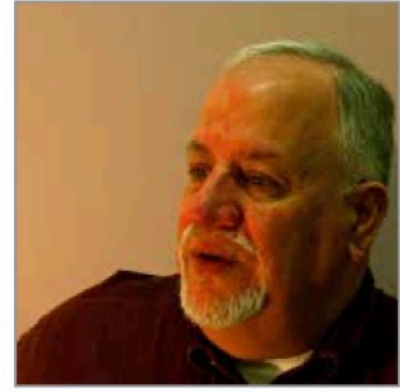
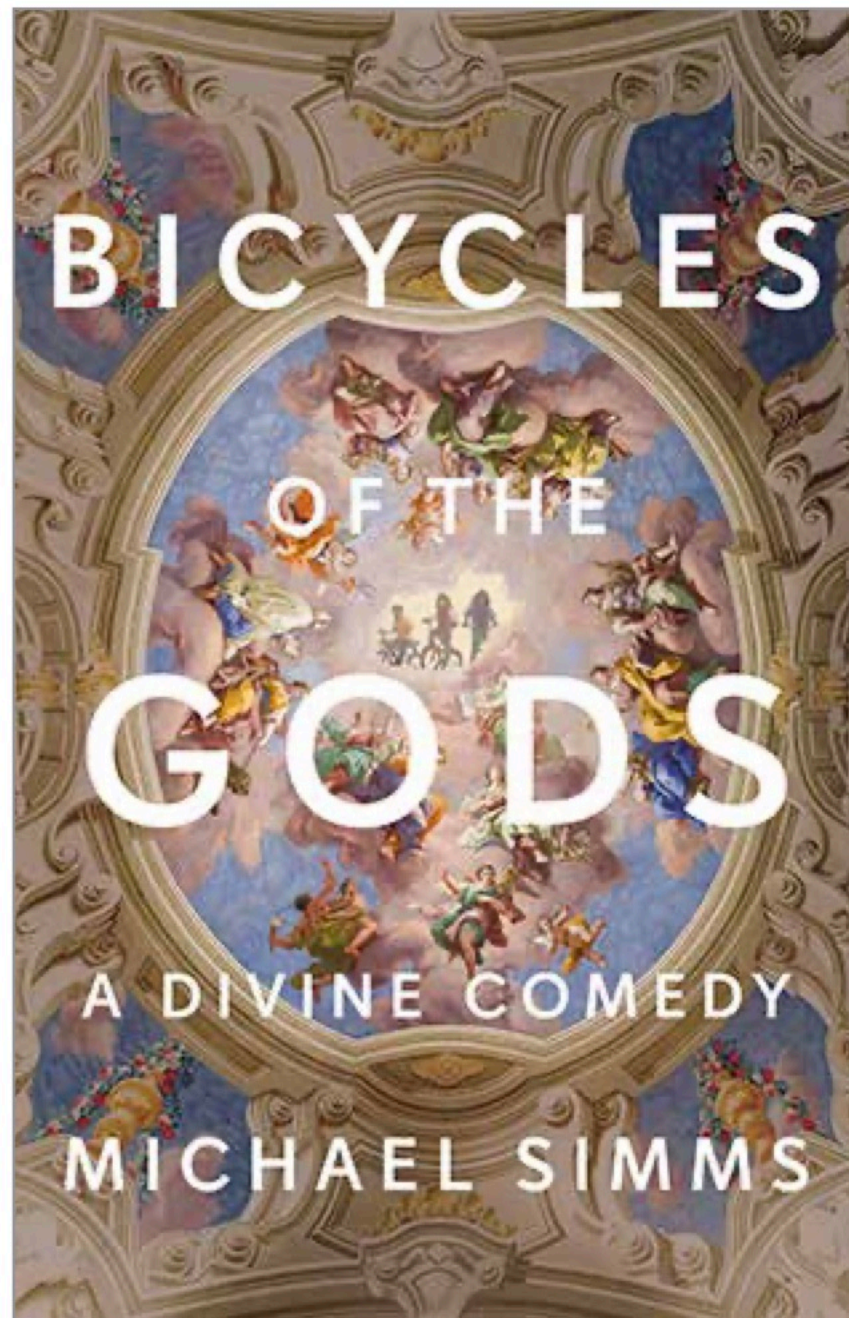


Michael Simms is the founding editor of Vox Populi: A public sphere for poetry, politics and nature. His latest publications are two books of poetry, *American Ash* and *Nightjar*, and a novel *Bicycles of the Gods: A Divine Comedy* released in August 2022.



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DR JOHN SAMUEL TIEMAN  
Review of  
MICHAEL SIMMS'  
*Bicycles Of The Gods: A Divine Comedy*  
Madville Publishing

God and Lucifer team up. As they do now and again, they plan to destroy the world. A cast of Fellini-like characters band together, and work to save Los Angeles and the world. *Bicycles Of The Gods* is an apocalyptic saga that is always riveting, always thought provoking, and alternately funny and sad.

It is refreshing to read a novel that, while satiric, takes seriously spiritual journey. One of the truly surprising parts of the novel is that, while religion is satirized, it is never disrespected. It's a real accomplishment. A lot of folks regard spirituality in general, and religion in particular, as irrelevant. Science and technology have given us ways of seeing the universe that truly benefit humankind. The Webb Telescope literally sees the unseen. All of which can lead to a sense that there is nothing that can remain unseen and unknown. It's a kind of intellectual arrogance, that there is nothing beyond the senses and the instruments, nothing sacred, nothing holy, nothing spiritual, nothing just beyond the tips of the fingers. In this novel, the holy and the spiritual are everywhere, in the streets of Los Angeles, along the Mexican-American border, everywhere. Our vision of heaven and hell have much more to do with Dante than Jesus. Simms picks up where Dante left off.

The novel also reminds me of the Cueva De Los Manos in Argentina. Christianity believes that the Creator God is holy, and that in creation we see expressions of the one God. Pre-monotheistic societies are held to be primitive because they people the universe with all manner of gods, a god of the mountain, a god of the sea, a nymph that protects a shepherd's hut. Polytheists and animists believe that holiness is everywhere. Everything is animated by holiness. Everything is alive with the sacred. In the Cueva De Los Manos in Argentina, those hands, those concentric circles, the animals, lizards, people and beasts, surely this is a world in which the spirits are no further than an outstretched arm.



Mythology is an attempt to not simply explain the unknown, but to participate in the holiness of all things. Odysseus may hate Poseidon, but he never forgets the divinity of the sea. This novel asks us to never doubt, therefore, that three kids, riding by on bicycles, could be gods or angels or demons.

Michael Simms' novel is peopled with gods and angels and demons. There are indeed humans, like the Sisters of the Pistons, a motorcycle gang of nuns, an order that instantly became a favorite this of reviewer. We also meet Maria Nazarene, who is Mother Mary. Then there's the homeless poet, Stefan Jozsef, and his social worker, Christina O'Malley. The central characters, however, are Jesse, Mikey, and Xavi, which is to say Jesus, St. Michael The Archangel, and Shiva respectively. And, yes, they ride their bikes around Los Angeles, awaiting and debating the coming apocalypse. Along the way, they meet all manner of being.

The apocalypse in *Bicycles Of The Gods* is not that of St. John. There are no horsemen bringing conquest, war, hunger, death. There are, however, three kids on bicycles. And nuns on motorcycles. And immigrants. And racism. And a whole host of contemporary characters and problems. In this sense, this novel is not unlike St. John's book.

The eschatology of *Bicycles* is rooted in the troubles of this century, just as St. John is rooted in the first century. At the core of each apocalypse is spiritual corruption that leads to societal disaster. When Jesse's uncle, Lucifer, talks about how he started racism, he admits that Xavi is "still a little pissed at me about that screw up". Lucifer didn't foresee that creating racism as a joke, a spiritual corruption, would lead to a disastrous combination of capitalism, slavery and racism.

Simms begins his novel with a disclaimer, saying that the book is not strictly orthodox when it comes to Christianity. That's true. The book is, however, a search for meaning, for spirituality, indeed for holiness. Much of that holiness is found in politics. Consider the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "Those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion is."

One of the central characters, a homeless poet, Stefan, near the beginning of the book, looks upon America, and writes -

*Oh poor dear  
Broken America  
To whom will you  
Leave your bars  
And laundromats?  
Who will inherit  
The warehouses  
Of the dying?  
Who will want  
The poisoned soil  
The Gideon Bibles  
The libraries of ghosts?*

Toward the end of the novel, Stefan writes -

*Our Father who art in flowers  
In the corner of the birds/ in the heart  
Of compassion/ in charity  
In patience and forgiveness  
Our Father who art in me  
Rid me of evil/ of violence  
Rid me of pain/ of heartache  
And disappointment/ But still  
When such difficulties are necessary  
Give me strength and courage  
To say Thank you Father  
For this lesson*

Stefan's spirituality asks us to look upon our home, then consider how we would rewrite the "Our Father". There are many things that recommend this novel. It is extremely well written. It is clever, thought provoking, funny, politically astute. But above all other things, it is a profound spiritual journey. And that journey includes everyone from those who occasionally say the rosary or Mincha, to those who occasionally read Sylvia Plath or Thomas Merton.