The God Argument; the Case against Religion and for Humanism

Grayling, A.C.


Anthony C. Grayling, Master of the New College of the Humanities, London, is a bright star in the galaxy of modern British atheists. He is a prolific author of books and a regular contributor to prominent British newspapers.

Grayling divides The God Argument into two parts – Against Religions, and For Humanism – which are well summed up in his beautiful phrase “escaping from a furnace to cool waters and green groves” (8). Their relationship is crucial to the argument of his book.

In Part II, For Humanism, Grayling essentially promotes the point of view of Stoicism. He describes its foundation as follows: "Their principal of reason (the logos) as the ordering principle of the world is a principle of rational structure, of rightness and fittingness in the natural order, to which ethical endeavour – so they argued – should conform itself" (148).

He raises the old question: do the gods command something because it is good, or is it good because the gods command it? Isn’t this a false dichotomy? The good is powerfully attractive. Love invites love.

Grayling lists seven qualities of the “good life”, right and fitting: purposeful, lived in relationship, active, honest, autonomous, satisfying, integrating the first six into a whole “which constitutes the individual’s own chosen project for the good”. (162). Grayling aims high. He hopes that his ethical outlook will provide a “basis for a more integrated and peaceful world” (7). Like Epicurus, whom he admires, Grayling has a missionary zeal for the healing of mankind.

His writing is clear and, while he provides no “proofs” for his point of its attractiveness convinces and excites. He invites his readers to make free, authentic choices about the value of their lives. Who could reject such a stance?

This being said, Grayling is Procrustean: he stretches or cuts from other writers as suits his purpose. He seeks support from the Epicureans but rejects their belief in the gods. He seeks confirmation from the Enlightenment, even though both Voltaire and Diderot were deists. He also appeals to 20th century atheist existentialists such as Albert Camus who, pace Grayling, rejects the fundamental logos of Stoicism and holds to a philosophy of the absurd.

Grayling’s project of a “well-lived, meaningful, fulfilled life” (151) is surely agreeable to all. It is the “cool waters”. His overall approach is, however, reductionist. Ethics is all.

In Part II, Against Religion, Grayling describes “the furnace”. Although he rejects the “acerbic” (8) tone of debate, his language is often demeaning, and his considerations are
sweeping. For him, Theravada Buddhism and Confucianism are just philosophies. The Tao is ignored and scant attention is given to Hinduism, for his ire is focussed on the religion of Jews, Christians and Muslims. His criticisms are based on a caricature, and are sometimes just plain wrong. For example, he holds that these religions “claim a transcendental source of authority, and posthumous rewards or punishment for obeying or failing to obey it” (p. 146), ignoring that the Jewish Bible (the Old Testament) typically does not hold to the idea of personal afterlife. His view of God is of a tyrant. Who would not reject a despotic deity?

Grayling does not consider the central Christian teaching, which holds that Jesus reveals God to be essentially humble, not dictatorial. He summarises the “thin teaching” of the New Testament to mean “give away all you have, make no plans for the future, turn your back on your family if they disagree with you in either of these respects, do not marry” (160). It is a travesty. He turns a blind eye to the major ethical teachings of the New Testament such as forgiveness, compassion, love of enemies.

Furthermore, there is no consideration that many monotheists may have known something altogether extraordinary which, like all experiences, is beyond proof. There is no consideration of the teaching of great mystics.

While many of his criticisms of Christian behaviour are valid, many are demeaning: its practitioners have “childhood religious sentiments” (165), they indulge in “falsehoods ... inanities”, “(256) and entertain “legends and superstitions” (257). All religions are merely “imaginary” while his view is “real” (258).

In short Part I, Against Religion, is severely limited in scope. In his missionary zeal he attacks. But who is he attacking: Christianity or his figment of that tradition?

Part II needs Part I. Grayling needs the horror stories of religion – “the furnace” – for they make the ethical system he proposes all the more attractive – “the green groves”. Is this why, towards the end of Part II, after applying his ethical stance to moral issues such as love, sex, drugs, euthanasia and abortion, and taking up positions which present nothing new, he feels the need to write yet another chapter called “Religion revisited” (237-247), to arouse the reader’s anger and make the “cool waters” seem less banal? Pages 238 ff. on the New Testament are particularly virulent and make us wonder if he has read any good commentaries.

Grayling proposes that “love, beauty, music, sunshine on the sea, the sound of rain on leaves, the company of friends, the satisfaction that comes from successful effort” (258) are enough, yet one might end up saying “Is that all there is? Is there nothing more?” He claims that his project does indeed satisfy, yet the persistence of religions would suggest that reason by itself cannot satisfy the boundless capacity of the human heart for knowledge and delight.

Reviewer: Rev. Dr. John Dupuche is a senior lecturer at MCD University of Divinity, and Honorary Fellow within the Centre for Inter-religious Dialogue at Australian Catholic University. His doctoral studies are in the field of Kashmir Shaivism. He is chair of the Catholic Interfaith Committee of the Archdiocese of Melbourne and Parish Priest of Nazareth Parish, Ricketts Point, Victoria. He is the author of Abhinavagupta: the Kula Ritual as elaborated in chapter 29 of the Tantraloka, 2003; Jesus, the Mantra of God, 2005; Towards a Christian Tantra in 2009.
Email: jrdupuche@pacific.net.au