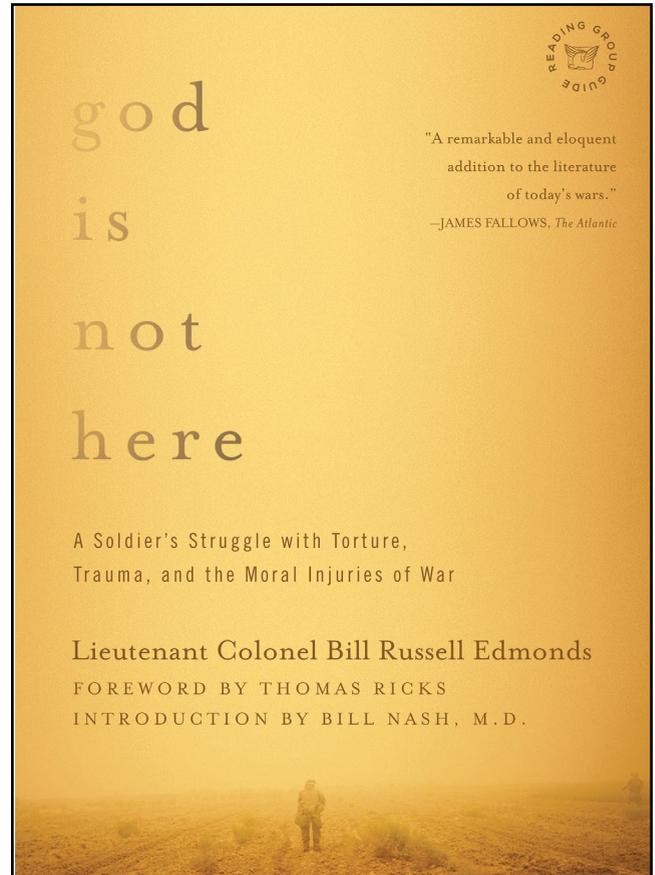


# GOD IS NOT HERE

## A Soldier's Struggle with Torture, Trauma, and the Moral Injuries of War



Bill Russell Edmonds, Pegasus Books, New York, 2015, 312 pages

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*Remembering speechlessly we seek the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an unfound door. Where? When?*

—Thomas Wolfe

In the quote above from the opening of his classic autobiographical novel, *Look Homeward Angel*, Thomas Wolfe describes both the ineffability of truth and how a single moment can lead us to glimpse it.

For Lt. Col. Bill Edmonds, an active-duty Special Forces officer, such a moment came a decade after the start of America's "War on Terrorism." During a visit to a mental health professional, he finds himself struggling to communicate his thoughts and feelings. He feels like

shouting but, instead, speaks softly, politely, unsure how to proceed. Suddenly, the words rush out, and he tells the doctor about his year in Iraq, and how memories of that time have begun to profoundly affect him.

The doctor is unimpressed. Edmonds' stories and symptoms do not "fit the profile" of someone afflicted with posttraumatic stress disorder. The doctor says Edmonds' only problem is his inability to handle stress, effectively blaming Edmonds for his psychiatric symptoms. "Listen to relaxing music," the doctor says. "Do some deep-breathing exercises."

This is the first and last time Edmonds visits a mental-health professional. Instead, he chooses to write, and *God is Not Here* is the result. Within its pages, Edmonds attempts to express the ultimately unknowable truth of that moment in the doctor's office, that is, to comprehend and communicate as well as he can what led him there. The memoir's reader assumes the role of listener, of therapist, as Edmonds relates two interwoven tales—that of his year in Iraq and of his breakdown six years later in Germany.

Edmonds deployed to Mosul in 2005; it was a place spiraling out of U.S. control, with greater depths of violence reached each month. His mission: to oversee operations at an Iraqi prison and to ensure these operations stay on the right side of the law of armed conflict. It is a job for which he is inadequately trained. Yes, he understands what is illegal; however, since he is not an intelligence professional, he is ill-equipped to deal with "Saedi," the crafty, manipulative Kurdish torturer he is supposed to "mentor."

Saedi has employed tactics such as Chinese water torture, electroshock, waterboarding, and the use of a drill. Edmonds, a hooded observer at Saedi's interrogations, does not allow Saedi to go to these extremes. Saedi convinces him, though, that hard measures are needed to force confessions because their prisoners are all "killers" and "rapists" and, without a confession, Iraqi courts will let them go. Other evidence, such as witness testimony and fingerprints, simply cannot be collected in their violent environment. So, Edmonds allows Saedi to violate the law of armed conflict: prisoners are kicked and slapped, forced to drink large quantities of water and kept from urinating, deprived of sleep, and whipped with cables.

Quickly, their roles reverse. Saedi becomes the mentor and Edmonds the conflicted acolyte—conflicted because Saedi wants to employ even harsher tortures, and Edmonds is increasingly unsure whether he should

stop the torturer. In fact, before his deployment is over, Edmonds will want to do even worse things to a prisoner than Saedi does.

In perhaps the memoir's most memorable passage, a prisoner is beaten and confesses to the beheading or shooting of ten Iraqis for an insurgent who pays him \$50 for each murder. When the prisoner pleads to Allah to save him, Edmonds looks at the man with disgust and thinks "God is not here." He feels an almost irrepressible urge to murder the man. Feeling he "will become lost" if he does not escape, Edmonds leaves the dank basement room and climbs stairs—both literal and allegorical—to the light above. Seeing the sunrise, he recoils in horror at the thought of the man he is becoming.

After this incident, Edmonds stops attending interrogations. He is certain Saedi is taking advantage of his absence to employ harsher tortures, but he feels too morally paralyzed to do anything about it. He sees only terrible choices, and he is afraid of what he, himself, may do to prisoners.

To understand what happens to Edmonds six years later, you have to understand the concept of "moral injury." Although ancient, this concept has only in the last decade gained traction in America's mental health community. Unlike posttraumatic stress disorder, moral injury concerns questions of identity rather than physical trauma. According to psychologists in a seminal article, it is caused by "perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations."<sup>1</sup> Symptoms can show immediately or can take years to manifest—however long it takes for the person's thin self-protective narrative about the past to collapse under the growing weight of cognitive dissonance.

Edmonds' breakdown could be a case study on the effects of moral injury. He becomes wracked with guilt. He struggles to believe that he is a good person. He cannot sleep. He cries often. He is manic-depressive and suicidal. He seems to shuffle through selves like a deck of cards.

His chain of command offers him no help, dismissing him as a "malingering drama queen." This is unsurprising. Our military's institutional preferences leave little room for personal conscience. Military culture expects service members suffering from moral distress to "suck it up and drive on." Doctrine does not mention conscience. "Resilience" training prepares soldiers to cope with bad experiences—even if these future experiences involve their doing, or witnessing, something that they *should* feel bad about. Technology enables service

members to kill our nation's enemies at increasingly greater distances and thereby avoid the fact that they are killing human beings.

Nonetheless, as Edmonds' memoir shows, conscience remains a powerful force that cannot be denied. First, Edmonds' conscience leads him to allow Saedi to violate the law of armed conflict because Edmonds believes great harm will happen if forced confessions are not obtained and "killers" and "rapists" are released. Conscience can trump training, it seems. Then, his conscience brings him back from the brink of personally committing atrocities.

Edmonds' memoir, therefore, makes the compelling case that our military needs to pay much more attention to conscience. Adding weight to this case is the current operational environment. Today, military operations increasingly involve tiny, semi-autonomous units, and, thanks to the information superhighway, the actions of these small units can have strategic effects. In this environment, if Edmonds' conscience had failed him, if he had murdered and tortured Iraqi prisoners, and if this story had made the news, it might have become an insurgent propaganda coup to rival that of the Abu Ghraib scandal.

Hopefully, *God is Not Here* will inspire debate within our military. This is not to say that the book does not have drawbacks. It does. Historians, for example, can make little use of the memoir. Like Wolfe's autobiographical novels, it is mostly, but not entirely, historically accurate. Or, as Edmonds writes, "names have been changed" and "some experiences and characters are composites."

Especially maddening is Edmonds' use of perspective. He presents at least three identities: who he is as a captain in Iraq, who he is as a major in Germany, and who he is as a lieutenant colonel today. Due to his sometimes unskillful handling of these identities, it is

often tough for the reader to distinguish between what is supposed to be accepted as fact and what could be fiction (the delusions of an earlier identity).

When, for instance, Edmonds repeatedly states that all Saedi's prisoners are "killers" and "rapists," the reader does not realize that this is not necessarily fact until the book is nearly over and Edmonds expresses the suspicion that many of these prisoners were actually innocent. Similarly, much of the book conflates torture's undeniable utility in getting confessions—true or not—with extracting reliable intelligence from prisoners. Only near the end of the book does Edmonds reveal that he believes torture is a poor means for collecting accurate intelligence. The key to collecting good intelligence from prisoners, he writes, is "perfecting the battle of wits, knowing every personal detail of the prisoner ... and then building a relationship with a prisoner." Nonetheless, the strengths of the book far outweigh its weaknesses.

What will the reader remember most about this time spent in a doctor's office in Germany, listening to Edmonds' two awful tales? One memory will be of how uncomfortable the experience was. Pain, whether it belongs to Edmonds or a prisoner, permeates this memoir's pages. Another will be how close Edmonds comes to capturing the truth of that moment in this office, to seeing more in it than "a stone, a leaf, an unfound door." Indeed, this memoir is a doorway found, a dissonance-proof, authentic framework that Edmonds has constructed to move through and beyond his past. Its truth does not belong only to this Special Forces officer, though. Those readers who suffer deep moral wounds themselves will hear in this book the familiar, haunting echoes of their own thoughts and feelings. Through these echoes they may realize, if they do not already: they are not alone. ■

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## Notes

**Epigraph.** Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward Angel* (New York: Scribner, 2006), 3.

1. Brett T. Litz, et al., "Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy," *Clinical Psychology Review* (December 2009): 695-706.