

On Being Good Without God

I was delighted to see “Perspectives on Faith” articles by two colleagues on the August 15 religion page. Both addressed the issue raised by local “atheists” who want to place ads on Bloomington Transit busses carrying the message, “You can be good without God.”

I agree wholeheartedly with Jack Skiles that a commitment to freedom of speech and religion entails the freedom of non-religious, or even anti-religious, people to have their say. Like Skiles, I was raised a Baptist of the sort who still holds dear the values of freedom of conscience and separation of church and state. I also agree wholeheartedly with John Crosby that being an atheist, or non-theist, does not preclude being good. God knows, there are lots of more-or-less good people out there who do not believe in God, and there are lots more not-so-good people out there who are adamant in their belief in God. I generally find the non-believers more congenial than the militant believers.

It may come as a surprise, therefore, that I disagree wholeheartedly with the statement, “You can be good without God.” If the statement were, “You can be good without *believing in* God,” I would not bother to write these comments. And I feel certain that is one of the main points the supporters of the statement wish to make. But the statement says more than that. It actually claims that goodness can exist apart from God. And it clearly implies that one can *be* without God.

Here’s my objection: As a religious person, I do not believe one can exist, or *be* at all, without God. Thus, one cannot be good, bad, or indifferent without God. Being itself, existentially speaking, depends on God.

Unfortunately, most public debates about religion fail to grasp the nettle. The question is not whether there are good people who are not religious. Of course there are. The question is not whether being religious makes one a better person. Sometimes it does, and sometimes it makes one worse. It rather depends on the sort of religion one practices. The crucial religious issue is not just whether God exists, but what sort of God we’re talking about, and whether this God is integral to our existence.

Let the atheists or the non-theists have their say, and spend their money on public advertising if they wish. Those of us who affirm the reality of God should respectfully disagree.

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