

GOD
IS THE GOOD
WE DO

Theology of Theopraxy

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Preface

THE BOOK in your hands is a statement and exploration of a certain kind of belief in God. We can experience God, it says, and we can think of God, not as something or someone remote, nor as the Creator of the universe, nor as a spirit or principle behind everything, but as something—“someone”—we bring to life when and as we do good. Hence the term “theopraxy” in the title.¹

Theopraxy is ancient beyond telling. It goes on today perhaps more than ever. But the *theology* of theopraxy—which is to say, the intellectual consideration of how God could be conceived in this way, and perhaps should—is new. In it you will find ideas both bothersome and appealing, this whether you are presently an atheist or a believer. But the theology of theopraxy is new in ways that prove to be old, or at least implicit, in all religions and moral philosophies when and as they succeed in preserving, honoring, and promoting all life—which is to say, when and as they help us do good.

WHO AM I to write such a book?

I am a university professor and an architect, Jewish by birth and enculturation, but not very observant.

I am also the only child of parents who struggled with faith ever since their liberation from Nazi concentration camps in 1945. They rarely attended synagogue after that. When they did, the words would choke in their throats and the songs would reduce them to tears. How could anyone worship the God who permitted the Holocaust, who wiped out their families, who allows the suffering of millions of innocents around the world to continue? Neither my mother nor my father could answer this question.

In fact, no one has satisfactorily answered this question within the framework of biblical faith. As theologians acknowledge, the “problem of evil” has been the greatest single challenge to belief in God for a very long time.

What you will read in these pages represents the result of many years of reading and reflection on the problem of evil. It is also a meditation on the question of who or what God actually is. For *this* question is founda-

¹ “Theo” is from the Greek, *theos*, meaning “god,” and *praxis* from *prattein*, meaning “do.”

tional to how the problem of evil must be solved—solved not just as an intellectual puzzle having to do with the attributes of the deity, but as a matter of some urgency in a world increasingly torn by religious differences.

If, then, you think that theology should be engaged in only by people who have graduated from a seminary, yeshiva, madrasah, divinity school or religious studies department, you should set this book aside. If you think that theology should be engaged in only by committed practitioners of one of the great religions, or if you are convinced that the referent of the word “God” is beyond human comprehension and ought to remain that way, you should set this book aside too.

THE STUDY and teaching of architecture undoubtedly influenced my thinking about theological matters. Indeed, theological questions were part of the reason for my going into architecture in the first place. How so? In retrospect, I can say.

Remember the poet William Blake’s portrayal of God as the Architect of the Universe? The God-as-Architect metaphor informed both 18th and 19th century *deism*. It also influenced Freemasonry, an ethico-religious movement with roots in the cathedral-building craft guilds. Here, anyway, was a vision of God as designer/builder rather than all-seeing father, judge, or governor. Here was God as an entity of vast intelligence, a designer and creator *par excellence*, that (or who) left humankind free to explore the beauty of his creation and the secrets of his perfect laws without interference or control. The natural world was a marvel. “Sin” was error, and entirely human.

For a barmitzvahed young man of scientific and creative bent, and one ready to question received wisdom, the hands-off God of deism was attractive. For someone untroubled by the problem of evil (which is not as sharp for deism as it is for theism) and overly impressed by the stars, the God of deism remains a tempting choice: God can be “space;” God can be “Being” or “Process” or “Order...” But as I will argue in this book, deism (it takes various forms) is not the best choice.

For converse to Blake’s God as Architect analogy, I came to think, and more challenging, is the “architect in the image of God” analogy, the ideal of *imitatio dei*. Architects, after all, are first and foremost creative designers. A few architects with unwarranted hubris, but most with requisite humility, see themselves working to make the earth a better home for humankind. Designing for people’s happiness, but not specifying what people should do—indeed, without the power to do so—the best architects go further, striving to construct places of such surpassing beauty that belief in

the possibility of heaven-on-earth, of paradise, would be justified.

But more important, I quickly saw, was that the analogy also throws light on the processes of creativity, action, and judgment in *all* walks of life. *Imitatio dei*—to emulate God, to walk in his ways²—is everyone’s option and obligation: doctors, executives, artists, editors, clerks, farmers. We can all ask: what does it mean to *create*, to *design*, to *decide*, or simply to *do*? What does it mean to configure things and events well? What is the role of will? What does it mean to act for the benefit of others in ways they might not be able to understand?

In architecture, certainly, designing takes time. Complexity abounds and more complexity develops. Solutions are tried and put aside in quick succession. Luck enters everywhere. Order must be found. From the outside, the process looks a lot like evolution speeded up. From the inside, however, the process of design has a distinct *feel* to it, produced from the sum of four moments: One moment is the *coming-to-mind* of a certain course of action, standing out from the chaos of half-formed possible ones. The second moment is that of *commitment* to that action, usually in the face of uncertainty—on faith, one might say. The third is *judging* that what one has done is *good*. And the fourth moment is the coupled experience of *gladness* and *rest*—as though the seventh day of Creation had repeated itself in this minor act of creation.

I think all creative people experience this cycle: chefs, artists, writers, scientists, craftsmen, florists, event organizers, teachers...the list, in fact, is long, because there is hardly a job or social role that does not have at its core a creative kernel, covered over as it might be by habit and neglect.

NOW, SOME might say that only *beauty* guides the human creative process. Certainly, the pursuit of beauty (and sometimes sublimity) captivates most artists and architects completely. For some scientists, most deists, and all theists, it is nature’s unfathomably complex beauty after all (and sometimes its sublimity) that underwrites the conviction that there must have been a Creator.

But now I know what, as a youth, I had only suspected: that there is also such a thing as *moral creativity*, by which I mean the creation of new ways of being, new applications of goodness, new life-affirming narratives and laws, and new freedoms and obligations to act, forged out of, and discovered in, the matrix of complexifying social and ecological realities. There exists, I came to see, not only scientific and artistic creative

² In Judaism one speaks of the commandment *Ve-halakhta bi-derakhav*, “You shall walk in His ways.” Confucian ethics urges us to follow the Way(s) of Heaven.

genius, but *moral* creative genius. The great religions and moral philosophies were sparked and fueled by the words and deeds of such geniuses, to be sure, but significant moral talent and genius can be found all around us: among the people we work with, among the members of our family. Many otherwise-ordinary individuals—people who might not be able to whistle a tune, draw a straight line, or dance a graceful step—consistently find creative solutions to moral dilemmas, regularly devise activities that heal and satisfy and inspire, sometimes invent new and fitting interpretations of law, but habitually step forward into uncertainty, themselves, simply out of the desire to be on the side of good, or, as they might put it, on the side of God.

This seemed to me to be miracle enough. If there is a God, “he” is manifest in such people and as such actions. If there is a God, “he” did not cause the Holocaust but caused families to hide Jews from the Nazis. God does not cause famine or genocide, but induces doctors and nurses to join *Médecins Sans Frontières* and others to provide it with funds. God does not evict, sicken, kill, or impoverish, but “commands” us to house the homeless, heal the sick, comfort the bereaved, share with the poor.

Why? For life. God comes out of life and turns to life. God turns to life, as it were, to act in it and on it through you and me, preserving, honoring, and promoting almost all of life’s forms and instances, which is the very definition of goodness.³ I came to realize that it matters less *why* good is done and more *that* it is. We must see God, when we see God as agentic, as an uplifting force only, and abandon most if not all of God’s other purported attributes. God is only where God is, not everywhere. God is only what God is, not everything. And God is only good, not bad. I see these as the true meaning of *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*, “I AM that which I AM” (Exodus 3:14).

If God acts only through us, it follows that there is a sense in which we are responsible not only *to* God but *for* God, or at least God’s continuance, by our actions.⁴ Take this to heart and a great deal changes. One weight is lifted and another is taken on—a weight that does not bend our backs but gives joy to life and purchase to our step. The first is the weight of our anger and puzzlement at evil, alternating with the weight of resignation. The second is the weight of our freedom and responsibility—that redoubtable duo—but now with something more precious in the balance than our acceptability to others; namely, the actuality of God.

³ For why I say “almost all forms and instances of life,” see EXPLANATIONS 6.

⁴ “I am called according to My actions” says God in the Midrash on Exodus 3:14 (*Shemot Rabbah* 3).

Allowing some personification, one sees that *our present freedom is a gift from God; but our earlier freedom was prerequisite to God’s very existence.* The same is true of moral responsibility. This is the two-phased cycle by which goodness increases and God’s kingdom comes...

But let me not go so far so soon. I hope only to have explained how an architect—how this architect—came to write about God.

The stakes are high, and go beyond architecture, of course. “True religion”—religion based on deed rather than creed, as the epistle writer James wanted it—should be a boon to life and not a cause for strife. As we consider what true religion might mean for our day, let us look at what contribution the theology of theopraxy might make, a theology that has no intention of removing us from our religious traditions, that in fact advocates their embrace with a renewed understanding of what we are actually doing when we do good on account of their urging, which is to bring God to life in both senses of the phrase.

AS YOU have no doubt noticed, this book dares to say who or what God is and who or what God is not. It makes its points confidently, and it does so in fairly plain English. It would be unfortunate to conclude from this, however, that the author is guilty of hubris or dogmatism. It’s a matter of my preferring vulnerable directness to defensible hedging. The truth is that no one can say who or what God is with absolute certainty, and that includes me. One can argue for the beauty, consistency, pedigree, timeliness, and validity of one’s point of view. One can try to persuade others of its rewards. One can even try to exemplify with one’s deeds what one means. But in the end, readers must decide for themselves whether the narratives and arguments offered make sense, whether a useful difference exists, for them, between God-as-experienced and God-as-theorized to exist independent of experience—be it theirs or anyone else’s.

Certainly, *God Is the Good We Do* reflects my experience of God *as* the good we do, not after a single revelation with the mark of truth stamped upon it—no burning bush for me—but rather after several, shall we say, less impressive revelations, and after considerable reflection on the problems of conventional faith. It was these reflections that emboldened me to convert the modest *as* of reported experience into the *is* of an ontological claim, to offer a theology rather than a testament. Perhaps my thoughts will resonate with yours. Perhaps not. I write about God, anyway, not as One Who Knows, but as an all-too-human advocate for my view’s reasonableness in this day. God and humanity, I am convinced, are both works-in-progress, co-creating each other, co-evolving. Neither will have the final word.

THE BOOK as a whole is divided into four smaller “Books,” entitled DECLARATIONS, EXPLANATIONS, ARGUMENTS, and REFLECTIONS. Each is comprised of around twenty short chapters. They can be read in any order once one gets the idea, but they are best read in sequence. This is because many follow each other in theme, or pick up from a question posed in the previous chapter. DECLARATIONS, as the name suggests, offers the tenets of the theology of theopraxy in aphoristic, poetic form. EXPLANATIONS starts at the Beginning, as it were, and makes the case again with a measure of scholarship in support. ARGUMENTS takes up a debate with a selection of theologians, scientists, and philosophers—ones that I think are wrong, ones that I think are right. Many of their names will be familiar. It is in ARGUMENTS that the problem of evil is mainly tackled.

Finally, REFLECTIONS, as its name suggests, goes back and offers deepenings of earlier passages. It recalls further writers on the topic—precursors, if you will. It touches on more subtle considerations and it looks toward the future: How viable, practically speaking, is “the theology of theopraxy”? What would it mean to subscribe to it? For whom is it intellectually suited? The answer to this last question is one I should offer now. It is: “Not everyone.”

A NOTE about gendered language. It’s easy to replace older usages such as “Man” or “mankind” with “human beings” or “humankind.” It’s not hard to write “men and women” instead of “men,” and “he or she” instead of “he.” It is harder, however, to de-gender “God,” who for thousands of years has been conceived of as male and written about using “He,” “His,” and “Himself” (Then there is God’s *Kingdom*, God the *Father*, and so on.) Perhaps insensitive to the bias it perpetuated, perhaps feeling helpless to change it, even secular philosophers who have had occasion to mention God adopted the usage. The result is that today, in the laudable attempt to remove gender from the concept of God, it still sounds distinctly odd to refer to God as “He-or-She,” or, worse, as “It,” which conjures images of a machine or alien life-form, while the term “Godself” positively hurts.

Since I believe that God is neither male nor female, in this book I have adopted the following policy: When quoting respected sources that use gendered pronouns and analogies, I leave things be. (Sometimes this involves capitalizing the “h,” as in “He” and “His.”) When representing traditional theologies as they would represent themselves, I also write he, him, and his, without quotation marks. When describing these same theologies at a critical distance, however, I write “he,” “him,” “his,” i.e. with quotation marks. Lastly, when presenting or elucidating the theology of

theopraxy in its *own* terms, I try to avoid using personal pronouns in third-person reference to God altogether.

Note that the object of this policy is not to avoid the *personification* of God. I am open to a degree of personification for reasons I discuss in the book. The object is to avoid imputing maleness or femaleness to God in any exclusive or literal way.

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I thank my daughter, Claire, for offering her affectionate skepticism and many helpful comments. I thank especially my wife, Amélie Frost Benedikt—love of my life, philosopher and friend, editor and debate-partner—for helping me refine my ideas and the language in which they are expressed.

For putting the question of God in front of me long ago, however, I must thank my parents, Dinah and Oscar David. I dedicate this book to them.

—Michael Benedikt, *Austin*, 2007

Michael Benedikt's book *God is the Good We Do* is a profound attempt to develop a new God language with which to define the human experience. He takes God out of the sky of theological debate and places this God in the depths of life. He empowers self-conscious human beings to embrace the power they have to bring God into human awareness....Â -Mitchell Silver, review in *Jewish Currents*, April/May 2008. *God is the Good We Do* is a passionate and profound rethinking of the meaning of the divine in human life. Its central argument for theopraxy develops biblical, Jewish, Christian, and modern perspectives on God in original and often surprising new directions. "You are good, and do good" (Psalm 119:68). "Good" is the consistent scriptural description of the nature and actions of God. In the Bible's earliest revelation about God and His creative acts, the word "good" is used repeatedly. God described as "good" the things He made on the various days of creation, and the overall work of creation was summarized as "every good" (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). According to the Bible, God is good. What is the definition, and the standard, of "good"? But what does that mean exactly?Â But how does the Bible define goodness? In what sense of the word "good" is God "good" according to the testimony of the Bible? If we are to understand God and the goodness of God, it is important that we study what the Bible teaches about this question.

God calls you to a purposeâ€”to do good worksâ€”â€œtailor-madeâ€ just for you. And He gifts you with all you need to accomplish that purpose. 3. Follow The Will Of God.Â Many are the plans in a personâ€™s heart, but it is the Lordâ€™s purpose that prevails. (Proverbs 19:21). God has better plans for us than we can imagine and he does things, which we may not be able to understand but trust in his will. Through scripture, there are several ways we can live a purpose driven life. For all that is in the worldâ€”the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessionsâ€”is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:16-17). Michael Benedikt s book *God is the Good We Do* is a profound attempt to develop a new God language with which to define the human experience. He takes God out of the sky of theological debate and places this God in the depths of life. He empowers self-conscious human beings to embrace the power they have to bring God into human awareness....Â -Mitchell Silver, review in *Jewish Currents*, April/May 2008. *God is the Good We Do* is a passionate and profound rethinking of the meaning of the divine in human life. Its central argument for theopraxy develops biblical, Jewish, Christian, and modern perspectives on God in original and often surprising new directions. How do we reconcile a good God with our current suffering, the violence of the Old Testament, or even with the brutality of the cross? And what benefit is there in â€œdoing goodâ€? What Does it Mean to Be â€œGoodâ€? Dictionaries define good as â€œhealthyâ€ or â€œnot badâ€ or someone who is â€œnice;â€ that is, a person who gives money to the poor or helps elderly people cross the street. A good person is â€œan honest, helpful, or morally good person.â€ Only God can be good. In Matthew 19:17, Jesus says, â€œWhy do you ask me about what is good?â€ and answers His own question thus: â€œThere is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.â€ Jesus is the answer to Micah 6. He healed and comforted without regard for race, gender, social status, or wealth.