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Another Word on “God and the Twenty-First Century”

by Michael Benedikt

March 5, 2011



It is no longer necessary to invoke the name of God to explain or promote compassionate action. Today we understand we have evolved that capacity and can choose to exercise it. Creative Commons/Melissa Gallo.

There's the story of a young atheist arguing with his Orthodox Jewish father about the existence of God. It's late Friday afternoon. After an hour or so, the father looks at his watch and concedes, “Well, my son, God might or might not exist, but it's time for evening prayers.”

Mitzvot are what matter. And what are *mitzvot* — what are commandments? Ways of bringing goodness to life through actions, through deeds. Said Rabbi Shimeon: “Not learning but *doing* is the chief thing.” Said Jesus: “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord! Lord!’ shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who *does* the will of God” (Matthew 7:21). Said Muhammad: “If you derive pleasure from the good you *do*, and are grieved by the evil you *commit*, you are a true believer.”

These are the words of three champions of monotheism. Their pragmatism is bracing. But what should followers of these theist traditions think of the good practiced by *nonbelievers* — people who would say it's quite unnecessary, and even counterproductive, to bring “God” into ordinary morality, who would offer that morality can and should be understood from an entirely scientific, evolutionary, and historical point of view thus: the capacity for empathy,

fairness, and altruism is wired into human beings and even other higher mammals from birth, thanks to millions of generations of reproduction-with-variation under the constraints of natural selection. Similarly, the laws of civility — from the Eightfold Way and the Ten Commandments to the Magna Carta, the Geneva Convention, and the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights — are the culturally transmitted legacy of thousands of years of human *social* evolution overlaid upon older, natural reproductive-selective processes. Whereas laws of civility may once have needed the rhetorical force of God-talk to establish themselves, today they can be embraced rationally in the service of peace and prosperity.

In short, the nonbeliever holds that arriving at the enlightened understanding that good actions are good-for-us, that better ones are good-for-us-all, and the best are good-for-all-living-things requires neither God nor religion. God (in their view) is actually “God,” a useful fiction at best, a mental catalyst, rather like the square root of minus one: put into the equation only to be taken out later.

This dismissal of God and “his” goodness — in favor of evolution and *its* goodness — leaves modern, science-educated theists (and deists) unsatisfied. They believe that centuries of religious architecture, literature, and music ought not be treated only aesthetically and/or anthropologically, bracketed from real life, and considered to be about what was once picturesquely believed — but rather as capable, still, of transporting the self and transforming the world for the good. They believe, likewise, that ceremonies calmly

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asking for God's blessing in progressive churches and synagogues the world over may not be *worship* in the traditions of self-abjection or irrational ecstasy, but they do more than "improve group fitness." There's a reason that the seal impressed upon births, marriages, and deaths by the invocation of the deity is so poorly replaced by secular language.

For modern, science-educated theists, the theory of evolution and the way it accounts for the origins of ethics and aesthetics is not wrong, then, just inadequate. Arthur Green's excellent essay in "God and the Twenty-First Century," the March/April 2010 *Tikkun*, represents one response, one solution. It is to *divinize evolution*, to understand evolution as God's only mode of operation. Evolution has a direction, which is the attainment of ever higher levels of complexity and organization — of ever greater "intensifications of beauty," as Alfred North Whitehead put it — in the arrangement of matter and energy in the universe, culminating in human consciousness. This passage from dust to mindfulness, this many-billion-year saga, is sacred in its entirety. It is the new "Greatest Story Ever Told."

In Divinizing Evolution, What Becomes of the Problem of Evil?



Reading Green brings to mind earlier attempts to divinize evolution: Whitehead's *process*, Henri Bergson's *creative evolution*, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's *cosmogensis*, Samuel Alexander's *emergentism*, as well as the "evolutionary spiritualities" (Andrew Cohen's term) of Leibniz, Schelling, Hegel, and J. Huxley, for whom humankind was "nothing else but evolution become conscious of itself." The danger with reconciling theism with science by sacralizing evolution, however, is the tendency to assign to evolution a wisdom equivalent to the God of Genesis. The resulting problem is an old one: the "problem of evil." For just as it is difficult and even impossible to reconcile the existence of a single, absolutely powerful, knowledgeable, and beneficent Creator God with the innocent suffering that surrounds us, so one cannot hold to a good, evolution-devising, evolution-endorsing, or even evolution-constituted God for whom the agonies and early deaths of uncountable living creatures through history are justified by the result, since *the vast majority of those agonies and deaths contributed nothing to evolution.*

Evolution, overall, may be "good" in as much as it eventuated in our being here to read and write articles like this. But looked at with any precision, evolution is a slow and messy affair, tragic in most directions. Is God really that careless, that wasteful? The evolution of species may be "the greatest ... drama of all time," as Arthur Green says, but on the evidence, it would seem that only a small and recent chapter of it *begins* to be "sacred." It's the chapter that opens with

If evolution itself is seen as wise and benevolent, even divine, how come it involves so much suffering? Or is there a better way to conceive of "evolutionary spirituality"? Creative Commons/William Li.

Eve's eating of the apple, the allegorical mark of the emergence of human conscience, and it's a chapter that's still being written.

What If God Emerges From and Evolves With Us?

I suggest that the only version of "evolutionary spirituality" that keeps God good and that makes spiritual as well as evolutionary sense, sees God him/her/itself as emerging *from* and evolving *with* us, and *not existing before.*

This is not so strange an idea, or so new. As talmudist Aryeh Cohen, coming from quite another direction, writes in his careful essay in the same issue of *Tikkun*: "It is in the practice of justice that God exists and that redemption may happen." The next logical step multiplies implications: perhaps it is not only *in* the doing of good (in "the practice of justice") that God exists, but as the doing of good (as the practice of justice) that God exists. "God" is not a noun but a verb, as David Cooper declares in his book about the Kabbalah; but more pointedly *God is not a being, but a doing.* If God is as God does, and God does only good by definition, then it follows, in so far as *doing* (over mere mechanical action or reaction) involves

even a trace of foresight, creativity, and review, that God’s existence and continuance is in human hands, no less than our continuance, increasingly, is in God’s. The human species is new in cosmic history. Doing good is newer still. God is not everywhere always, therefore, and never was; God *is* — only where good is being done, and when. Humanity is “theogenic,” and God “ethicogenic.”

I understand that these declarations are under-supported in this short article. But consider this: seeing God as goodness performed, like music or dance, allows an educated believer to say “God” and to mean by “God” something viable, actual, and energizing that needs no apology or bracketing or empty hyperbole to promote. It encourages them — it encourages us — to understand that religious texts, and especially ancient religious texts, are not poor science or arcane readings suited only for ritual use, but recordings of the emergence of — and generators, still, of an openness to — that new, tenuous, and “vertical” dimension of human experience we call the ethical. This is the dimension into which we step, as out of a basement into fresh air, each time we volunteer ourselves into selflessness, or choose what is best for all, or welcome necessary complexity. One might call it elevation through submission — submission not to God Almighty (this is the old hyperbole), but to the gentle and persistent current of joy and care that runs through life: a charge coming to us from everywhere and nowhere to “choose life,” consciously, for all living things, in the freedom to do otherwise.

The step into the ethical dimension and its upward loft is not arduous. It is often a small one. Said Moses to the Israelites:

Surely this instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond your reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, “Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?” Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?” No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your hearts, to observe it ... Choose life, that ye may live (Deut. 30:11-14, 20:19).

Look out of your window, then. Every animal 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. We should look upon these things and be glad, even reverent. We should rejoice at peace and simple decency, and not take them for granted. They are not the product of raw, biological evolution, but of the divine process of civilization, a process to which we contribute. Our “cup runneth over,” and by our ethical actions, that cup runs over for others. This is the wonder of good doing. “The wonder of [good] doing,” wrote Abraham Joshua Heschel,

is no less amazing than the marvel of being ... and [it] may prompt us to discover “the divinity of deeds.” In 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.”

How Should We De-Anthropomorphize God?

One perpetual challenge for thoughtful theists — a challenge almost as great as how to interpret evolution — is how to deal with theological anthropomorphism, which is the second entry point for atheists after the problem of evil.

As Stewart Guthrie points out in *Faces in the Clouds*, anthropomorphism takes two forms. The first is easy to detect and easy to suppress: seeing the man in the moon or thinking that snakes are reincarnated bad people, that volcanoes are angry, that the stock market “shakes off” bad news, and so on. It is the stuff of instinct, of children’s books, poetry, and colorful journalism.

The second form of anthropomorphism is not as easy to detect or neutralize. It is part of thinking itself. As Kant argued, space and time may or may not be “out there” apart from our thinking. More commonsensically, we know at some level that whereas we are born and die, the universe may not have had a beginning at all and may not end. Certainly, the universe is neither beautiful nor ugly nor safe nor dangerous, except to us. But neither, *really*, is it large or small or old or young. We might say that the universe “just is.” But metaphysical “being” too might be an indiscriminate extension of what our own persistence feels like to us. And so on. Like metaphor in language, this form of anthropomorphism is endemic to all human perception and thought, and we just have to live with it. We *are*, after all, part of the universe — even though we may be the only part evolved enough to ponder its form and meaning — and so can’t be *totally* wrong.

Where, then, should religious anthropomorphism lie on the spectrum between children’s-book animism on

the one hand and *Nature*-article objectivity on the other? Choosing the first as inevitable, atheists will gleefully quote the pre-Socratic wit, Xenophanes, who reasoned: “If lions could think, their gods would have manes and roar,” or cite Ludwig Feuerbach, who more seriously portrayed God as the wishful *projection* of human virtues onto an indifferent cosmos — and regard both as evidence of God’s nonexistence.

In defense of this critique, serious theologians and philosophers have long sought to move to the other pole, devising ever less anthropomorphic descriptions of God. Among them are Spinoza’s *Deus sive Natura* (“God or Nature”), Hegel’s Absolute Spirit, Whitehead’s Process, Tillich’s Ground of Being, Hartshorne’s Eminent Self-Creation, Kaufman’s Creativity, and Green’s Sacred Evolution. Important to note is that while each helps de-anthropomorphize divinity (at the price of God’s addressability — but that’s another story), each also leaves God presiding over the Beginning and underlying all historical developments; each leaves God, though not human in any way, omnipresent, beyond understanding, and without end (*Ein Sof*), and thus, like the God of the Bible, the suitable object of awe. It would seem that the capacity to inspire awe, by size, beauty, power, and age, is the one capacity without which no God, in our estimation, could be considered *God*. Do you recall God’s answer to Job? Even a de-anthropomorphized God, it seems, would answer Job in essentially the same way.

What If God Is Young and Weak?

I think that these theologians and philosophers’ hyperbolic descriptions of God might be, if not a mistake, then an unexamined habit. For God may not be the oldest and strongest force in the universe, but the youngest and weakest one, neither celestial on a throne, nor embedded among subatomic events, but enacted in daily human encounters, choices, and deeds. This is a God to cherish, not to fear. Our tradition of depicting God with a human voice “and an outstretched arm” may not, then, be the result of naive anthropocentrism, but rather a reflection of the fact that voluntary goodness *emerges from* the matrix of human life in acts of love, duty, beauty, compassion, forbearance, and wisdom — it emerges from motherly, fatherly, brotherly, sisterly, and neighborly acts whose recently evolved, high-order complexity is essential not only to our happiness, but to our continuance and even to that of life on earth. Is it not miracle enough that a whole new level of being/doing is struggling to its feet on this planet? And if we are inclined to concede that the emotion of awe is necessary for any God to be God to us, may we not feel awe at a child’s first words? Or radical amazement at the flowering of the Torah on this speck of dust drifting among the mindless, wheeling stars?

Influenced variously by the Hasidic masters, Felix Adler, Martin Buber, Emanuel Levinas, and Abraham Joshua Heschel were among the pioneers of the line of Jewish, existential, “theo-humanistic” religious thinking that we find in practitioners today as different as Michael Lerner and Harold Schulweis (both Heschel students). This line of thinking is happy to see divinity at work in ethical human relationships — people with each other and with other living things. It speaks often of human *partnership* with God. It celebrates the godliness of certain human deeds. But that divinity, that partnership, that godliness is derivative still, and dependent upon the much greater godliness of God the Creator/Sustainer/Evolver of the Universe, who remains in place, as it were, at the alpha and omega points of existence. I propose that we can let go of this conception and, in holding God to be good only, consider seriously that our ethical actions are the very substance of God, and say *dayenu*. I have tried to describe this variant of humanistic Jewish theology in my book *God Is the Good We Do*.

In Conclusion

As every reader of *Tikkun* knows, the word “tikkun” means healing, repair, uplift. Healing, repairing, and lifting-up are deeds, not just doctrines; they are transformations of the world around, not just private adjustments of attitude. Tikkun, one might say, is the obligation that evolution bequeaths to the creatures it “blesses,” first with consciousness and then with conscience, to effect life’s further evolution *without* causing or countenancing involuntary suffering.

Let us resist the tradition of claiming that God is “that than which nothing greater can be conceived.” Let us stop competing with each other to compose dizzying encomiums to God’s cosmic creativity, eternity, wisdom, and might (shadows of kingship, all), and embrace instead the humbler truth at hand: that divinity is evidenced — indeed constituted — not by how the stars twirl or how life began, but by how graciously we step forward into the next moment.

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Source Citation

Benedikt, Michael. 2011. Another Word on "God and the Twenty-First Century." *Tikkun* 26(2): 14.

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