



The Morals of the Story: Good News About a Good God

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“Due to his lectures and previous writings, Professor Baggett has established himself as one of a small handful of elite experts on moral arguments for God and related matters. Now, collaborating with his wife, Marybeth, we finally have a readable and authoritative treatment of a very wide range of issues relevant to the moral argument.”

—J. P. Moreland,
Distinguished Professor of
Philosophy, Talbot School of
Theology, Biola University

The Comeback of Moral Apologetics

It is the best of moral times, it is the worst of moral times; it is an age of callous cruelty, it is an age of hypersensitivity; a time of enlightenment, a time of myopia; an age of liberation, an age of bondage; an epoch of free thinking, an epoch of mindless conformity.

What’s transpiring at some of our greatest universities provides telling cases in point. No, not the outrageous athletic budgets, but certain agenda-driven protests that so often seem to go awry, setting in motion all manner of bubbling cauldron heads whose collective commentary rivals the blast of a howler. Sometime back, for example, a video went viral of a student at Yale publicly berating a distinguished sociology professor who, in his function as administrator, refused to capitulate to student demands for greater sensitivity over Halloween costumes. We don’t want to be callous here because concern and respect for others and resistance to dehumanization are fueled by right motives, but such motives don’t always ensure right methods.

Shouts of invective, peppered with feisty expletives and colorful pejoratives that would surely make her grandmother blush, emanated from the livid student. She clearly counted her righteous indignation justified, no matter that it was heavy on indignation and light on righteousness. What, to her thinking, afforded her the moral high ground was what she found to be *offensive* about the professor’s administrative decisions. His sin involved endorsing the proposition that students at universities aren’t always entitled to protection from every perspective, even derogatory ones. They should cultivate the capacity to engage in rigorous but civil discourse. For this he was demonized with vituperation. Sadly, a plethora of recent examples abound and serve to show how a good moral insight, pushed in isolation, can lead to bad behavior.

Perhaps, though, there is a ready explanation, or at least a partial one, for the moral ambivalence of this age. When a society’s moral foundations gradually erode, efforts to compensate for the loss tend to feature a lack of proportionality. Vast swaths of moral terrain can go neglected, such as humility, self-control, and temperance. But a few sacred (or at least coddled) cows remain and irresistibly attract all the pent-up moral indignation. Racism is surely one of those tropes, and understandably so, in light of the hideous track record of race relations in America and elsewhere. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s consensus has been built, and nearly everyone nowadays at least pays lip service to the need for racial justice and equality. A cultural tipping point was crossed, after which racism could be denounced in the strongest of moral terms. Of course, we’re not suggesting more progress isn’t needed; it surely is.

Racial injustices should of course be denounced, but perhaps what this historical moment reveals is cultural compensation for the loss of much of our collective moral imagination. Rather than recognizing a range of moral victories to savor and, more importantly for

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Marybeth Baggett (PhD, Indiana University of Pennsylvania) is professor of English at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. She is the coauthor of *At the Bend of the River Grand*.



David Baggett (PhD, Wayne State University) is professor of philosophy in the Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. He is the coauthor of *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality*, *God and Cosmos: Moral Truth and Human Meaning*, and *At the Bend of the River Grand*.

present purposes, a wide array of moral failures deserving of our censure and needing healing and grace, our attention has been drawn to but a few notable, sometimes exaggerated, and often inflamed moral fires. This tends to elicit an intensified downpour of indignation that's better distributed more evenly across the moral landscape. Our suggestion is not that all moral sins are equal, for surely they are not, but that the selectivity of contemporary moral outrage is conspicuous and likely unprincipled.

Our sense of moral proportion often needs realignment, not because morality is unimportant but because it's *vital* important. Like all good things—even a mother's love for her child—morality introduces the possibility of error: a hyperbolic sense of injustice over imagined wrongs, a self-righteous or pharisaical attitude, an artificially manufactured presumed right never to be offended, a failure to empathize as one ought, myriad justifications and rationalizations for wrongdoing, callous disregard for the feelings of others.

Arthur Miller thoughtfully explored this temptation and human tendency in his 1953 play, *The Crucible*. Drawing on the infamous Salem witch trials, Miller's drama is often seen as an allegory of McCarthyism and the House Un-American Activities Committee, intent on rooting out communist sympathizers in America. Although Miller plays fast and loose with the historical record in his fictional recreation, he realistically depicts human failings in the struggle for righteousness. As the Puritan town of Salem, Massachusetts, strives to root out ungodliness in its midst, it sacrifices truth and grace. The courts are overtaken by brute power and authoritarianism, as those are seen as the only means of purification. The result is, well, a witch hunt, with anything but actual justice being served.

And yet this injustice is pursued with the language of the righteous, pitting "good" against "evil" in a facile sorting. Miller's Judge Danforth exemplifies this arbitrary moral line drawing, and he positions himself as arbiter of the good and leverages moral language in support of his immoral rulings: "You must understand, sir, that a person is either with this court or he must be counted against it, there be no road between. This is a sharp time, now, a precise time—we live no longer in the dusky afternoon when evil mixed itself with good and befuddled the world. Now, by God's grace, the shining sun is up, and them that fear not light will surely praise it."

Indeed, the greater something is, as with Danforth's desire for a righteous community or today's social justice warriors' insistence on human dignity, the larger a perversion its distortion becomes. We live at a time when penetrating moral insight is in short supply, when horrific evils are perpetrated with reckless abandon or claimed to have divine approval, when a sense of moral proportion needs to be restored, when clarity about the function and foundation of morality is crucial. Morality can indeed shed light on who we are, on the human condition, and on the meaning of life, but only if, and only after, we grasp its significance and import rightly. This book aims to provide some help to do just that.

— Taken from chapter one, "The Comeback of Moral Apologetics"

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