

Can We Be Good without God?

by Dennis Prager

The following article is the edited text of the opening statement in a debate at Oxford University on March 3, 1993. Under the auspices of Oxford's Chabad Rabbi Shmuel Boteach, Dennis Prager debated Jonathan Glover, a lecturer in moral philosophy at Oxford. The full text of the entire debate appeared in Ultimate Issues (Vol. 9, No. 1, copyright 1993) a scholarly quarterly journal published by Prager. It is reprinted here with permission. For further information write Ultimate Issues, 10573 Pico Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90064.

If the question is, "Can we be good without God?" the answer is, of course, yes.

Of course there could be people who could be good without God. There could be people who could be good who believe that extraterrestrials visit them nightly. You can be good if you think that the earth stands on the back of a turtle. There were good pagans. There were good people who worshipped animals. In theory, you can be good and believe in anything. So if the question is to be answered literally, the debate is over.

"Can a human being be good without reference to God?" is therefore obviously not the question. There are two bigger questions.

One is, are people *likely to* be good without God? That's the question, I think, intelligent people have to ask. The question, "Is it possible for one person to be good without God?" is no question – just as, incidentally, it is very possible to be evil with God. I am religious, and I am defending the argument on behalf of God's necessity for ethics. But I am the first to acknowledge that there are quite a number of religious people who are disgusting. Indeed, any

religious person who doesn't acknowledge this is a fool, and does God and religion a disservice. It is a source of deep embarrassment, deep unhappiness for me, but it is a fact of life. Different times have shown different groups doing this. Right now, unfortunately, the most internationally known example is the Iranian *religious fatwah* to murder a human being for what he wrote – to murder in the name of God. It's as simple as that. I acknowledge it. That people can misuse God and religion is hardly new, but it hardly argues against the necessity of God.

My analogy would be to medicine. Those of you who know of Auschwitz certainly must know of Dr. Mengele, the Nazi doctor who performed grotesque, torturous experiments on human beings; he would inject children's eyeballs with dye to see if he could make them into "Aryan" blue eyeballs, would X-ray women's ovaries to see if he could sterilize them, and he did the same to male genitalia. I won't go through the litany, but the fact of the German Medical Association accepting his experiments and that he was a medical doctor only reveals that medical doctors can do absolute evil. It doesn't reveal that medicine is unnecessary.

To argue that religion and God are unnecessary to morality because there are evil people in religion is to me tantamount to saying that because Dr. Mengele and the German Medical Association did what they did, we don't need medicine.

God is necessary for morality to survive, and I will explain why. But I want it clear at the outset that I will not defend an absurdity, and it would be absurd to argue that there are no good people who are atheists, since my worthy debater is a good man who is an atheist.

Now, having said that, there are two separate questions here.

The first, which I have just discussed, is a very real, practical question: Are we more likely to make good people

with or without God? The second is: Do good and evil exist if there is no God?

Let me deal first with this question – can good and evil exist if there is no God?

Here the answer to me is as evident as my first points were, that there are bad people who believe in God and good people who don't. It is clear that if there is no God, there is no good and evil; there are only *opinions* about good and evil. Good and evil without God are purely subjective: I think that torturing children is bad; Mengele thought that torturing children is good.

If there is no God who makes a declaration about the torture of children, then it's Prager's opinion against Mengele's opinion. If there isn't a moral source that transcends Mengele and Prager, there is no way to say that Mengele is wrong – capital W. You can only say, "I, personally, think that what he did is wrong." But so what? You may say, "I personally, think that a BMW is a better car than a Mercedes," but nobody argues that this is an objective statement. That's taste. Without God, good and evil are taste. Like I think this painting is beautiful and this one is ugly. I think this act is beautiful and this act is ugly.

Just as an honest religious person must confront the reality of religious people who do evil, an honest atheist must confront the fact that with all his or her desire for there to be good in this world, for us to be able to declare Auschwitz evil or the Gulag evil or racism evil, they are purely terms of taste if there is no God. That is all that we have.

If there is no God, you and I are purely the culmination of chance, pure random chance. And whether I kick your face in, or I support you charitably, the universe is as indifferent to that as to whether a star in another galaxy blows up tonight. You are, after all, as I am, just stellar matter, if there is

no God. We happen to be self-conscious stellar matter, but so what? Whether you're kicked or a stone is kicked is only an atomic difference – it's a molecular question, not a moral question, if there's no moral universe.

What atheists who speak in terms of good and evil have done is appropriated religious dialogue for themselves. They have kidnapped our way of speaking and said what was rooted in God doesn't need God any longer.

Which now brings me to the second and perhaps in some way more fundamental question because good and evil are ultimately a question of how we behave, not a question of theory: Are we likely to produce people who are good with or without God? Which is the greater likelihood?

Let me begin by asking a question that I have posed on my radio show in Los Angeles numerous times to atheist callers who tell me that religion is irrelevant to goodness. I ask them the following question. Imagine you are walking in a bad Los Angeles neighborhood at midnight. You are alone, and you notice ten men walking toward you in a dark alley. Would you or would you not be relieved to know that they had just attended a Bible class?

Your laughter is identical to their laughter though usually they don't laugh because they feel that they are trapped. Why did most of you laugh?

Because you, too, even if you are a member of Atheists United, if you are a member of Down With God, Inc., you, too, would breathe a major sigh of relief if you were walking in a dark alley and you knew they had just been studying Genesis. Because while it is possible they will mug or rape you, deep in your gut you know that the likelihood is that they won't. If you could only know one thing, that would be a good thing to know about the ten men who are walking toward you.

I will go further. I interviewed Pearl and Sam Oliner, two

professors of sociology at California State University at Humboldt, the authors of the most highly regarded work on altruism, *The Altruistic Personality*. The book is a lifetime of study of non-Jewish rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust. If there was any time where moral clarity prevailed, that was certainly such a time.

The Oliners are not religious people. That is very important. They had a sociological agenda, not a religious agenda. They arrived at many conclusions, but I asked them the following question: "Professor Oliner"- it was to him in this case – "knowing all you now know about who rescued Jews during the Holocaust, if you had to return as a Jew to Poland where the greatest amount of massacring took place, and you could knock on the door of only one person in the hope that they would rescue you, would you knock on the door of a Polish lawyer, a Polish doctor, a Polish artist,"- I tried to pick the best possible professions – "a Polish farmer, or a Polish priest?" Without hesitation, he said, "a Polish priest." And his wife added, "I would prefer a Polish nun" because, she said, they had a better record than the priests did.

I thought that this was a pretty devastating response. Over a doctor, over a lawyer, over an artist they would have picked a Polish priest – and these are Jews speaking who know that the Catholic Church's record in World War II was not a great one. It was a mixed bag, but this is not the time for that issue. But when push came to shove, that's where they would knock.

My friends, when push comes to shove, that's where we would knock, just as you would be relieved to know that ten people had just walked out of a Bible class. That's reality. At Oxford or Harvard or wherever, in the highest realms of ethereal theory, you can work out brilliant philosophical schemes for morality, but in real life, in actual real life, that's the door you knock on – where somebody actually believes there's a God who said, "Thou shalt not murder."

Sure, there are a lot of people who claim to be religious or even are religious and don't live by it. I have no excuse for them. I'm merely talking about the likelihood on planet earth that it is the door that you, too, would knock on, even if you were a member of Atheists United.

To see what secularism induces, it is very important to look at campuses. In the Western world, the secular temple is the university. There are some religious people at universities, but by and large it is a place that is based upon secularism.

In the secular university in the United States there is a massive movement toward what is called multiculturalism. In theory, it means the celebration of many cultures, which obviously, I am for, since I'm a member of a minority culture. I obviously want people to celebrate their cultures . But that's not what multiculturalism is about. Multiculturalism is, at its essence, an onslaught against the belief that any culture's values are better than any other culture's values.

It is ultimately an argument against the Judea-Christian tradition, which held that its values were superior. To those who hold this Judea-Christian view, however, as either (a) purely arrogant, or (b) pointless, I have a question that the late Professor Allen Bloom used to ask his students at the University of Chicago.

Bloom writes that he would enter the sophomore class where he taught, and he knew at the outset exactly what they believed – that culture determines morality. Remember, if there is no God, morality is a matter of what a culture says it is. So he would ask them the following question: Imagine that you were in the British Imperial Government in India in the 19th Century. You had complete control as Governor over the area of your jurisdiction and you were informed that the Hindus in your area were about to engage in Satee. Satee is the Hindu practice of burning a widow with her husband's corpse. Would you or would you not stop it?

Why does he ask the question? It should be obvious. If you say that you would not stop it, then you are implicitly admitting that culture entirely determines morality. Though *you* think widow burning is wrong, many Hindus thought it was right, and who are you to say it's wrong and stop it? But if you *would* stop it, then you don't hold that all cultural values are morally equal; you really do believe in a universal morality, and that morality is not merely a matter of culture, and you would therefore impose your morality on those Hindus.

So, what did the students answer, having been given this great cognitive dissonance? "The British didn't belong in India," which is somewhat of a non-sequitur.

I would stop Satee because I believe in a God who says, "Thou shalt not murder," and it doesn't have an asterisk denoting "except for widows." Therefore, I would, with great respect to Hindu tradition, say, "You are wrong. So long as I have power here, you will not burn widows."

I'll give you a second example, which took place in France two weeks ago. An African woman was sentenced to prison for performing clitoridectomies on her daughters – the removal of a girl's clitoris. This has been performed on between 70 and 100 million women in Africa, in Muslim states primarily.

Given my value system, that is the mutilation of a human being. It is an evil. To the French, heirs of the Judea-Christian and Western traditions, this is an evil. To this woman, it was a good. I would have loved to have asked the French, on what grounds they could arrest this woman, if they don't have a religious basis. They could say, "This is French law. you can't do it in France." But this argument is certainly against multiculturalism. It certainly argues that our idea is better; we say it's mutilation, we should stop it.

The Nuremberg Trials were predicated on the belief that there is a universal law. But where does universal law come from?

The universe? Neptune? Does Neptune form the Ten Commandments? Does human reason? Give me a break. Human reason can argue for anything. People use reason any way they want. It's very reasonable in that culture to have clitoridectomies, just as it was reasonable to support Stalin – which brings me to one of the reasons I became religious.

I looked at what secularism produced. May I tell every one of you who wants to point out the atrocities done in the name of God, you don't have a leg to stand on compared to the atrocities committed by secular ideologies. Nazism and Communism make religious evil-doers look like Boy Scouts.

Communism and Nazism are secular ideologies. They were onslaughts against the Judea-Christian tradition and they did a very effective job obliterating that tradition. Their Fuhrer was God. You swore fidelity to Hitler. There was no God above Hitler who could say Hitler was wrong. Hitler was the source of morality. In the Soviet Union, Stalin and the Party were the source of morality.

What made me religious? Seeing how many secular intellectuals backed Stalin. The only place in the Western world – and this is my field, Communist affairs – where you could find organized support for Communism was among secular intellectuals. Organized labor was anti-Communist, but from Cambridge to Harvard to Stanford, you would find professor after professor who had studied dialectal materialism and therefore could somehow find reason to support Stalin and the Gulag.

The people who supported it were in the secular temple, the university. It was the moral chaos of the university that made me realize that what the Psalms said – "Wisdom begins with the fear of God" was true.

Ultimately, yes, one individual here, another individual there could be really sweet and fine without God, but a system that

obliterates the religious basis of morality will ultimately consume itself. I look at the Netherlands today and I see the latest law they passed on behalf of euthanasia, even liberalizing it further so that we have now quantum leaps in the amount of killing doctors can do in the Netherlands, where the doctor has been gradually transformed from the person who saves you to the person who can easily kill you. This is all done by secular humanists for very compassionate and rational reasons.

Obviously, reason alone does not bring you to morality. It was reasonable to do what the Greeks did – leaving deformed and ugly children on mountaintops to die. Greek writers said the Jews were barbarians for keeping all their children alive. The Greeks only kept esthetically pleasing ones alive. Who was right? The ones who followed Greek reason? It is, after all, much more rational to keep only healthy, good looking babies alive.

But every one of you thinks it's wrong because you're the heir to the Jewish and then Christian tradition that said human beings are created in God's image. You get rid of that tradition and then you start treating people as they were treated in a place like Auschwitz, where you make a person into a lamp shade. Why not? If there is no God, all you've done is rearrange molecules.