

12 : How religions go bad (2)

Making absolute truth claims, continued. We still need to consider whether belief in the truth of such maxims as “God is the good we do” or “God is in our hands” could some day cause harm beyond provoking intellectual disagreement.

Well, first consider this: an avid subscriber to the theology of theopraxy would have to be an existentialist and a romantic, a believer and a skeptic, a traditionalist and a revolutionary, all at once. This is a complex position to hold, to say the least, but it has the following advantage: any tendency to extremism with regard to one of its components would be counteracted by a commitment to another component, likely its opposite. Our theology is self-moderating (some would say: conflicted). Moreover, the complexity of thought involved does not lend itself to easy imitation and thus to rapid propagation in the general population.

So far so good (and bad): the theology of theopraxy is for smart people.

Alas, overly-facile renditions of it could emerge nonetheless, renditions of it that might encourage extremism in certain people. And this would be unfortunate. Consider the following two scenarios, the first mostly an irritation, the second potentially more dangerous.

Do-goodism. The thought that one is *doing* God when one is doing good can be quite heady. Dizzy with the importance of their every action, some people could become annoying to live around: meddlesome, self-righteous, overly earnest and critical. We call them “do-gooders” already: people who *insist* on doing what they think is the higher good at every turn despite other possibilities and judgments. For example, friends and family members who refuse to ask for the help they need because that they “don’t want to be a burden” or think you should offer them help “more genuinely”; people who never park over a yellow line because it would be *wrong*; people who *like* running about in constant service to others, “innocently” spreading indebtedness. And so on.

This is not to say that all do-gooders are responding to religious impulses. There are other reasons for behaving in this obsessively law-abiding, holier-than-thou way. But insistent do-goodism has at least this saving grace: it is self-limiting. For as soon as the insistence itself is understood as blocking or undoing the good intended—it stops in embarrassment. The mission might continue, but another way is sought. “Live and let live” becomes the more credible motto, at least until the next reminder.

Add social authority to do-goodism, however, and one has paternalism of the most irksome sort, i.e., permanent, and with *prima facie* impeccably moral intentions or the law on its side. And this can slide into:

Hubris, which is such arrogant, violent pride in one's own moral and creative powers—or, if not in one's own, then in one's tribe or humankind's—that it comes to rival or eclipse God's (as traditionally conceived).

Hubris is no less dangerous in secular contexts (“*I am France!*” cried de Gaulle) than it is in religious ones, where it is blasphemy to presume oneself in any way to *be* God.⁶⁵ But pointing to secular hubris is not yet a defense of theopraxy, and blasphemy is what every traditional Christian, Jew, or Muslim hears in epigrams like “Whether or not God exists is entirely up to us,” “God is the good we do,” or “God is in our hands.”

How can these worries be assuaged?

Only by knowing more. For let there be no mistake: the theology of theopraxy does not claim that any person can *be* God, or ever was God, or ever will be God; only that some of their deeds are, have been, and will be (cf. EXPLANATIONS 12). When God is the good we *do*, no one can say, “I am God” or “We are gods,” only that “I do God” or “We do God,” happily allowing traditional believers to add “-’s will.”

Moreover, and more importantly, the God that subscribers to theopraxy believe they (and others) bring into being with their good doings is not the all-powerful God of the Bible. Traditional believers are right: human beings cannot be Lord over God and at the same time mean, by “God,” the Lord God of the Bible and Qur’an. But subscribers to the theology of theopraxy are right too. God (in the theology of theopraxy) has none of the Biblical/Qur’anic God’s infinite powers and attributes in the first place—powers and attributes that it would indeed be presumptuous, not to say dangerous, for any human being or group of human beings to claim for themselves.⁶⁶

When God is believed to be nothing like the sun, nothing like a king or warrior, or judge-on-high, nor even the Ground of Being or some such ultimate thing, but rather more like a candle flame, a whisper of conscience, a tender gesture, a favor for a stranger unreported and unre-

65 For Christians, Jesus might be exempt from the charge, although even the Gospels avoid direct statements of Christ’s divinity. Jesus never says “I am God” in so many words.

66 Do I hear “gotcha!” from some readers? “...so you admit that theopraxy’s God is not really God!” For my answer to this challenge read on, and see ARGUMENTS 3 and 23, REFLECTIONS 11 and 14. Although theopraxy argues against it in principle, the danger of believing oneself to be God lies more in what kind of God one believes oneself to be than in thinking of oneself as God at all.

marked-upon, a flow of deeds and thoughts as rippling and balanced as a dance upon water...what large thing is there for hubris to attach itself to?

Then too, believing that we *all* enact God equally when we do good does not make me very special or powerful: it makes me just another worker in the field, as it were, “lifting the sparks.”⁶⁷

A theopracticing person saying “I do good, and thereby ‘make God,’” is rather like a musician saying “I play the violin and thereby make music.” As I wrote in DECLARATIONS 7: “Wherever and whenever there is a choosing of good over bad, of beauty over ugliness, of truth over falsehood, and life over death... *there* is God and only there, as fugitive as the moment, ready to become a reality enacted.” God is in everyone’s hands. In the theology of theopraxy, one might say God is neither Father nor Son, but rather more like the Holy Spirit or *Shekinah*: the divine presence that penetrates, informs, and issues from the human heart one situation and one deed at a time. But unlike the Holy Spirit or *Shekinah*, this “spirit,” this presence, has no fountainhead, no radiant unitary source, no point in the Beginning whence it emanated. Because of this, theopractitioners do not imagine themselves connected to an all-powerful Creator who works His will through them. Instead, they imagine themselves modest but always-significant sources of good themselves, like fireflies, God present and accounted for by every glowing deed.

This is the Good News of the theology of theopraxy.

THERE ARE those who will say: “This is all very nice; very poetic. But what you are describing is not *God* as anyone today understands the word. It is something else. Why don’t you find a new name for it? ‘God’ is taken.”

We can reply: There is no question of finding a new name for good-being-done. It is God. Our aim is precisely to challenge older ideas of God with newer ones, to contest the meaning of the Name.⁶⁸ Who, what, when, and how God *really* exists is the question that needs answering in a way that best produces what all believers in God say God wants: the end of involuntary suffering, more beauty, justice, and truth in the world, more enjoyment, peace, and goodwill among men and women and all living creatures...in a phrase: our continued evolution as a moral species.

⁶⁷ This is a medieval image of our proper task on earth, authored by Rabbi Isaac Luria. See REFLECTIONS 18.

⁶⁸ Of course, no word is owned, as I have said. Nor is any word in the dictionary—much less “God”—immune from drift in its usage and meaning over time. See also REFLECTIONS 14.