings out in me—and I hope in the people who read the book—a feeling that God is to be valued and cherished precisely for that 'weakness,' and not feared.

Rachael Kohn: There are so many beautiful analogies and certainly God as the flame is a wonderful analogy, because it seems to be saying that God is always there in potential; flames can be lit all around the world at any time, out of almost nothing. Of course the idea of God in nature (I mean, you've used the analogy of 'flame' or 'breeze' or 'dewdrop') has often prompted people to contemplate God in nature, but you seem to be saying that that isn't enough, you have to actively *prove* your faith. God only exists if you actively do the deed, rather than simply meditate or reflect on God.

Michael Benedikt: Correct. I have no problem finding inspiration in nature and finding beauty in nature. But it is a distinctly different thing to say 'I find beauty in nature' and 'I find beauty in nature because God put it there for me to find.' I think, rather, that we are the ones who reach out to nature to find ways to express our intuitions in this way; so whether it's a dewdrop or flame, or the soft breeze that blew through Eden in the cool of the evening—the breeze that spoke to Adam…these are things that we can be sensitive to, but it is us, it is we, who can find in these images ways to express another idea of God.

So, do actions prove our faith? Yes, actions prove our faith more than talking about them endlessly or about God (although it is good to talk about God now and then, right? Otherwise we wouldn't be doing it now). But if 'proving' means I prove by my actions that I have conventional faith, I don't know. But if 'proving' means *im*proving or strengthening—changing the world through action—I think yes, but that's a different sense of 'proof.'

Rachael Kohn: Improving, yes.

Michael Benedikt: When you prove iron, or proof iron, you take a hot iron and you put it in cold water, and it strengthens the iron. There's something about that as an *activity* that I think of as the sense in which good action 'proves' (the existence of) God, yes.

Rachael Kohn: I think the architect in you is coming through there.

Michael Benedikt: Totally.

Rachael Kohn: In fact, it's very interesting that a practising architect would write a book such as this on 'theopraxy,' as you've called it. I must say I think you have to get a better word for it; it sounds like that glue, epoxy.

Michael Benedikt (laughs): If you come up with a better name, do let me know.

Rachael Kohn: Well how did you go from being an architect to writing such a profound and intense book, and also very practical book I must say, which probably says something about your profession.

Michael Benedikt: Well as I say in the preface to the book, I am the child of two Holocaust survivors, so for me the 'problem of evil'—which is about wondering where God is when things are going very, very badly for innocents—was a problem that I had to think about philosophically as well as emotionally at

a very young age. So religious questions and religion's problems were part of my constitution even as I went through a scientific education and became the great lover of science I still am. It's reconciling these two in my maturity that led me to write this book.

As for the profession of architecture, you know, architecture puts you in a sort of an existential position where you really have to, it seems, create something out of nothing. You have some ideas whirling around in your head, you have some needs that need to be satisfied in the world, and somehow, from somewhere, you start to produce something, a building, which you will leave behind, and which will promote life from then on. But I don't think that's something that only architects do. I very quickly realised that there's a creative core to every profession; there's a creative core to every job. It's covered over by habit, and it's covered over by neglect, but the truth is, if you look carefully at anything that you do, there is a small creative engine in it that it is in your power to turn to good or to evil. And I think that's where God resides: in the constant choosing of the good when it is quite possible, even attractive, not to.

Rachael Kohn: He's the author of *God is the Good We Do*, Michael Benedikt, an Australian who's lived in Texas so long I can hear a twang in his voice. He's speaking to me from Austin.

What is the relationship between doing good deeds and obeying religious commands? Michael, I'd like you to comment on the biblical account of Abraham, the father, being ordered or commanded to sacrifice his son Isaac. How would you interpret that?

Michael Benedikt: Great, great, great question, and we could go on for a long time about that. A commandment is something that you obey. The word 'obey' suggests resistance, that is, this is something you would not otherwise do unless you were obeying . Let's think about children. You do have to make children obey you. They have to follow orders because they have tendencies to do things that they ought not to do, and vice versa. So I'm very respectful of commandments. But we also know that once commandments become *internalised*, we start doing them freely, naturally. Now when you start to do them freely, they no longer feel like commandments, they just feel like good sense, common sense, like the way things are and the way things should be. That's what one hopes for anyway: that the Ten Commandments in fact become second nature, if you will. And I think that's a sense in which one wants commandments in the first place. Maybe that's a bit optimistic, but I think it's possible to reach that stage.

You asked about Abraham. It's a large and important question having to do with commandments. As you know, the 'Akedah,' or near-sacrifice of Isaac, is a topic of immense importance for people like Kierkegaard and Levinas. I suspect just about every religious philosopher has to discuss this—cross this territory—but here's my summary of it, for what it's worth.

First, we have to know that sacrificing first-born sons was not uncommon in Canaanite religious practice. I don't think it was *common* either. I imagine it was reserved for very big favours from God, relief from extremely dire circumstances, like a 10-year drought, or something. But what's interesting is that in the Genesis account, Abraham is asked to sacrifice Isaac pretty much out of the blue. 'Just do it', says God, 'because I say so.' So Abraham is obedient, so obedient that the faithful today can feel nothing but respect, awe, for Abraham's faithfulness. But atheists of course are kind of delighted in a cruel way, because it supports the notion of how ridiculous it is to listen to voices.

Now, that's more or less where the debate stops: at Abraham's obedience on the one hand, and how stupid (or mad) it is to take voices seriously that say, 'Go, kill your son.' The point of the Biblical story, though, is that Abraham does *not* sacrifice Isaac. And the real question is: why? Tradition says that God (an angel) steps in at the last moment, and stays his hand. I'm going to say it's because his conscience clicked in. His *not* going through with the sacrifice was a unilateral break from tradition, and that was a step in the evolution of God. This was a God who would *not* be, or do, or ask for, senseless cruelty. God was in Abraham's hands that day. And it was by his compassion and rebellion, not by his obedience, that Abraham brought a new God into being.

In other words, I believe that moral progress *is* theological progress, if that makes sense.

Rachael Kohn: Just looking at another religious injunction—and we go to the Christian tradition now—because the Christian tradition has always been suspicious of obedience to the law. Of course one of the most famous Christian injunctions is, 'Love the sinner, hate the sin'. How would you interpret that injunction?

Michael Benedikt: I find that there's a great deal of wisdom in that, because to 'love the sinner' is to say one must love the *person*, because people are the source of good. And sometimes the source of evil, to be sure; but staying positive, people are the source of good. One must cultivate and love people because they are where good will issue from. So 'hate the sin.' Sin is an action, not a person, so to hate the sin, or to try to prevent the sin, or to correct the sin, it seems to me, is perfectly consonant with what I'm trying to say. God is an activity. We want to

encourage Godly activity, and a good way to do that, because human nature is what it is, is to 'love the sinner, hate the sin.'

Rachael Kohn: I can imagine that the desire to demonstrate God in your life through doing good deeds could become a rather competitive sort of thing. It might even lead to ostentatious acts that would prove publicly that you are constantly bringing God into your life, and into the world. How does this fit with Christian notions of grace? Christians who hold to the theology of grace would be very sceptical of a theology of theopraxy, that is, proving God's presence by acts, by good deeds.

Michael Benedikt: I hear you. Well, first I'd want to say: you know, it may be that a *little bit* of competitiveness and ostentation about doing good is not such a bad thing. But I agree, it can be damn annoying to be around a compulsive do-gooder, one who always wants recognition and reward and so on and so forth, especially *sanctimonious* do-gooders that make you feel guilty you're not doing as much. I mean (and I forget who said this very wise thing), 'The self-righteous see the worst in others and bring out the worst in others, but the righteous see the best in others, and bring out the best in others.' It's the self-righteousness that's annoying, not to good-doing itself. The doctrine of grace says that how things turn out—whether we're an agent or a beneficiary of God's favours—is entirely up to God, who acts as and when 'He' sees fit, and who owes us no explanations. I think this doctrine fine for generating acceptance where it's necessary and humility where that's necessary. But it might just as well generate acceptance when *action* is necessary or would be better. As the saying also goes: 'God helps those who help themselves.' That has problems of its own, of course. Better it is to say, then, that 'God helps those who helps others as well as themselves.' Believe this and I think the danger of do-gooders being annoying is a risk well worth taking.

Rachael Kohn: Well what about the intention to act to do good. Is the intention very important in theopraxy?

Michael Benedikt: Intention is important in the same sense that looking where you're going is important. Or aiming an arrow is important. Because without intentions you're blind, or you're a puppet. Also, if you examine your intentions—just knowing that you have intentions—highlights how free you are to select among different intentions, and different ways to carry out your intentions, and what the consequences might be. But I think that it is ultimately the carrying out, the doing, that is the substance of God, if the action is good.

Think of Jacob. Jacob wrestles with the an angel all night. Who hasn't wrestled with God in this sense? Who hasn't tossed and turned all night about what the

right thing to do is? You wake up early, exhausted, feeling beaten up, your dreams vanish in white smoke, but now you're certain what to do. If the problem solved is big enough, you might even feel like changing your name, as Jacob renamed himself Israel (which means 'struggles with God'). I believe he struggled with God. We've all done that. The rabbis said 'Having good intentions and doing good actions together is the best situation bar none.' Who would argue with that? We have good intentions and you do good. Bad intentions, followed by bad actions? You can't do worse. But if the choice is between good intentions and bad actions, on the one hand, and bad intentions and good actions on the other, you should choose the second. That's more Jewish; it's certainly more Confucian, and I think it might even be more Islamic, I'm not sure. But many Christians would advocate the other, that good intentions are more important than good actions, and I simply just cant agree.

Rachael Kohn: Well at least the good action would benefit someone else, hopefully.

Michael Benedikt: And the person.

Rachael Kohn: What about the person who really hasn't done much good in their life, and then dies. What does one say about them at their funeral? Have they lived without God? Has God been absent from their life?

Michael Benedikt: I think there are very, very few people who have done no good in their lives. Wouldn't you agree? Even if it was outweighed by the bad. So if this is a graveside scenario for the sake of family, I would try to remember the good and overlook the bad, and if that makes for a short ceremony, well that's the truth of it. But I think that's common wisdom.

It's true that theopraxy doesn't offer traditional life after death consolation. But it does want to emphasise how the good that we do while alive continues to do good after we're gone. So maybe that's what I'd be looking for. You know: the business we built, the students we taught, the children and wives or husbands we were good to; our inventions, writings, stories, jokes… The good we do lives on in memories and in things, the bits of the world we improve, the stuff we put right, things that still work like wells drawing water in the desert long after people who have planned them and dug them have gone. I mean: we should look around and consider how much of our lives depend on the good others have done, back through the generations, and be grateful. We stand, each one of us, on the mountain of goodness that is life, language, art, and law, deposited over hundreds of thousands of years. God was then, God is now, and God will be in the future, I think, as long as good continues to be done.

Rachael Kohn: Michael, there are a lot of wise words there, and I think your directing to us to be good-conscious rather than simply God-conscious is a very salutary one, not only for us but for others. I thank you so much for speaking to me today on *The Spirit of Things*.

Michael Benedikt: Thank you Rachael. I would only want to add that to be good-conscious *is* to be God-conscious. I don't think you need to look for God anywhere further than the people smiling around you now, one of whom I'm sure has just made some coffee.

Rachael Kohn: I wish! Thank you so much. Would you like to read one other of your Declarations?

Michael Benedikt: I will, thank you. You know Declarations 13. It is called 'Whether or Not God Exists (Continued).' Do you mind if I read that?

Rachael Kohn: That would be lovely.

Michael Benedikt (reading): 'Whether or not God exists is entirely up to you. God cannot forsake you, only you can forsake God, for without you, God is nothing where you are. Do not wait for miracles then, but put yourself to redeeming the world. Do not wait for God's grace to descend upon you, but give your grace to others. Love life, all life, putting your own neither first nor last. Do not drop what is precious in your hands, tell your children that they matter to you, that they matter to others, that they matter to every living thing that feels their touch. Teach them how they have a sacred and ancient mission to turn sun and rain into seed and flower, to turn foe into friend, and harm into harmlessness. Tell them to seek and spread knowledge, to delight in new complexity and to make or find order in that complexity without reducing it. Teach them to forebear small injuries and not to seek revenge. Teach them to prefer injustice over death, and justice over injustice, but goodness for no reason above justice and above all. Teach them that God is not the oldest and strongest force in the universe, but the youngest and weakest one. Not a storm, but a breeze, not expended in might but persistent in direction; not anywhere on a throne but everywhere in choice. Send them to read all things about God, that they may hear God's praises in every land and love "him." But bid them remember this: that in the end, God is the good they do; God is in *their* hands too.'

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Rachael Kohn: Well I hope that changes your meaning of 'the good life'. It's not about bigger TVs at all. (Although they help!) Michael Benedikt is the author of *God is the Good We Do*, but his day job is being the Director of the Center for American Design and Architecture at the University of Texas, in Austin, where is also holds the Hal Box Chair in Urbanism. Details of both my guests, Clive Hamilton and Michael Benedikt and their books, will be on our website. Sound engineering this week was by Anne Marie Debettencourt and production by me and Geoff Wood. Next week, it's the beginning of Ramadan, when Muslims commence their month-long day fast which nonetheless includes some special meals in the evening. We'll hear all about in the Year of Festivals, next Sunday on *The Spirit of Things*, with me, Rachael Kohn.

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Track: The Good Life
Artist: Tony Bennett
Album: Tony Bennett: 16 Most Requested Songs
Composer: Reardon/ Distel
Description CD details: Columbia CGK 40215
Track: The Good Life
Artist: Sarah Vaughan
Album: Sarah Vaughan: The Divine
Composer: Reardon/ Distel
DescriptionCD details: Roulette VG 651
TrackThe Good Life
ArtistBetty Carter
AlbumBetty Carter's Finest Hour
Composer: Reardon/ Distel
DescriptionCD details: Verve 589 778 2