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Can We Be Good Without God?

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Secularization, the process by which a society severs its ties to a religious worldview, is now pressed to the limits by ideological secularists bent on removing all vestiges of the Judeo-Christian heritage from the nation's culture. They will not stop until every aspect of Christian morality is supplanted by the new morality of the postmodern philosophers—a morality with no absolutes, and without God.

How bad is it? Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz, an influential liberal partisan in the Culture Wars, rejects the idea that belief in God is necessary for moral goodness. In *Letters to a Young Lawyer*, Dershowitz argues that obedience to the God of the Bible can often be immoral. We should not be good because we fear divine punishment, Dershowitz argues, but because we aspire to good character. "In deciding what course of action is moral," he instructs, "you should act as if there were no God. You should also act as if there were no threat of earthly punishment or reward. You should be a person of good character because it is right to be such a person."

Of course, this begs the question of character itself. How do we know what character is without an objective reference? If human beings are left to our own devices and limited to our own wisdom, we will invent whatever model of 'good character' seems right at the time. Without God there are no moral absolutes. Without moral absolutes, there is no authentic knowledge of right and wrong.

According to the new American secular orthodoxy, no reference to God or faith—no matter how vague or distant—is allowable in public conversation, much less in governmental policy making. The end result is a total collapse of moral conversation. All that is left is a burlesque of moral nonsense with endless debates going nowhere in particular, except away from Christianity.

For example, we are now told that concern for sexual abstinence is just another imposition of a Christian morality. Planned Parenthood and the proponents of teenage sexual activity oppose abstinence-based sex education as "inherently religious." That is, the only arguments against teenage sexual promiscuity are based on religious convictions—which are forbidden grounds for public consideration.

In fact, the American Civil Liberties Union has successfully fought abstinence-based programs in several states, arguing that such programs violate their radical notion of church/state separation, and put the public schools in the position of teaching 'religion.'

This nonsense would be laughable if its results were not so devastating among America's young people. One parent opposed the program, stating: "I am extremely upset that this school board wants to teach my Jewish kids Christian values." Pardon me, but who dropped Judaism from the Judeo-Christian heritage? Christianity and Judaism differ on any number of central issues of faith, but we share the Ten Commandments. As rabbi Jacob Neusner once lamented: "A country without a sense of shame or of sin does not have a sense of what is right or wrong, just what is useful or what you can get away with or not get away with."

Are moral values now off limits just because they may be affirmed or shared by Christians? As columnist Mona Charen asked, "Have we reached the point in America where virtue is considered contaminated because it has been known to keep company with religion?"

If abstinence-based sex education is "inherently religious," then so is the criminal code which outlaws murder. After all, "Thou shall not kill" was first inscribed on tablets of stone by God, not contrived by a secularist lawmaker in Washington. What about prohibitions against robbery, rape, or lying? Out with them all, for they are part of God's moral law as well.

The sheer nonsense of this makes it difficult to take the argument seriously, but courts at the local, state, and federal levels are heeding these secularist arguments. Our ability to conduct any meaningful moral discourse is fast evaporating.

Just how far we have come is made clear by a glance at the most formative legal commentary which lies behind this nation's legal tradition, William Blackstone's Commentaries on the Laws of England. English common law is, after all, the basis of our own legal doctrines. Just before the American Revolution, Blackstone wrote: "Man, considered as a creature, must necessarily be subject to the laws of his Creator, for he is an entirely dependent being."

The legal tradition which gave birth to this nation, formed the background of its Constitution, and sustained our laws and their interpretation for a century and a half, is now itself ruled out of bounds. Any moral tradition which even whispers the memory of the Almighty is now ruled null and void.

But can Americans be good without God? Can we even entertain the fiction that citizens can create a totally secular morality? Nonsense. There is no secular morality of any substance. As Fyodor Dostoyevsky acknowledged, "If God is dead, everything is permissible."

So, we live among the ruins of a moral value structure destroyed by the wrecking ball of a radical secularist agenda, but already weakened by compromise from within—even from within the Church.

The Church of England and its sister church in America, the Episcopal Church (USA), are competing in a disbelief derby to see which church can produce more heretical bishops. Richard Holloway, the Anglican bishop of Edinburgh, now argues that morality must be freed from Christian teaching for the modern age. As he argues, "We either admit that God is, to some extent at least, a human construct that is subject to criticism and evolution, or we weld religion to unsustainable prejudices that guarantee its rejection for the best, not the worst of reasons, so that to abandon it becomes a virtuous act of revolt against an oppressive force that imprisons rather than liberates humanity." According to this bishop, the only way to be moral is to reject the Bible and the very notion of moral absolutes. In effect, the only way to be a good person is to function as an atheist.

With Friedrich Nietzsche, Holloway wants modern humanity to be freed from "slave obedience" to the morality of the Bible. In *Godless Morality*, the bishop insists that we must just learn to live with moral ambiguity. As for Scripture, it must be abandoned as authoritative moral guidance, for "it no longer conforms to our experience of truth and value."

The same rejection of biblical morality is all too common on these shores as well. Liberal theologians and church leaders display the same embarrassment over the moral teachings of the Bible. Among evangelicals, outright rejection of biblical authority is more rare (at least for now), but too many pulpits remain empty of biblical content and moral confrontation with the issues of the day.

In the confused public square of America's cultural currents, the situation is far worse. Now that God is off limits, we face the morality of the cultural elites and media celebrities.

Evidence of the inevitable confusion that results is seen in the nation's nonsensical moral fireworks over Michael Jackson's arrest for child molestation. Americans seem certain that Jackson's publicly acknowledged behavior—much less his alleged crime—is wrong, even immoral. But why? Will his trial for sexual molestation bring moral clarity to the situation? Probably not. Lawyers like Alan Dershowitz earn their lavish incomes by making certain that moral arguments are kept out of the picture. As Dershowitz instructs young lawyers, "So you want to do good. Don't we all. But when you became a lawyer, you have to define good differently than you did before." Obviously.

Several years ago, a group of boys at Lakewood High School in southern California were arrested as members of a “sexual posse” which kept score at the sport of sexual intercourse with different girls. Several of the boys’ fathers said that nothing was wrong with their behavior. Eric Richardson, one of the Lakewood boys, said, “They pass out condoms, teach sex education and pregnancy—but they don’t teach us any rules.”

Welcome to post-Christian America. All the rules are off—it’s everyone for himself. Write your own rules, find your own way, just be sure to leave God out of it. The Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Rome, warning that “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God has been made plain to them” [Romans 1:18]. God is not mocked. Welcome to Rome—America in the postmodern age.

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