

Is God Good?

by Rebecca Bynum (Aug 2006)

"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth...And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good." – Genesis

I have often pondered the question, what is this war about? Really about? What is the core issue at stake? And after considerable reflection, I believe I may state this war is about one thing, and that is the proposition that God is good.

I also believe the reason we are having such a difficult time articulating an effective ideological response to Islam, is we are quite shaky on this proposition ourselves. In fact, our entire culture has been involved in indicting God as immoral for centuries. Our highest understanding of God as Love, I'm afraid, is degraded by millennia old concepts concerning the nature of God as wrathful, vengeful and angry, which is the very picture of God Islam embraces, and so we are lost in a jumble of confusion. If God is a mixture of Good and evil, if He directs evil toward man as in the book of Job, then how can we love, venerate or worship Him? How can we trust and have faith in Him? Indeed, how is it possible to avoid placing Him on trial by way of human judgment? For if God is not unified Good, how can we *not* place ourselves and our moral sensibility above His? And indeed, are not all totalitarianisms based, at bottom, on the concept that man is morally superior to God and that the reality He created is unjust and corrupt?

The indictment of the west by Islam is based on the notion that man should not put himself above God. But, of course, by constructing "God's law" directly from the life of a man, and a man with more than a few, shall we say, severe character flaws at that, Muslims are in fact guilty of the crime of which they accuse the west: placing man, indeed, one man (Muhammad frozen in aspic), above God. And furthermore, Islam firmly clings to the olden anthropomorphic notion of God's character as bloodthirsty and warlike, cloaked as a revival of religious originalism. The modern Judeo-Christian world must make an equally firm stand for God's character as loving and fatherly, for these core conceptions determine the nature of the societies we inhabit. But to do this, Christians must examine

Christianity itself and separate the gospel of Jesus from the engulfing bed of twenty centuries of theological layering which created the theological schisms that spawned anti-Semitism and the numerous internecine Christian wars.

Even though the west lost sight of God as a personal being during the Enlightenment, it kept hold of Goodness as a concept of absolute value for a time, but this conception has weakened considerably along with the increasing technologicalization of society. It seems the closer man lives to the soil, the more likely he is to view nature, and by extension God, as good. The further he is removed from the soil, the more likely he is to view the natural world with suspicion, even fear and contempt. Today, a child's view of nature is most likely to be formed by watching sensational gore-filled nature programs constantly being shown on television and he is constantly exhorted to fear germs and disease. The message thereby instilled in young minds is this: Nature is evil. The world is an evil place. Goodness does not exist. God does not exist.

If our culture is to regenerate, and regenerate it must in order to face down Islam over the long haul, then certain core cultural concepts must be revived, and first among these is concept of Goodness. Goodness is pure value, nothing else. It is not time or space dependent. It stands above Reason and gives Reason order. Goodness may also be viewed as a final level of intellectual integration or primary organizing concept. Moving downward from Goodness flows Mercy and from Mercy flows Justice and from Justice flows Honor and from Honor flows Duty. Thus, if the concept of Goodness is lost, all that flows from it likewise becomes meaningless. Without a firm grasp on the transcendent, man is thrown back upon himself, a victim of directionless scientististic dialectic, without purpose, without reason. And with nothing beyond himself to live for or to strive for, man becomes a pitiable creature vainly endeavoring to elevate his lusts to some level of profundity. We see this absurd drama everywhere. The message is, the meaning of life is found in the pleasures of the flesh (money and sex), which of course holds no meaning whatever and creates no life at all.

Man, it seems, is dropped into this world as a questioning stranger born in tension, fear and doubt. No other creature struggles over the purpose of life, no other creature experiences moral conflict. Significantly, no other creature but man bears the gift of language or can express its will with all the subtlety language provides. Each human utterance, each thought, is an expression of will. Thus man seems to be provided with freedom of will above and beyond that of any

other living creature, and is endowed with a moral sense and the ability to recognize value other creatures show no sign of possessing.

Our cultural imagination has always striven to deliver man from himself and to elevate him above the base animal level of existence (money and sex). Culture is what rescues man from suffering his passions and helps him strive toward higher purposes by giving him direction; a direction toward increasing appreciation of the good. When examined, our culture is found to be based upon such concepts such as Justice, Honor and Duty and thus society becomes utterly lost and adrift once its tether to transcendent Goodness is cut.

On the other hand, according to Islamic doctrine, God (Allah) is most expressly *not good*, and thus the lesser organizing concepts, Mercy, Justice, Honor and Duty, to continue our example, are perverted to their opposite meanings. It is crucial we recognize this truth, for each culture is using the same words, but with opposite meanings, and this is creating great confusion especially among those eager to see good (and thus harmlessness) in Islam.

The question then is, in modern industrial society, can the concept of goodness survive minus an intrinsic identification between the concept of the absolute, infinite and eternal Good and thus with *God*? In other words, if goodness is reduced to a mere relativity, can it remain good?

In modern Christian doctrine, there is a great stumbling block to the recovery of this concept of God as Good, and that is the atonement doctrine. According to this train of theological thought, God required the sacrifice of His sinless Son in order to propitiate His wrath against fallen mankind. It was only through this, the penultimate sacrifice, that total redemption from sin was thought to have been made possible. Jesus took on the sins of the world, was sacrificed, and thus became the path of redemption. His exemplary teachings were thereby reduced to an adjunct to the centrality of His sacrifice.

But is this the vision of God Jesus himself brought to the world? Did Jesus not repeatedly emphasize the loving nature of God and man's redemption through *faith*? Was the life of Jesus not a lens through which man might glimpse the nature of God? And if so, do we see through Christ a God of wrath and vengeance? If not, might there not some other interpretation of the Passion to be made? Must we be satisfied with such a schizophrenic view of God?

Sin, obviously, did not end with the Passion of Christ. The “long, lamentable catalogue of human crime” continues to find new additions unabated throughout the course of our history. It is a very powerful and especially emotional idea to feel that our sins somehow retroactively cause the suffering of Christ, the suffering of God. But perhaps we are missing something else.

Central to all faith is the concept of the will of God and central to the atonement doctrine is the concept that the Father willed the death of the Son. In other words, the will of man is subordinate to the will of God. This idea is central to Islamic doctrine as well. And though this conception may be emotionally satisfying, it may also be a method of mere justification, since everything that occurs may be put down as “God’s will,” leading directly to fatalism, the opiate of the masses. So does God really negate the will of man? Or might the life of Jesus illustrate exactly how far the will of God is in reality subordinate to the will of man, at least during man’s time on earth?

If all things come about through the will of God, then we must conclude that God wills evil, which is exactly the simplistic conclusion of Islam. But if we take a broader view, and see God as allowing human will to indulge in both good and evil, then the life of Jesus, as God and man, becomes immediately more complex. Christians may view the figure of Jesus as the embodiment of goodness and personification of truth. As man, he portrayed the perfect submission to the Father’s will, and as God, he portrayed the reality of *God’s submission to the will of man*, for He allowed his own execution.

In this view, free will is God’s gift to man and the endowment of language gives us an additional level of mental freedom, enhanced imagination. We are free to love God and to respond to His love, but we are also free to reject Him, even to hate Him and to formulate our reasons for doing so by way of our language endowment. According to this line of thought, the Father does not coerce the love of his children. In Islam, on the other hand, human love of God is subordinate to human obedience to Allah, which is sadly equated with worship, and thus obedience is unapologetically coerced. Free will, according to Islam, simply does not exist; rather everything that occurs in time is predestined as God’s will. Simply put, if it happened, God willed it to happen. “Freedom” is thought to only be found in complete subordination of the individual will to the Islamic system, thought to be “God’s plan.” This is slavery of the most cruel and barbaric kind, slavery of the mind and spirit. The western mind inherently rebels at the thought

God would do such a thing to his children, we are revolted by this portrait of an un-loving God.

The Lord's Prayer illustrates our understanding of free will perfectly: "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Implied here is the understanding that God's will is not always done by His children. Perhaps those children were not carrying out God's will when they humiliated, scourged and crucified the innocent Jesus, but perhaps, and maybe more than just perhaps, Jesus carried out God's will when he voluntarily submitted himself to the natural outworking of human error and human passion, just the way He does every day and every hour. For having granted man his freedom, He would not arbitrarily rescind it, even at the cost of His human life. In this view, God is unified and consistent.

On the existence of evil in the world, the Master had this to say: "The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while the man slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? From whence then hath it tares? He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn."
—*Matthew 13:24-30*

In this parable, two things are clear. 1) God does not create evil, though he does allow it and 2) evil is a temporary phenomenon. This is entirely consistent with the much, much older foundational document of Judeo-Christian thought put forth in Genesis and quoted at the beginning of this piece: God is good and his creation is also good.

I believe the evil with which modern man attempts to indict God is in reality that of his own creation. I cannot believe, nor will I ever believe God is a source of evil, or that He is angry or vengeful or filled with wrath requiring appeasement through the sacrifice and suffering of the innocent. These are anthropomorphic concepts of God entirely unworthy to be included in modern

theological thought. It is my firm conviction the atonement doctrine must eventually be abandoned if Christianity is to recapture the truth in and through the life of Jesus. The religion revealed by Jesus during his life must triumph over the religion that was developed about Jesus after his death. I believe that only in this way can we revive the concept of Good and of God as the personification of the ultimate, eternal and infinite Good.

For without a unified conception of Good, our lives are lost and our civilization is doomed.

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