

# Book Review

Prozesky, M. 2019. *Honest to Goodness: An Ethical and Spiritual Odyssey*. Eugene: Resource Publications. 302 pages. Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-5326-6537-0.

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Martin Prozesky's book, *Honest to goodness: An ethical and spiritual Odyssey* is an ambitious project. It is a rich and multiple-layered text – an autobiography, a religious confession in addition to being an examination of the discipline of Religious Studies through the eyes of Professor Prozesky, regaling his long and influential involvement with the academic field. Ultimately though, *Honest to goodness* is a personal exploration into the heart of the Christian teaching that places goodness at the center of the Christian message. Moreover, Prozesky wants to illustrate, through personal accounts and the logic of the Christian message, that goodness is an emergent quality throughout the universe. Though complexly structured, it is the very expansiveness of his ideas and argument that makes *Honest to goodness* such a compelling read.

Reading *Honest to goodness* reminded me of Iris Murdoch's book, *Metaphysics as a guide to morals* (Murdoch 1992). As the book's title suggests, Murdoch argues that the *Good* is simultaneously a 'Platonic Form' which is experientially confirmed. She follows the trajectory of the idea of an abstract *Good* from Plato to Kant's *numinous* and links it to discussions of St. Anselm's ontological proof of God (suggesting its strength less in its logic than its basis in experience) and Martin Buber's relational experience of God in the 'Other'. Besides her oft return to Schleiermacher's experiential theology, in striking similarity to Prozesky's argument in *Honest to goodness*, Murdoch concludes her book with very similar ideas to Prozesky. In the concluding chapter to her book she writes:

Good is something clearly seen and indubitably discovered in our ordinary unmysterious experience of transcendence, the progressive illuminating and inspiring discovery of other, the positive experience of truth, which comes to us all the time in a weak form and comes to us sometimes in a strong form...and which remains with us as a standard vision, an orientation, a proof of what is possible and a vista of what might be (Murdoch 1992:508).

Earlier in the conclusion, she states:

The sovereign Good is an empty receptacle into which the arbitrary will laces objects of its choice. It is something which we all experience as a creative force. This is metaphysics, which sets up a picture which it then offers as an appeal to us all to see if we cannot find just this in our deepest experience (Murdoch 1992:507).

Prozesky agrees with Murdoch:

The word 'good' is your central term of approval for whatever we find fulfilling, meaningful and enjoyable, which we therefore seek to perpetuate because it has the greatest value for us. The enjoyment is at first purely physical, but in time we learn that there are other enjoyments of intellectual, moral, aesthetic, social and spiritual kind, and so we extend and deepen our sense of the good. This is the subjective or personal justification of my appeal to this supreme reality as the basis of religion and of all other aspects of human culture. My contention is that the cosmos, in my expanded, holistic conception of it, brings about developments that we humans, given our valorising nature and or restless hunger for ever greater fulfilment, will find beneficial and call good (Prozesky 2019:203).

Whereas Murdoch takes a journey through Western philosophy to establish a metaphysical basis for the experience of goodness, Prozesky is perhaps truer to his mission. He begins with his childhood in Oudtshoorn, describing the closed Christian community in which he grew up, juxtaposed to his childhood passion for astronomy and the awe-inspiring night sky that has stayed with him throughout his life. He then relates about his education – first school and

later studying to become an Anglican priest. He confesses to a loss of belief in himself to give comfort to those who experience great suffering, which resulted in his subsequent entry into theological studies and religious studies in the Universities of Rhodes and Oxford.

Prozesky found his 'calling' as a university teacher of religion in his early academic years at Rhodes University and the University of Rhodesia. He later moved to the University of Natal where he spent the rest of his academic career. As a teacher of religion in apartheid South Africa, he writes about the necessity of presenting religion as a force for social justice in opposition to the apartheid State's use of Christianity to support apartheid policies. The liberal churches' opposition to Apartheid led to deep reflections on goodness and the social/political responsibility of Christianity. Concomitantly, during his long period as a religious studies academic, Prozesky also shares his reflections on goodness pertaining to his own life and experience in terms of a prayer-based healing of health conditions and the 'hand of goodness' evident in daily life, in his personal account of traveling to work on his scooter, once narrowly avoiding a fatal road death.

He writes about taking an early retirement from academic teaching and research in religious studies and founding the Unilever Ethical Centre at the University of Natal in 1997, affording him the opportunity to reflect directly on ethics and develop his theoretical framework for ethical practice.

In his later years, Prozesky returned to Christianity. This period of his life forms the focus of the book. After years of finding the conventional church bereft of spiritual nourishment, he encountered progressive Christianity that resonated with his ideas of goodness and social justice. Older forms of Christianity that are creed-based and demand belief according to the Nicene Creed, could not be ethically founded, nor could they emerge from the wellspring of a loving God. Prozesky includes both conservative, text-based churches and liberal, socially conscious churches within the ambit of conventional Christianity, who both still hold to a belief in central creeds that exclude and condemn to damnation those who have not heard of the creeds, or follow other religions, much like monarchs who demand absolute adherence. Prozesky argues that progressive Christianity is befitting of a good and loving God who promotes ethical faith and loving practice. Progressive Christianity is by no means close to supplanting conventional Christianity, but has the potential for Jesus' teachings to be a force of profound good in the world, he avers, embracing

- religious pluralism;
- the sacredness and oneness of life;
- the affirming of Jesus' teaching as offering but one path to sacredness;
- the community and inclusiveness of all spiritual paths of goodness;
- understanding that loving behavior is the greatest expression of belief in Jesus' teachings;
- the questioning of absolutes and putting more value on the questioning of received views of doctrinal biblical texts; and
- lifelong learning, compassion, and ecological awareness (Prozesky 2019:140).

In promoting progressive Christianity, Prozesky returns to the experience-based theology of Schleiermacher, the subject of his PhD. He also refers to St. Anselm, although his philosophical foundation is Whitehead's process theology. While he does not overtly describe the constituents of Whitehead's theology, one senses the reverberations of the dual divine structure of the primordial and consequent natures, the latter being influenced by relative experiences of humanity and feeding back into the primordial nature. Prozesky, I think, here attempts to establish a metaphysical structure for goodness from experience. It is crucial that he attempts this, if progressive Christianity is to convince. For Murdoch (1992:507),

the mystic Christ who is the image of Good is lovable. That we can and do love Good and are drawn towards it is something that we have to learn from our experience, as we move all the time in the continuum between good and bad...There is only the working of the human spirit in the morass of existence in which it always at every moment finds itself immersed. We live in an 'intermediate world'.

Murdoch regards God as the source of morals, absolute but separate. It is for good reason that Prozesky seeks the more intermediary idea of God in process theology as a step towards metaphysical goodness. Personally, I have always felt a strong affinity to Whitehead since my third-year studies when I first encountered him.

The question is if Prozesky does enough to prove that he has formed a firm enough ground for a working metaphysical ground of Goodness. I am not sure that he provides enough proof for goodness in the fullness of the cosmos. While it holds our fascination and stirs our wonder, does this equate to goodness? Despite these doubts, *Honest to goodness* is an engrossing and challenging read. It is an important book not only for its subject matter, but also because it tells the inner journey into the heart of religion of one of South Africa's doyens of religious studies.

### **Bibliography**

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