

God & His Demons: Taking on the Religious Right

Review of Michael Parenti's book

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Theme: [Religion](#)

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Michael Parenti has written a compelling work, whose themes are so relevant for our time: the essentiality of rational thought, the struggle to maintain a secular and tolerant society, and the abuse of religion for reactionary political and obscurant objectives. As Parenti points out, "That 'old-time religion' is still very much with us and having a considerable impact on U.S. political life." And that impact has only grown in recent years.

Parenti launches his account with that bedrock of old-time religion, the Bible, examining it for what moral lessons it has to impart. Assessing the Bible in the light of literal interpretation as advocated by fundamentalist Christians, rather than inspiration Parenti finds a deeply troubling narrative. There have been many excellent analyses of the absurdities and twisted morality of the Old Testament, but this is among the best. Parenti's romp through the Old Testament is highly entertaining, sharply observed, and simultaneously hilarious and disturbing (in that so many point to it as a source of moral authority). Parenti writes:

"The god of the Holy Bible – so much adored in the United States and elsewhere – is ferociously vindictive, neurotically jealous, intolerant, vainglorious, punitive, wrathful, sexist, racist, xenophobic, homophobic, sadistic and homicidal. As they say, it's all in the Bible. Beware of those who act in the name of such a god. Were we to encounter these vicious traits in an ordinary man, we would judge him to be in need of lifelong incarceration at a maximum-security facility. At the very least, we would not prattle on about how he works his wonders in mysterious ways."

Unlike some detractors of the Old Testament, Parenti does not give the New Testament a free ride, holding it up to the same standard of rational analysis he gave to the older section of the Bible. Parenti finds that the "biblical Jesus qualifies quite well as founder and forerunner of an intolerant Christianity."

Parenti is devastating in his critique of the efficacy of prayer and the incongruous nature of religious belief in divine intervention, which he notes is partly based on selective perception: "When over 22,000 people were killed in a 7.6-magnitude earthquake in Pakistan in 2005, one survivor, convinced that his god had saved him – and taking no notice of the thousands who had perished – shouted 'Allah is great'. In 2003, when a U.S. space shuttle blew up in midair killing seven astronauts, thousands of pieces of wreckage rained down on East Texas. Fortunately, no one on the ground was hurt. Many believers praised their god for watching over them. One marquee in Hemphill, Texas read: 'Thank you God. You protected us all here on the ground. You are amazing.' Not a word was proffered regarding God's less than amazing performance in regard to the astronauts." As Parenti observes, "when people

survive a danger, they proclaim that their prayers have been answered.” But when people perish, no one is quoted as saying their prayers went unanswered, “and no news story is inclined to voice a lament about the futility of prayer.”

Indeed, Parenti points out, some of the faithful regard death and destruction as direct retribution, such as Christian evangelist Jerry Falwell’s statement that the 9-11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon were divine punishment upon America for harboring “the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and lesbians.” Then there was Republican congressman Richard Baker’s equally insensitive and deranged comment after Hurricane Katrina: “We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.”

One of the strengths of [*God and His Demons*](#) is its refusal to back away from exposing the underside of those widely-admired mainstream icons of modern religion: Mother Teresa, Pope John Paul II, and Tibetan Buddhism. Mother Teresa’s “clinics and hospitals” were in actuality hospices, where medical care was lacking. One young doctor was appalled at the conditions and reported that many of the dying were suffering from hunger and malnutrition rather than fatal diseases, and could be saved with an improved diet and vitamin supplements. “But he could not persuade Teresa, who showed no interest in medicine or in treating patients with vitamins.” Expensive medical equipment donated to Mother Teresa “was left to rust, completely unused.”

Meanwhile, Mother Teresa jetted around the globe, “to wage campaigns against divorce, abortion, and birth control.” In Egypt, “she urged housewives to ‘have lots and lots of children’ – at a time when the Egyptian government was trying to promote family planning to counter the nation’s population explosion.” Mother Teresa’s opposition to contraception was unwavering. “Her concern for the unborn child,” observes Parenti, “was matched only by an indifference toward the living child. What social conditions caused hundreds of thousands of children to die of malnutrition and disease in Asia and elsewhere was a question that failed to win her attention.”

Fast-tracked on the path to sainthood by Pope John Paul II, Mother Teresa was beatified in 2003. She was only one among many of the frauds launched upon that path by John Paul. Similarly beatified was Msgr. José María Escrivá de Balaguer, supporter of Franco’s fascist government and founder of the right-wing Opus Dei. The self-promoting Padre Pio was another, and Parenti delightfully exposes Pio’s outlandish claims about himself, leaving one to wonder how anyone could have taken the man seriously, let alone canonized him. Then there was Cardinal Aloysius Stepinac, that fervent supporter of the Hitler-era fascist puppet government in Croatia, with its extermination of hundreds of thousands of Serbs, Jews and Roma.

But it is for his political role that Pope John Paul II is most revered. As Parenti points out, “John Paul, that most political of all popes, remained up to his ears in counter-revolutionary politics in Latin America and elsewhere.” Noted for his close collaboration with U.S. President Ronald Reagan, “the pontiff directed no critical attacks against right-wing dictatorships, which he valued as bulwarks against communist revolution.” Through the Vatican’s secretary of state, he intervened on behalf of Augusto Pinochet, the former fascist leader of Chile, who was then under arrest in Spain for his crimes. And it was John Paul who did the most to undermine the spirit of Vatican II, replacing it with what one church historian has described as “a law-and-order, fear-driven, clerically controlled Church.”

Most in need of myth-busting has been the widespread illusion about Tibetan Buddhism, with its reputed beneficence. This section alone is worth the price of the book, so revealing is it. "Religions have an age-long relationship not only with violence but also with economic exploitation. Indeed, it is often the economic exploitation that necessitates the violence." The Tibetan theocracy was no different, even up through the time of rule by the Dalai Lama, when "most of the arable land was still organized into manorial estates worked by serfs and owned by monasteries and secular landlords. Just how harsh life could be for a Tibetan serf is described in moving and eye-opening detail by Parenti. Change for Tibetans since 1959 has been substantial, and Parenti provides a balanced narrative of developments, with an honest portrayal of what has been positive and what has not. Certainly, the worst excesses of religious oppression have been expunged.

In a chapter entitled, *Cashing in on Heaven*, Parenti focuses on the self-enrichment by many religious leaders at the expense of their followers. The extent of sheer greed is astonishing. Often the message today in fundamentalist churches is that of what is termed *prosperity gospel*, promising "material affluence." Such a retrograde ideal has predictable results. "Prosperity televangelists like W.V. Grant and Robert Tilton collected tens of millions of dollars from poor, sick, and desperate viewers, while claiming to be supporting orphanages that did not exist. Meanwhile, both live in utter opulence. Tilton does not directly trust in God for financial miracles, preferring to get his money the old-fashioned way – from other people." By no means are these isolated examples, and the emotional extortion of money from the gullible for personal enrichment has, if anything, been the hallmark of fundamentalist Christian leaders.

Similarly abusive have been a great many of the cult leaders and gurus, a subject that has not always received the attention it has deserved. "Pretending to an inner quietude and profound modesty, many are endowed with raging egos and immersed in nasty rivalries that are played out with a vehemence redolent of less spiritually advanced individuals." While leaders live a lavish lifestyle, in many cases adherents are compelled to live in poverty as they work long hours for the cult with little or no pay. In these "totalistic, self-enriching, guru-worshipping cults," the "master is elevated, the followers are infantilized and diminished." The outright child abuse that occurs in many of these cults and churches is one of the more disturbing sections of the book.

Too often today, religion is placed at the service of reactionary political goals. "Backed by moneyed interests, the right-wing Christianist media propagate free-market corporatism, militarism, and super-patriotism." And their influence is powerful. "It is no accident that we hear almost nothing about the religious Left and so much about the religious Right. Progressive dissidents usually are denied access to mass media audiences. As with politics, so with religion: there is no free market of ideas, no level playing field. Conservative organizations possess a vast constellation of publications, television and radio networks, and satellite and cable channels that gather millions of listeners and viewers." But "the secular corporate-owned media also show a striking favoritism toward the religious Right. On the major television networks, cable news channels, and PBS, conservative religious leaders have been quoted, mentioned, or interviewed almost 400 percent more often than progressive ones, and over 250 percent more often in major newspapers." Those statistics are taken from a 2007 report, and my initial reaction was surprise that these percentages were not higher. Surely in the last three years, the gap has only grown more skewed.

The all-too-frequent abuse of position by religious leaders for sexual predation makes for one of the book's more harrowing chapters. "How the religionists and their political

counterparts wish to lead their private lives is their business, as long as they bring no harm to others,” writes Parenti. “What is at issue here is the moral chasm between what is preached and what is practiced. Also at issue is their homophobia and – in the case of pedophiles and rapists – their criminal venality and the damage they inflict upon the innocent.” Parenti recounts the record of hypocrisy and harm with compassion for the victims and outrage over injustice.

Fundamentalist Christian leaders make no secret of their desire to transform the American political system into a theocracy. Already, alarming inroads have been made, as outlined by Parenti with so many examples as to alert one to the dangers ahead. One wishes this information could be presented to as wide an audience as possible. These people mean business. “In the mind of theocrats, ‘religious freedom’ means the right to roll back secular culture and impose a monochromatic belief system upon everyone. Right-wing fundamentalist leader Randall Terry told an audience of the like-minded faithful: ‘I want you to just let a wave of intolerance wash over you... Our goal is a Christian nation... We are called by God to conquer this country. We don’t want equal time. We don’t want pluralism’.” The goal, Parenti writes, “is to take over the U.S. government and replace civil law with biblical law.”

Islam, too, has its fundamentalists. “Today’s Islamist reactionaries, however, bear a closer resemblance to today’s Christian reactionaries in their intolerance toward secularism and their conviction that both heaven and earth are their exclusive province. But unlike the Christianists who await their return to state power, the Islamists can already boast of existing bona fide theocracies such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan (under the Taliban), and Kuwait.” And in a number of other countries Islamists are such a strong force that they manage to impose Sharia law. Theirs is an appalling record, as demonstrated by the examples mentioned in this book.

Parenti does see some glimmers of hope, with the continued adherence to the ideal of a secular and tolerant society by a meaningful portion of the American public. Our aim, Parenti concludes, should be to “roll back the theocratic aggrandizement while strengthening our right to entertain our beliefs and disbeliefs openly and with impunity. Only secular strength and organized democratic activism on our part will counter the sectarian intolerance and state-assisted tyranny of reactionary theocrats.

God and His Demons is exceptionally well-written book, infused with the author’s characteristic style, wit, no-nonsense analysis and deeply-felt humanism. This ranks among the author’s most important works, deserving of the highest praise.

Visit Michael Parenti at: <http://www.michaelparenti.org/>

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