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The Good Book: A Humanist Bible

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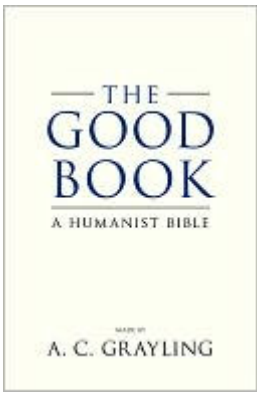

The Good Book: A Humanist Bible

Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: I'm Joanne Myers, director of Public Affairs Programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council I'd like to thank you all for joining us.

It isn't every day that the reputation of our speaker precedes him, but that is the case this morning. A.C. Grayling is known as a remarkable thinker, a prolific writer, an acclaimed philosopher, and one of Britain's best-known public intellectuals, who was just elected president-elect of the British Humanistic Association. We are really fortunate to have him as our guest.

Although there are many words one could use to describe our speaker and the book he is about to discuss, I have narrowed it down to three, which should prepare you for what you are about to hear. They are imaginative, erudite, and skilled.

Why these three? First of all, very few thinkers and writers today would have the imagination to conceive of this project, even fewer the breadth of knowledge required to draw from so many different sources, and hardly any would have the literary skill to actually format a new work constructed in the Biblical manner, chapter, and verse.

In *The Good Book*, Professor Grayling offers a thoughtful, non-religious alternative to the Bible, drawing on the wisdom of 2,500 years of contemplative writing.

Humanism, as many of you may know, has its roots in the philosophies of classical antiquity, including ancient China and India. These civilizations, along with ancient Greece, were concerned with humanity and finding the best way to live one's life. In fact, much of what we think of as Christian ethics comes from the thinking of ancient Greeks. Therefore, it's not surprising that in publishing this *magnum opus* Professor Grayling would draw on the wisdom of civilization's greatest thinkers, philosophers, poets, and essayists, along with the perspective of secular humanist traditions. He has collected, edited, rearranged, and organized the collective secular wisdom from the writings of Herodotus and Lucretius, Confucius and Mencius, Seneca and Cicero, Montaigne, Bacon, and so many others.

Professor Grayling devotes his attention to the question of how life should be lived, how we relate to one other, and how vicissitudes are to be faced and joys appreciated. *The Good Book* aims to provide a rich resource of materials for thinking about these issues.

You don't have to be a humanist or an atheist to thoroughly enjoy his work, as all one really needs is to have an appreciation for the wisdom and inspiration that is to be found in the world's great literature. *The Good Book* will not only provide the details for a moral and ethical code for a life, but it is also a rich resource of materials for thinking about what really matters.

Please join me in welcoming one of Britain's treasures, our guest today, A.C. Grayling.

Thank you for joining us.

Remarks

A.C. GRAYLING: Thank you very much indeed, Joanne. It was terribly kind of you to choose those three words. Others choose other words, as you can imagine, especially with so ambitious and hubristic a project as this one. I'll tell you about it in just a moment.

But if I may begin with a little anecdote, especially in this company, where there are some distinguished ambassadors present. My father-in-law was the British ambassador to Chile during the Pinochet years and had what the Chinese would call an "interesting time" there as a result. My wife, who is a well-known novelist, Katie Hickman, wrote a book called *The Daughters of Britannia*. Some of you ambassadors' wives may have read about the experiences that she recounts there.

I mention that because for nearly 20 years now I have had the honor to be a representative to the Human Rights Council in Geneva for an NGO. We lobby when the Council meets (and we used to when it was the Commission), on various human rights questions—women and children, education, free expression, and the like.

Not very far away is the Large Hadron Collider at Cern, where an international consortium of scientists are accelerating protons to near the speed of light in opposite directions and then crashing them together. Imagine that.

These tiny, little things which have to be so precisely beamed at one another, and then in the momentary debris of these explosions they are hunting for evidence of the very early history of the universe. The thing is that the same nations who quarrel with one another at the Human Rights Council are present side by side at the Large Hadron Collider.

If you go to Cern and you have the great good fortune to be taken down in this vast lift way underground to the great chamber where the Compact Muon Solenoid experiment is—there are four experiments on the collider—you see the massive solenoid machine color-coded for all the countries that have contributed scientific and technical engineering skill to the building of this machine. You see Indian and Pakistani scientists side by side, you see Palestinian and Israeli scientists side by side, you see Russians and Americans and Persians, all working away together, and their representatives a couple of kilometers away are all arguing furiously.

I sometimes feel when I go to Geneva that I would like to take the diplomatic representatives at the Human Rights Council, put them in the Large Hadron Collider, and fire them at one another as an alternative to banging their heads together, because that would certainly bang their heads together and they would think rather differently.

All they would need to see is the results of collaboration. The collaboration, of course, is on this tremendous, ambitious, and remarkable endeavor to understand this world of ours, to understand the structure and properties of the physical universe and its origins.

It's subjective. It's about something other than temporary local human concerns. It's a magnificent achievement. It shows that scientific endeavors have the character of something truly global, something that the human species as a whole working together is trying to do. It's extraordinary, it really is. It is where there is peace and cooperation, and it is a model of all that is best about our kind.

That's sort of apropos in connection with *The Good Book*.

I thought many years ago, when I was a young academic studying the different normative traditions of ethics —because when one studies philosophy academically, one gets into very technical and specialist areas where one has to use very long words, like "marmalade" and "corrugated iron," and it's only other specialists in the field who can be party to the conversation you are having—one thing that interested me, after having studied and thought a little bit about some of the great theories of ethics, was to look at normative ethics—that is to say those ethical systems which advised, guided, or instructed people how they should live.

I read my way carefully through the literature of the great traditions which do this—so, for example, classical antiquity in the Western tradition, Confucius, the Jewish and Christian writings, the Muslim writings. As I looked at these books, I noticed that there were some rather significant differences between them.

There were traditions in which the instructions, the commands, the requirements of a transcendent being were delivered to his (usually his) creatures, his creation, and a very specific set of ideas about the relationship between creation and the creator were conveyed.

Then, there were other traditions which premised their attempt to understand what the good and well-lived life is on its most sympathetic and generous understanding of human nature—a frail, needy thing, human nature, capacity of course of great joy and satisfaction also. These, as you might call them humanist—that is with a small

'h'—traditions, like the ancient Greek ethical traditions were much closer in a way to the grain of human nature. They didn't try to cross that grain, they didn't try to say "you must limit and constrain, you must hang in there somehow."

Perhaps the best and simplest way to describe the contrast that I found in these traditions was the contrast between the *Contemptus mundi* literature of the High Medieval period, the contempt of the world, teaching us that the world is a dark and dangerous place where we are likely to snag our souls on the rusty nails of sin at any point, that the devil and his minions wait to catch us at any moment, not just when we indulge our appetites but even when we sneeze ("bless you").

Then you contrast that with the Renaissance itself, full of paintings of picnics and portraits of ordinary people, celebration of music and poetry, a refocusing on this life, this world now, and all its potential for beauty and for joy. The recovery of that sense of how a life can be good and flourishing in this life that we have now, that was a recovery of the classical view of these matters. When you read the Greeks and the writings of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, you often find—in Ovid and others, and in the Stoic tradition also, all the way back to Aristotle—you find a celebration of aspects of human life where it is possible to live thoughtfully and responsibly but yet with an enjoyment, a relish, in occupying one's body and being amongst the flowers and the breezes of this world.

At about that time, I thought to myself, gosh, what a different history the world would have had if the Bible makers, instead of drawing on the great religious documents of their traditions, if instead they had focused on Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus and Cicero and others. If they had put their documents together out of that, what a different history the world might have had.

The minute that I had that thought, I had the other thought, which was, oh dear, well I better try to do it in that case since nobody else has thought of doing it.

So many decades ago I began my reading, collecting texts, putting them together, studying very carefully the history of the way that the sacred scriptures of the world had been put together. It's a very interesting process, if we think of the holy books as having emerged from great episodes of inspiration on the part of those who had had, as they felt, direct contact perhaps with the divine voice.

We tend to treat them rather unhistorically. When historical scholarship on the origins of the Bible really began, in the 19th century and since, the discovery was made that these texts have multiple sources, that editors interwove these texts and redacted them, changed them, put in other texts, occasionally perhaps deleted inconvenient occurrences of the word "not," and shaped them, massaged them a little bit, for what can only be described really as a tendentious purpose, in the sense that it was a tendency to tell a certain story, to convey a certain message about the world and the deity and the relationship between the two.

So I thought, I will do this to the secular literature of the great traditions. I will select them, arrange them, edit them, interweave them, every now and then adjust them, modify them, and here and there put in a few passages of my own which would connect, link, or introduce.

This of course has taken a very long time. But it has also been the greatest fun. Only imagine editing Aristotle—ooh, I think he should have put it this way. You can just imagine giving yourself license to do that—but always with a very responsible end in view, which is to try to produce something which would not displace—it doesn't challenge, it doesn't offer itself as something that should take the other great normative ethical documents of world history and push them aside. Not at all. It's a contribution.

Despite its hubristic-seeming nature, it is really a modest contribution to the great conversation that mankind has with itself about "the good." It's a response to what Socrates said: "The unconsidered life is not worth living."

What he meant is that to reflect on the values that you are going to live by and how you are going to pursue and attempt to realize them; to think about how you live and what matters; to be able to make a case to yourself and to others about what matters; and to recognize the great truths about what that is, including the fact that good lives are lives that are centered on good relationships, a connection with our fellows, with those we love and care about, and with our societies—all these are really focal to the chance of creating something, a life full of flourishing and well-being, a life which is worth living.

There is a kind of urgency to this, because you will know—I'm sure you were reading Herodotus in the bath last night, so you will remember the story that he tells about Solon, the great law giver of Athens, visiting Croesus in Libya, Croesus the richest man and a great king, and Croesus says to Solon, "Who is the happiest man in the world?"—meaning *moi*, because he was expecting Solon to say that.

Solon picked some rather ordinary but upstanding citizen of Athens as his choice.

Croesus was very annoyed and he said, "How can you possibly compare an ordinary citizen of Athens with the richest king in the world?"

That was when Solon said, as you may remember, "Call no man happy until he is dead, until you have seen the trajectory, the arc, of a life and been able to judge whether it was well lived."

And he says something which I always quote, I'm afraid almost to the point of boredom, reminding people, because it does illustrate the urgency with which we must accept Socrates' challenge to think about life. Solon says to him, "A human life is less than a thousand months long due to man"—12 times 70. It's quite alarming when you consider that it is less than a thousand months, and that a third of them were asleep and the other third of them were shopping, or working out our tax returns, or something. So the amount of time that you have for doing the Socratic thing, of thinking about the good and how you are to live it, is relatively limited. There is a certain urgency there.

Whenever I mention this and I see faces fall in an audience, I then proceed to the next part of the story, which is to report a rather wonderful article I read in a newspaper by a woman whose mother had just died, having about two years to the day beforehand been diagnosed with a terminal illness. She said, "These two years were the happiest years of my mother's life because everything trivial fell away. All the things that get in the way of seeing clearly were removed. The people she cared about and the things that she loved doing, they came fully into focus. In those two years she lived a whole new lifetime."

In a way—and I speak with all the authority of a professor of philosophy here—there is no such thing as time; there is only experience. One lifetime can be filled with many lifetimes, just as one lifetime can be less than one lifetime if people waste their time.

When Solon said to Croesus, "A human life is less than a thousand months long; one must therefore focus on the things that are truly good or worthwhile," it does place this responsibility on us to accept that challenge of Socrates and to think about the good life.

I went to the texts of the great traditions, not just the Western, but also to the Eastern and South Asian traditions, because, as you know, there are very longstanding and very rich non-religious (in fact atheist) traditions in Indian philosophy. When I selected these texts and wove them into one another, and made choices about which insights and consolations might go very well with others, and put it together into this form, I chose to do it in a way which is similar to or reflective of the more modern translations of the Bible.

By the way, I should just pause for a moment and register the fact that I am using the word "Bible" as a stock expression. There is in the Jewish tradition the Tanakh, and it's Christians who call the marriage of the Tanakh with the New Testament canon "the Bible." But I'm just using it for shorthand purposes.

In the Anglophone tradition of the Bible especially, it is arranged in a way which is very easy and very inviting to read—double-columned chapter and verse; you can read a very short passage and reflect on it, or you can read at greater length. One of the reasons for the success of the religious Bible is the way it has been presented.

For example, the makers of the King James Version of the Bible, a work of great beauty in its language, was even in its own day, in the first decade of the 17th century, already archaic. The English was 100 years out of date, partly because it was mainly based on Tyndale's translation, which was a century before, but also partly because the makers of the King James Version wanted this slightly heightened sense that a slightly archaic use of language gives, a sort of vatic sense that something of some significance is being said or reported in that language. If you used the colloquial language of the day—if I had written this as a deaf man, in the contemporary patois that people use—it wouldn't have conveyed quite the sense of importance that the makers of these texts attached to them.

The people whose texts I have used here are very special for lots of different reasons, not just that they are among those who have offered us the best that has been thought and said about human experience and the human condition, but also because their lives were lived in much less comfortable circumstances than ours. In fact, if you lived in the Roman world or in ancient China, your life was much more like living in Benghazi, Kabul, or Baghdad today than it is like living in New York or London.

It was a world where there were risks and dangers, where life was short, where resources were more fragile. If you were a citizen of a polis, in one of the cities of the Greek world, it would not be impossible that at some point in your life you would be engaged in war. If your city lost, you might be enslaved.

These are possibilities and likelihoods that are practically null for us in our contemporary world. We don't realize how all this insight, all this experience, that these great writers of the past whom I have drawn from, that their

experience was ground out between the millstones of a harsher reality than we are used to.

For that reason, their insights are all the more valuable and all the more potent. When they talked about the desire for the good, they talked about how one should live with courage in relation to things that we can't ourselves control, or try to master our appetites and our fears so that we can liberate ourselves from slavery to fear, slavery to wrong ideas—they really meant it. This was not just armchair speculation; it was something that came out of hard experience and is well worth meditating on.

I thought that if all those many years ago the Bible makers had worked on these texts, something like this might have resulted. The religious texts do of course exist, and so I am putting this one into the same sort of category—that is, as a resource for people thinking about the good, about their lives, about ethical questions—to allow people to see what the great traditions other than the great religious traditions have to offer on this.

For us here, a book of this kind could very well be made by each one of us out of the opportunity that we have to go to libraries, and we've all had educations. We're alerted to the fact that people like Cicero, Montaigne, and David Hume existed. We can read them. We could go to the poetry of the world for our consolation and our uplift. We forget that there are so many other people who just haven't had that opportunity, they haven't been told of the existence of these resources, and therefore they can't go to them.

Trying to bring together, to distill them, and to unify them in this way as a source that people might use for that important business of reflecting on how one should live well seemed to me to be worth doing. Hence I have done it.

Actually people think that it's an aggressive act, that I am attempting to displace the Holy Bible—that is not going to happen in any hurry—and I don't imagine that anybody would be so hubristic as to think they could do it. So that is not the intention.

There is not one occurrence of the word "god" or "goddess," "soul," "afterlife." It's as if there isn't religion at all. It just addresses itself to human experience in the here and now.

It doesn't attack any religions. It is important to say that because some of those have already reacted to the book. As you know, the best reviews are written by people who haven't read the thing yet. [Laughter]

There is a natural assumption that if somebody has come up with what they offer as a Bible—and here, what I am doing is I am capitalizing on the fact that *biblos*, which means book in ancient Greek, referred to the one and only book that was a resource of people for century after century after century. It was their repository of wisdom and guidance and history, and shaped their view of the world.

As you know, it is full of sex and violence. It really is post-watershed reading. You have the concept of the evening watershed in television.

I was in the back of a London taxi the other day. Not anything to do with this at all, but somehow or other the conversation got around to the Old Testament.

I said to the cab driver, "Have you read it?"

He said, "No."

I said, "Do you remember any stories from it?"

He pondered for a moment. He said, "I remember about somebody's wife turning into a pillar of salt."

I detected behind that remark marital problems—it was probably wishful thinking. [Laughter]

I said, "Do you know where that story comes from, the pillar of salt?"

He said, "No, I don't."

So I told him the story of Lot and Sodom and Gomorrah, the pillar of salt, and Lot's daughters. He was outraged—the angels coming to Lot and the men of Sodom wanting them and Lot saying, "You can't have them. They're my guests. You can have my daughters instead." He was horrified.

He said, "Is that in the Bible?"

I said, "Yes, it is."

He said, "Surely they edited it out." [Laughter]

This of course is why, right up until the Reformation anyway, the Bible was a forbidden book and people weren't allowed to read it. It had all these disconcerting things in it.

There is the story of David, a great figure in the lineage of Christ himself, seeing Bathsheba in her bath, and sending her husband off to the front line of battle so he could get hold of her. Those aspects of the Bible are very unedifying.

It was for this reason that it was so long before the whole text became available and why such a lot of work has been done to reinterpret, parse, and gloss various things in that book—for example, to take the beautiful erotic love poem of the Song of Solomon and to turn it into an allegory about the relation to the church. And it is all very well done.

The Good Book contains no pillars of salt and incestuous relationships. It is just those perspectives of what it is to be the best that one can be as a human being. It doesn't ask anybody to accept any injunctions, other than one, which is to think for yourself, to take responsibility in the end for the moral values that we live by.

I say towards the end of the book what we have to do is we have to go beyond our teachers, go behind our texts, and do that thinking for ourselves and to take responsibility for those choices, because then ultimately we own our own lives. When we own them and we live according to our best, most generous, and humane thoughts, we recognize that what it is to live the good life is to try to live the good life.

Thank you very much indeed.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: Thank you. William Verdone.

How do we dispel hatred, how do we make everything okay, because we seem to be living in a world so much on edge?

A.C. GRAYLING: When my youngest daughter was three or four years old, she went to a kindergarten in a school in our part of London where there are large immigrant communities. In that school there were 36 different languages spoken by the children there. She was in a little group of very young children of all backgrounds, languages, ethnicities, and traditions. The children themselves knew nothing about all that. They just played together as children. I have often reflected on how much hard work goes into making those children different from one another, telling them they belong to different tribes, different religions, different this, different that.

We had a campaign in London just recently in which we put a row of smiling baby faces on the side of the bus in London and under each one we put their political affiliation—Labour, Tory, Liberal, and so on—as you might do here, on the side of the bus you might have a Republican one-year-old and a Democrat one-year-old. Of course, you see the absurdity of it and you see how hard we have to work at introducing divisions between human beings. The thing to do is to get away from them.

One thing about *The Good Book* is it is a little bit like the UN Declaration of Human Rights—a document of which I am a great admirer, by the way, although now we rather dismiss it and think of it as vague and aspirational. But that document and this book, both of them try to say: Forget all the differences, prescind from them, focus on the things that we have in common, which is our humanity and the fact that all of us need food, comfort, and warmth, and above all we need the companionship of our fellows and an opportunity to express ourselves.

One very important point is that most of history has imposed on humankind what must be a falsehood, which is there is one great truth, one right answer, one correct way to live. That's not true.

One thing that we learned from the Enlightenment is plurality, diversity, the fact that there are huge differences between people, and that we must honor those differences.

You know the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." George Bernard Shaw said, "On no account must you do to others what you would have them do unto you, because they may not like it." It's a very deep insight.

You have to recognize the differences between you and other people, not make yourself the arbiter of what is good and right, but respect the fact that people have other choices, providing of course that they exercise those choices responsibly, under what John Stuart Mill called the "harm principle," that we mustn't harm others. In this

way we concentrate on the commonalities and work against these great divisions that we erect between people and people.

QUESTION: My name is Alberto Turlon.

My question is about human rights. Now that we are a system of this multiplication of human rights—we shifted from the fundamental rights to economic, social, and cultural, to more specific third-generation, fourth-generation rights—isn't there the risk that we lose the focus of what is fundamental, what is really necessary in our life, and also because as the more rights we see in charters, the less we are able to fully implement them?

A.C. GRAYLING: Yes, I agree. That's a very good point. It would be terribly important not to lose sight of the overall inspiration, the early inspiration.

The fact is that the 1948 Declaration is rather vague in its statement of principles. Think about a right to life. It needs a jurisprudence and a philosophy to make richer this idea of what a life is that we have a right to. If I put you in a cage and give you bread and water, you're alive but that's no life. It has the implication to a certain quality of life, which is why the two great conventions came into existence, to try to make it more precise.

But in making it more precise and in becoming more legalist about it, we do risk this danger that you mention. It is quite important, therefore, that we should constantly recur to the question of principle and recognize that what Mrs. Roosevelt and her committee were doing when they drew up that document was to say, "Let us open a space around people so that they can, if they take responsibility and if they have the energy, make something for themselves."

Instead of giving them the resources to do it, they are giving them the space to do it. That is the important point about it: let people have the opportunity, which is denied to perhaps more than half of humankind today for various reasons—traditional reasons having to do with what you wear, what you eat, whether or not you get an education, and so on.

QUESTION: Roswell Perkins.

I heard you say that you are not being critical of any religion. What I would be curious is as to whether there is any organized school of thought or group within the world today which closely reflects the same thinking that you have—for example, the Ethical Culture Society of the Unitarian religion, or some other schools, if you don't want to call them religions. Is there any organized school of thought that most reflects your own thinking?

A.C. GRAYLING: Firstly, just to be maximally accurate, I said that the book is not critical of religion. That's different from whether its author has been critical of it in the past. I frankly and freely confess to having written some blunt things about religion in the past. But that's a separate matter from this book.

The answer to your question is yes, the humanist movement. When people talk about humanists, what immediately springs to mind is open-toed sandals and beards, a rather earnest outlook on life, and perhaps a large dollop of vegetarianism.

But in fact humanism is not a prescriptive movement. It doesn't tell people what to think or how to be. Rather, it says: Whatever we do, let us first acknowledge our humanity and let us acknowledge the fact that as very imperfect beings in a life which is often difficult and yet has the capacity in it for joy, let us reflect and think, make sensible choices, and build good relationships.

Humanism, with a small 'h' and with a capital 'H,' which is the sort of organized version of it, is a movement for ethical reflection which doesn't premise itself on the thought that there are transcendent sources of instruction about how we should live.

There is a big contrast between saying that "our duty is to understand and obey." Islam means submission.

One of the great sins in Christianity is the sin of pride, thinking that you can stand on your own two feet and make these choices for yourself. Humanism opposes the view that we are subjects; we are agents, and we must act responsibly.

So the answer to your question is: Yes, humanism would be that sort of, if I may be allowed the expression, broad church of attitudes towards living sensibly, responsibly, and well.

QUESTION: Matthew Olson.

I will stick to the convention of leaving God out of this. I think I heard you say that your single commandment is

to be true to yourself, and I think I heard you dismiss proscriptive rules in the Bible from building your ideal society, if I may put it that way.

It's hard for me to see how ignoring the seven normative rules or the Ten Commandments can result in a just society of people coexisting with each other without interfering with the others' happiness—do not kill, do not lie, do not steal, treat your parents with respect, don't covet your neighbors' goods or spouses. How do you marry the two, or do you think it's necessary to do that?

A.C. GRAYLING: I'm tempted to refer you to George Carlin's reduction of the Ten Commandments to two—I don't know whether any of you have seen those—rather amusingly.

But almost all the ethical traditions of the world, if not indeed all of them, religious or non-religious, share a very great deal just on these points.

They don't obey without qualification the injunction not to kill, because our bishops bless our troops on their way to war and we find circumstances in which we think it's justified—for example, in self-defense or in defending a principle.

Coveting your neighbor's goods—well, the consumer society and its associated economy rather depends upon our wanting to own nice watches and motor cars.

Coveting your neighbor's wife—well, I'm afraid human nature is what it is.

So, in general, the kinds of prescriptions or ideals that all the great ethical systems set for themselves share much in common with that.

But if you look at Christian ethics of the very early church—that is, in the first three centuries or so of the Christian church—you notice something rather distinctive about it. We are told give away everything we have, take no thought for tomorrow, consider the lilies of the field, make no plans. If your family disagrees with you, turn your back on them. "Don't marry," says Saint Paul.

This is an unlivable ethics which made sense to people who very sincerely thought that they lay at the end of the world, that the *Parousia*, the Second Coming, was imminent, that the Messiah was going to return. And so of course you don't need material goods, you don't marry, you don't plan, because it's next week or next month, it's very soon, and you must be like the wise virgins and keep the wick of your lamp trimmed.

After centuries had gone by, they recognized that a little bit more thinking about the good life was required, and they took it from Greek philosophy. In fact, what we think of as the characteristically Christian attitude, the Christian gentleman or the Christian gentlewoman, is directly from Aristotle, the *megalopsychos*—it sounds absolutely terrifying in Greek—the Latin words translated *magna anima*, magnanimity, the magnanimous person, the person of respect, kindness, and courtesy who considers others, the considerate person. This is at the very heart of the idea of being a genuine Christian. But in fact it is a Greek view imported into Christianity late on because of the poverty, you might say, of the early Christian ethics, which was the ethics of a people who thought that they were living right at the very end of time.

When one understands this and puts things into the context of history and recognizes—if you go, for example, to the teachings of Mozi in ancient China two or three centuries before Christ, who preached brotherly love—love your fellow man, honor him respect him, help him; we go back to Confucius, who talks about *junzi*, the gentleman, the person who has duties to his fellows and his neighbors—you see that human ethics, when it has been well thought and when it has been thought with generosity, kindness, and the best, most sympathetic understanding of what it is to be human, has a great deal in common with all the other great traditions.

QUESTION: John Jefferson.

You stimulate a lot of questions and a lot of polemics.

One question I have is, if you look at a Hobbesian view of life in society versus outside of society that he calls in the state of nature, everything is kind of pretexted upon having a government, a structure—whether you call it proscriptions based on religion, or maybe even some humanist ideal if you talk about Athenian democracy. If you could say that's net or pure of religious influence, I don't know.

But given that context, and if that's true—not to just base it only on Hobbes, but I think he's a good example—then what can we say about the humanist Bible and humanist thinking outside of that context? I think you are kind of going in the direction of you really don't necessarily need governments and structures per se to live as a good person. Do you struggle with that at all?

A.C. GRAYLING: I really don't think that it would be possible for human beings to live without institutions that regulate their relationships with one another. But the production of such institutions is very natural to human beings because we are essentially social animals.

If we look at Hobbes and we look at the whole social contract theory tradition, which contrasts life within a society where there are laws, structures, and an order of society, with something else, thought of as the anarchy of the primitive condition, the contrast is a false one, because even outside developed societies, human beings as social animals always had their connections and their groups in which there were ordered relationships—respect for elders and certain rules and taboos that governed their relationships with one another.

It's very easy to demonstrate that, quite naturally, if human beings get together in certain circumstances, they won't have the *Lord of the Flies* experience of William Golding; they will have a rather different experience. An organic social structure would arise.

It's simple to show it in this way. If you were walking down the street and a complete stranger was walking down the street ahead of you, and you saw a great pile of bricks teetering just above him and just about to fall on his head, what would you do? You would shout out a warning instinctively. You wouldn't say, unless you were a rather special person, "Hmm, this is going to be interesting." [Laughter]

Most people wouldn't do that. Most people have this instinctive reaction to call out to a fellow human being. That marks something deep about the connection between all human beings from which organically the structures of our society have arisen.

The fact that we have institutions and laws, and the fact that we arrange and organize, the fact that we have in our mores and our morals as well as in our legal systems ways of relating to one another—as we do right now, we listen to one another with respect and courtesy, ask questions in a polite way—this is natural to us, this is what we are as human beings.

What is unnatural is what our newspapers are full of—war, conflict, turmoil, people doing other people down, cheating, and lying. These things happen all the time, but they are a minority avocation of human experience, because in every town and city of the world, every hour of every day, there are a million acts of kindness and cooperation, courtesy, and normal friendship. When you walk into a shop or get on a bus, what you get from most of the human beings you encounter is what is natural to us. It's the wars, the conflicts, and the cheating that are not.

QUESTION: John Richardson.

My question is about the historical development of human rights and whether it is driven more by secular humanism or by religion.

But the example I wanted to give you is I just happened by pure chance to be reading a little bit of Deuteronomy last Sunday. In the portion where there are the Decalogue and the Commandments, you learn that you have to rest on the Sabbath, but also your male and female slave is entitled to rest on the Sabbath. You cannot covet your neighbor's wife, but you also can't covet your neighbor's male and female slave. The explanation in Moses is that you have to remember we were slaves in Egypt. It struck me there was no appreciation of the fact that maybe slavery wasn't a good thing.

My question is: Did you have to wait until the secular world of the 18th and 19th century to see that change, or what was the driving force that changed that?

A.C. GRAYLING: It's a very good question.

It happens that all of us—if you do the math on our ancestry, we are all related to one another, everybody on the planet is, and we are, all of us, therefore descendents of slaves, and we are, all of us, all descendents of slave owners. This is a part of our history that we do well to remember.

Now this sounds like a commercial break, but I don't intend it to be. A couple of years ago, I wrote a book, called *Towards the Light of Liberty*, which recounts the development of thinking about the concept of liberty from the beginning of the Reformation, so just the modern history of liberty, which began with a desire for liberty of conscience, the liberty of thinking for yourself in matters of religion.

When the Reformation occurred, prior to that time there had been a very powerful injunction from the church for orthodoxy and that if people were heterodox in their religious belief or practice they risk being burned at the stake, as we saw in the case of the Inquisition.

But what Luther and others wanted was to be able to think for themselves in matters of faith, because the destiny of your soul or eternal future turned on whether or not you got it right in their view. And so they demanded the right to think for themselves.

Liberty of conscience became liberty of thought and inquiry, which had a great deal to do with the scientific revolution. But as soon as people began to think and inquire for themselves, they began to ask questions like, "Why am I the property of a king? Why don't I have some say in my own life?" The minute that they began to say, "Why can't I be free and make some decisions for myself?" they began to recognize, "Why aren't other human beings free also?"

The anti-slavery movement, which began in the 18th century, in fact among the Quakers, was premised on this idea of "If I demand freedom for myself, I must demand it for other people." Despite the fact that it took so long, in a way the really significant thing in the overall history of human beings is that people had the logic and the understanding to recognize that whatever they claimed for themselves, they should claim for others too.

It took that history, as it were, of the expansion of the application of an idea, the idea of the liberty of the individual, for people to face up to the fact that this reflex acceptance of slavery which had happened right throughout history—Aristotle approved of slavery, for example—that that was no longer acceptable and, happily for us, things changed.

Although I would just mention to you that there are more people in conditions of slavery on this day, in April 2011, than there ever have been in history in total—in wage slavery, indentured labor, child labor, and so on—and it behooves us to look at the UN reports on these matters and to keep fighting against slavery because it's still happening.

QUESTION: Harry Langer.

Why do all systems have a tendency to self-destruct, sow the seeds of their own destruction?

A.C. GRAYLING: Not *The Good Book*, because it isn't a system. You've got to take responsibility for yourself, think for yourself; that's the one and only injunction in it. Also to your own self be true, but think for yourself, that was the one commandment of this—as we change, as societies evolve, as we face new and different challenges, if we are over-reliant on a way of thinking and a prescription for living which is suited to much earlier phases in the history of humankind, we feel the tensions and the difficulties.

In that connection, I might say that some of the strife that there is in the world between religions and within religions today is a symptom of the disconnect, of the fracture, the tectonic movement between an outlook on life which is more than a thousand years, or two or three thousand years old, and this modern world that we find ourselves in.

People who can't let go of the old ways and the old teachings and who are not permitted the flexibility to rethink, to look at the evidence and to move forward, are going to struggle.

QUESTION: Jim McClennan.

I have so many questions I could ask them till the end of time. But one that is very simple: you obviously take at least your structural inspiration from the Bible. Is it possible to put the two side by side and read them together? Are they that contemporary in terms of their structure, or is that going to be a fraught exercise?

A.C. GRAYLING: Certainly anybody who has a religious commitment could certainly read this and find a great deal in it.

In the "Epistle to the Reader" of this, which is an interweaving of texts from John Locke, Aristotle, and myself, you will see something that I use from John Locke in which he says: "If the reader of this book finds nothing in it of inspiration or instruction or use, it will be because he himself is so superior that he doesn't need it." By this means he has managed quite cleverly to—so the reviewers who do read the book will be in a bit of a difficulty about that. [Laughter]

But you see the point. No matter what tradition you come from or what your outlook, this is not a book of challenge or attack, it's not aggressive. It could quite well sit alongside all the other texts.

On the other hand, there would be one slight dissonance, which is that this book says, "Here are the materials which some of the greatest, most reflective minds of all the great traditions offer us for a resource so that we can think about our own lives, and now your responsibility is to go and think and make your choices." That's what this

book invites us to do.

Other great such books in the past have not said that. They have said "Read, understand, and obey." That would be a rather different matter. And so there would be a little frisson between the two there.

QUESTION: Caroline Urvater.

Thank you. That was a most thought-provoking talk. But I think you made one little mistake. It's much too big, that book. It should be the same size as a pocket Bible.

A.C. GRAYLING: That's a thought to be directed to my publishers. I've been hoping that they would do a little one.

I mean we all have the problem already with small print, so I don't know how they will manage that. Perhaps a small, shorter, pocket-sized version—I'm looking at my publisher right now—will come with a magnifying glass.

But I'm sure there will be other versions of it. In fact, I was approached at the first talk I gave about the book in the Sheldonian Theatre at my alma mater in Oxford. Somebody came up afterwards and said, "I've already begun doing illustrations for a children's version of it," because there are some lovely stories in it that in fact my own children like to read in the Parables. He had come up with some very amusing, delightful pictures. So there might be that version too. But it's all up to the people who make these decisions.

The size of it at the moment is, however, very useful for propping things up, keeping doors open in summer. [Laughter]

JOANNE MYERS: Thank you for being humorous and inspirational. It was a wonderful morning. Thank you so much.

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