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In Theory: How 'good' is 'The Good Book?'

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Q. British academic and atheist A.C. Grayling has hit the headlines — and the bestseller lists — with the publication of his work, “The Good Book: A Secular Bible.” The amazon.co.uk website describes the book as “[d]rawing on the wisdom of 2,500 years of contemplative non-religious writing on all that it means to be human.”

The book is arranged like the Bible, with double columns, chapters and verses, instead of paragraphs. It even has a first chapter titled “Genesis,” but instead of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden, Grayling calls on scientist Isaac Newton and his famous apple tree. The book ends with a humanist 10 Commandments.

Grayling has been lumped in with Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, purveyors of what’s been called “militant atheism.” But he dismisses the term, saying that being a militant atheist is like “sleeping furiously.” Of his book, Grayling says, “[I]t’s not against religion. There’s not one occurrence of the word God, or afterlife, or anything like that. It doesn’t attack religion, it’s a positive book, there’s nothing negative in it.”

A Catholic website, protectthepope.com, says the publication of “The Good Book” confirms “New Atheism’s pretensions to be a religion.” Others have claimed that an atheist Bible is a contradiction in terms, or just 600 pages of stuff that should be basic common sense.

What do you think of Grayling’s effort? Is it possible to write such a book without involving God? Could “The Good Book: A Secular Bible” be as strong a guide for living a good life as the Bible is?

Answer:

The word “bible,” in its broadest definition, is simply: “Any book, reference work, periodical, etc., accepted as authoritative, informative or reliable.” As such, Grayling’s new work, “The Good Book: A Secular Bible,” qualifies as such a work. Just because it is not a version of the Judeo-Christian Bible does not make it illegitimate or wrong.

In fact, Grayling makes it clear that, as a humanist/atheist, he is not trying to contradict or attack the words of that Bible. He is simply working to present ideas by other great thinkers for those who want to broaden their horizons. So what is all the furor about his book?

Once again, it seems that those of the Judeo-Christian tradition are claiming that they alone have the “capital T” form of truth as it is found in their Bible. What Grayling has done is to present the ideas of some of the greatest thinkers in our history to explain ways in which we would do well to live our lives — ideas about ethical living and other concepts that do not depend on belief in a divine being.

While I grant that Grayling has used a format that could be seen as a tongue-in-cheek jab at the Bible, he is not trying to pass his book off as another form of that historic book.

It is my contention that how well we live our lives is a great deal more important than the scriptures we can quote. With that in mind, we would do well to look at the ideas of men and women who have been revered for their philosophical writing and not get upset that a book by a modern author will somehow subvert the “truth” of the Bible. It is for that reason that I became a Unitarian Universalist more than four decades ago. We are encouraged to search for truth and meaning for our lives in multiple sources. My hope is that we can find

common ground among all of our religious and non-religious traditions as ways to live lives of integrity and compassion.

The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford

Unitarian Universalist Church

Of the Verdugo Hills

La Crescenta

A British academic has gotten his 15 minutes of fame and a handful of euros from imitating (and twisting) the most popular, revered and beloved book in human history. They say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. This is a perfect example. And A. C. Grayling truly puts the “sin” in sincere.

Of course Grayling’s book involves God. Even if it’s not overt, it’s still an attack on faith. How so? By proposing that you can live quite happily and never even think about God.

Violence isn’t the worst form of hatred. Denying even the existence of the other is the worst. In Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan, the priest and the Levite demonstrated hatred toward the man who had been beaten when they simply “passed by on the other side” of the road.

Though God isn’t wounded (we’re the wounded ones), Grayling proposes that we can do the same to him. What a horrible existence: spending your life trying to ignore the God who loved you and made you and has manifested his existence in countless ways all around you. Clinging to a cheap substitute instead of to the life-giving, soul-healing word of God.

This “secular Bible” mocks the content and form of God’s written revelation and replaces it with personal opinion and perhaps a handful of truisms. That’s always been Satan’s tactic. Give people enough truth to hook them, but twist it enough to keep them from God. Could this “secular Bible” be as strong a guide as the Bible? Ask me again in a year or two when everybody has forgotten about it and moved on to something else.

Pastor Jon Barta

Valley Baptist Church

Burbank

Grayling's book is a compilation of the wisdom of some of the greatest humanist thinkers of all time. Intellectual giants, some working long before the Abrahamic faiths emerged, they created foundational theories of philosophy, science and history. Lovingly gathered over the course of 30 years, it is a life's work of an accomplished, scholarly author. It immediately shot up the bestseller list in the UK, a nation with a huge number of well-educated readers.

I conclude it is probably a “good,” in the sense of worthwhile, book.

My interest is piqued enough to consult it when I run across it in a bookstore or library. I understand that

Grayling doesn't include any sources, or even attributions, for the 608 pages of quoted ideas. The librarian in me, and she is the one with the income, trumps my atheist side; so I doubt if I'll buy it.

After 38 years of managing library collections, I'm happy to let others do it for me — may the goddess Minerva bless all libraries and librarians everywhere for taking care of “my” books. But that's just me — by all means, do buy it, preferably from a local bookseller.

Obviously, it is possible to write such a book without involving God — Grayling has done it.

Could it be as strong a guide to living a good life as the Bible is?

Taking “strong” to mean successful, based on the number who follow it, I'd have to say no, of course not, and here's why:

As the Jews are the “people of the book,” atheists are the people of no one book, by definition. We are “a” (from Greek “without” or “no”) - “theists,” without or having no god. Thus there is no deity to center a story on, as the Old Testament editors did in compiling the Hebrew legends and the New Testament's creators did in setting down the originally orally-transmitted story of Jesus. The structures and trappings of religion have no place in atheism.

Grayling himself explains that his book, unlike the Bible, should only be a “resource,” a jumping-off point for figuring out for yourself what constitutes a good life. He says, “But we have to think for ourselves. You must transcend the teaching and the teachers. Don't be a disciple.”

Grayling would include himself with Buddha, Confucius, Plato, Aristotle, Darwin, Marx, Swift, Voltaire, Descartes and hundreds more teachers in *The Good Book*. They are to be read, pondered, synthesized, and then ultimately left behind in finding one's own way to truth. To this list, I would add the Bible and other religious texts, and a creative and critical thinker such as Grayling might even agree with me.

Roberta Medford

Atheist

Montrose

The main question raised this week is: “Could “*The Good Book: A Secular Bible*” be as strong a guide for living a good life as the Bible is?” Predictably, my answer to this question is no. I believe the Bible to be the word of God as written by his prophets and apostles.

Having said that, I'm not going to condemn Grayling's book as heresy or as something coming from the devil — that is simplistic thinking. I haven't had a chance to read this book, so I can't answer specifically about its ability to act as a “guide for living a good life.”

I understand that Grayling crafted the book by using more than a thousand texts from several hundred authors, collections and traditions that represent to Grayling the best in human thinking about human nature. I have to assume that there is much within that book that is good and instructive for living a good life.

To me, the more fundamental question is whether the Bible is the word of God. If so, it should be the guide for our lives. If not, then it is merely a book of history and teachings, as written by men and women centuries ago.

I cannot empirically prove that the Bible is the word of God. But I can suggest how one can find out for himself or herself if it is. In James 1:5 it reads: "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him." That is, if you ask in prayer with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, God will manifest the truth of the Bible to you by the power of the holy spirit.

If you don't ask, or believe you did not get an answer to prayer, then for you, Grayling's book may be an appropriate "guide for living a good life." If you ask and receive a witness of the spirit, then the answer to the question posed this week should be clear.

Rick Callister

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

La Cañada

Jesus said, "No one is good, except God alone" (Mark 10:18). The Bible is called "the Good Book" because it's our good God's good word received and recorded for mankind to live the "good" life forever. It's still argued whether "good" and "God" are etymologically related, but without a doubt, God alone defines what is good.

Holy week includes "Good Friday," a day commemorating Christ's sacrifice for our good; yet realistically, it's God's Friday. The crucifixion was God's intended means of satisfying justice (the good) while simultaneously expressing love and rescuing a redeemable asset, sinful mankind (a good). If mankind was so adept at finding and guiding itself to live the good life, there would be no reason for the Bible or the Messiah, and we wouldn't be celebrating something called Easter.

The Holy Bible is the ultimate book, and that's why everyone who wants to speak ultimately to an issue endlessly copies its moniker as part of their own. There's the Cook's Bible (the end-all instruction for wanna-be chefs) and our recently replaced governor wrote "The Bible of Bodybuilding." There's even a Satanic Bible with retaliatory verses like, "Do unto others as they do unto you."

Now the atheists have a Bible, yet it treads on the very territory of the Holy Bible by competing with contradictory human meanderings about ultimate good. How do atheists know what is ultimately good without referencing The Ultimate Good? They don't. They guesstimate, they get it wrong, and they evangelize to make converts to non-belief who will follow their substitute brand of goodness (which is, at best, good tarnished — and more truthfully, sin varnished).

Grayling replaces Eden's Tree Of Knowledge with Newton's apple tree. Kind of absurd, given that Newton was a biblical theist (heretic though he was), and current atheistic morality spins off modern Western civilization, which owes its moral compass to the Holy Bible. If not for that, the atheistic prophets would probably think that murdering preborn babies was morally good, and that sexual immorality was a badge of pride. Oh yeah, that's the world already without God.

The Rev. Bryan Griem

Montrose Community Church

Montrose

There is an old joke that goes like this: What do you call an atheist at a funeral? The answer is, somebody who is all dressed up with no place to go.

And as long as I'm on atheist jokes: What is an atheist? That's somebody who has no invisible means of support.

Seriously, it is interesting to me that those who don't believe in God still use religious terms to “sell” whatever it is they are putting out there. The title, “The Good Book,” is even a term for the religious tome that Jews, Christians and Muslims honor. My dad even used to use the term, “the Good Book,” and he meant the Bible.

What do I think of the concept of a secular bible? I'm not opposed. And I believe that anything that helps people live a moral life, with God or without God, is a good thing. I even believe that it's possible to live such a life without God. Lonely, perhaps, but possible.

The bigger question, it seems to me, is the question of faith. A person believes or he doesn't believe. Believers aren't necessarily better people than non-believers. Believers believe because they have been touched by something, possibly the hand of God.

I think non-believers are missing the point if they try to show that atheists can be as good as believers. You'll get no argument from me on that one. But the point of belief — which atheists miss — is not to be necessarily a “better” person. The point of belief is to be faithful to the one who has called our names.

Those of us who believe have experienced something like Jeremiah in the Hebrew Bible experienced, or even Moses: It's not that we want to believe; it's that we can do no other, and being a “better” person is irrelevant.

The Rev. Skip Lindeman

La Cañada Congregational Church

La Cañada

I thought we'd get a nice easy lob for a Holy Week question, what with our Jewish neighbors celebrating Passover and we Christians looking forward to our biggest religious celebration of the year (Easter). But OK, I get it — we tell an impossible story: the story of a man who performed great miracles of healing, a man who walked on water and calmed the sea, a man who drove out demons, a man who was the son of God. At this time of year, we celebrate the truth that this divine man was killed by the authorities of his time who were jealous and scared and wary. And three days after his death, he rose again. He ate some grilled fish with his disciples; he walked along the road with them; he let them touch the scars on his hands and his feet. He told them to carry on with the good work, and he said that he would be with us always.

It is an impossible story to explain in human terms.

Many of us are relieved and intrigued to find that there is a realm beyond what we can control. We take hope from knowing that God wants something better for us than the messed up world we have made for ourselves. And in our best moments, we are open to being changed and renewed by our encounters with the spirit. Change and renewal through faith actually happens to people. It has been happening for 2,000 years.

Others, however, are less open to mystery, and so seek the best paths available within the world of rational thought, like a secular Bible. Other than the mocking nature of this exercise, there is nothing wildly wrong with

it. It's just — limiting.

The Rev. Paige Eaves

Crescenta Valley

United Methodist Church

Montrose