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If God is the author of our moral code, how can we challenge it? Has increasing secularism eroded traditional moral systems? Bishop Richard Holloway challenges our assumptions and offers provocative solutions to these questions. He argues that moral codes are human constructs.

Godless Morality: Keeping Religion Out of Ethics Details

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From Reader Review Godless Morality: Keeping Religion Out of Ethics for online ebook

Emma Glaisher says

This was pretty much my first foray into ethics/philosophy (and even, in an absent sort of way, theology), certainly since my teens. I found it fascinating, thought-provoking and will definitely be reading it again.

Lots of quotable stuff I will be sticking provocatively in my Facebook status, I think.

I would love to read more by this man whose faith (I have none) is so comfortably unfettered by random collections of interesting old writings cobbled together nearly 2000 years ago.

Rebecca says

(3.5) A clear, convincing and compassionate case for why the Bible should not be the basis of societal morality. You might assume this would come from one of the New Atheists, but nope – Holloway was the Bishop of Edinburgh at the time he wrote this. His arguments are along the lines of: Christians have been too quick to codify context-specific rituals and traditions into blanket law; we have a tendency to pick and choose what we want the Bible to say (emphasizing the parts about sex and ignoring the bits about the poor and social justice); we've gotten it wrong before when it comes to morality (slavery is just the beginning); and, in general, we try to oversimplify the diversity and mystery of human life. This was written in 1999. The most helpful chapter is about homosexuality, while those about the legalization of marijuana, abortion and bio-ethics feel rather dated. There are many brilliant statements, but the practical application part isn't as successful.

Some favorite lines:

“mature people try to learn to live with contradictions rather than insisting on neat resolutions.”

“this is the origin of morality, this need to find some kind of balance between instinctive and intentional life, between the drive of the species and the consciousness of the individual.”

“scripture was made for humanity and not humanity for scripture. We should not, therefore, have to torture [contort] scripture into self-contradictory positions, when it no longer conforms to our experience of truth and value. It is much more honest to abandon it”

“Morality is more an art than a science and it calls for a certain versatility from us”

“most human disagreement is between opposing goods rather than between right and wrong.”

“We assume that our pleasures, because they are ours, are more benign and less problematic than the pleasures of strangers.”

“Human nature has a tendency to hedonistic inflation, to turn good or neutral things into bad by using them excessively.”

Emily says

cover-judging, i figured this was going to be a treatise in praise of secular humanism by a secular humanist - also an outside chance it'd sound dawkinsy.

actually, it's a musing on an inclusive notion of morality by a retired scottish bishop. christian, liberal and interestED (in how the world operates, about how his moral opposites feel and why, and in the possibilities for engaged debate rather than divisive animosity). welcome stuff for sure.

the basic premises:

--neither the religious nor the non-religious own the corner on morality, so quit acting like it, both of yis.

--following dogma to its dotted Ts and crossed Is is a recipe for stagnation and is, ultimately, the morally easy way out (ready-made difficult decisions, rather than the case-by-case struggle).

i liked it for its eyes-&-mind-open approach. i did think he used some wide-reaching analogies now and again, and strayed a bit from the focus on/comparison with religious morality at times - especially the chapter on drugs. i also could have done with section breaks within the chapters.

ultimately, i missed a rallying call - great notions, now how to encourage them in our lives? but hey. work for the readers.

Brian Dunkel says

Godless Morality is one of my all-time favorite theological/philosophical pieces. Holloway's differentiation between morals and ethics is classic. He is one of the most deeply empathetic religious leaders of our time.

Samaa Ahmed says

Perhaps there is nothing revolutionary about this book, in the sense that it does not propose anything novel, but what I think makes it so special is that it is a radical text (as in very progressive, but not in a cop out "liberal" way) that is not anti-religion.

This is a very sensible, logical book, that is very thoughtfully written. I learned a lot about the Christian tradition from this book, and Holloway's explanations of Biblical passages help to contextualize a lot of the references. It is feminist and political while being quite gentle, so it is an easy read for those who may have more conservative viewpoints.

Holloway writes critically about religion and tradition without being insensitive to religious folks, and writes compassionately about historical trends without making excuses for past mistakes and transgressions. Would absolutely recommend.

Sean Kerrigan says

Excellent

Alden says

Thought-provoking. Wide-ranging discussions of several moral topics, including homosexuality, drugs, abortion and cloning, with the overall position that "command morality" no longer works. Instead, the author offers the metaphor of an improvised jazz composition as the modern approach to defining morality.

Alexandra says

Yet another case where a person with expertise in one field, thereby feels entitled to propound his ill-formed opinions on a wide range of matters.

This series of essays are based on the typical liberal fallacy - the assumption that everyone really wants everyone to be happy, and all conflict and cruelty arise out of misconceptions, which 'enlightened' thinking should be able to straighten out.

A brief look at the last century should demonstrate the foolhardiness of this assumption - there are always a small minority of ruthless individuals whose aim is to achieve the optimum situation for themselves, and are quite content to achieve this at the expense of everyone else. And the more this "everyone really wants to get along" argument is promulgated, the more successful the psychopaths are - because they are assumed not to exist.

Starting from a faulty premise drastically reduces the value of this book; but it is not terribly well-reasoned either. I spotted several factual inaccuracies, apparently arising from the former Bishop's assumption that America is the pattern on which the rest of the world is modelled.

This is not theology, and as philosophy it is shoddy work. It is another manifestation of our celebrity culture, which enables a man given authority in one field to abrogate it to give spurious validity to the airing of his personal prejudices in another.

Rebecca says

I think I bought this book because it was 99p in a Kindle sale... it didn't really tell me anything new, although it was refreshing to see common sense and wisdom coming out of a former Bishop, and I have no doubt it will be a revelation to some readers, which is a very good thing indeed. Sadly though, the crazies who really need to learn from this book will probably never read it, so its positive effect will be limited to those who already have a brain.

M.G. Mason says

It created a stir when first published. Of course, most rational people know that it is entirely possible to lead a good moral life without having to believe in religion, any deity or defined set of dogmas or superstitions brought from on high by people who wear funny clothes and consider themselves beyond criticism, but when the idea is being expounded by a former Anglican Bishop, it was bound to ruffle a few feathers. Richard Holloway was the Bishop of Edinburgh until his retirement and today makes a career as a political and social writer. It is also suspected, yet he has never stated such, that part of his reason for retiring was because he had abandoned his faith altogether.

But I'm not here to debate the man or what he might now think of the core concepts of Christian belief but whether the book achieves what it sets out to do, and that is to demonstrate that it is perfectly possible to reject religious dogmas on morality and lead a good life. It also attempts to demonstrate in no uncertain terms that many of our religious traditions on sex and relationships, drugs, alcohol, cloning, stem cell research and even abortion are rarely as clear cut as they would like to portray. Most interesting for me is how he attempts to distinguish the difference between a moral sin (one that causes harm to others) and ritual sin (one that is a breaking of a covenant with God) has been distinctly blurred in Christianity. For example, homosexuality ought to be considered a sin only to one who takes a Christian oath because of the scriptural sanctions against it; yet it should not be considered sinful for those who do not choose a Christian lifestyle. He hints at a degree of conceitedness in the way that Christianity blurs this line between this ritual sin and moral sin and that it is not something that Jews and Muslims are generally guilty of, that true morals ought to be about observable consequences, not the quoting of superstitions.

If he is not an atheist, then he is perhaps the only Christian who truly understands the atheist position and why we consider many of their arguments to be empty rhetoric, near valueless and absurd at best and downright dangerous ideology desperately clinging to a bygone age of pre-Enlightenment totalitarianism and willing to bribe, threaten and kill to maintain that at worst. He also discusses the modern knee-jerk reactionary attitudes of morality from churches who are becoming more and more entrenched against the 'democratisation' of morality, the idea that things become unethical through consent and that despite claims from certain churches that they have driven liberation and social reform, the opposite is often usually true as church institutions sometimes find they have no choice but to change their attitude in line with the public outcry.

Does it set out to do what it professes? In my mind most certainly, it is a very powerful piece of writing that will make you look at social issues in a different light, whether that be sex and relationships, drugs or cloning there is bound to be something to challenge even the most liberal of us.

My only criticisms are to do with flow. Holloway seemingly hops around from time to time and I wish it had been more structured and given a thorough going over by an experienced editor. But this is a minor criticism and the content doesn't suffer for it.

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Chad says

Godless Morality is, perhaps surprisingly given its title, written by Richard Halloway, Bishop of Edinburgh. The book was another well-calibrated recommendation from my Goodreads page. The title both intrigued me and perhaps disgusted or frightened me. A book written by a Bishop suggesting we take God out of ethics? It sounded like a wolf in sheep's clothing, a bishop who had lost his faith and yet retained his clerical position as a means of spreading his opinions and influencing people, an attempt to challenge a religious tradition from the inside, or to strip Christianity of what is deemed unessential leaving a weak-sauce humanism. A quick Wikipedia search on Halloway describes him as "having taken an agnostic worldview... has become increasingly radical and has described himself as "after-religionist." I was reminded of the "Three Pale Men" from C. S. Lewis's Pilgrim's Regress, who offer John, the protagonist, some shelter:

Mr. Neo-Angular: "You will fare badly here. But I am a Steward, and it is my duty according to my office to share my supper with you. You may come it."

Mr. Neo-Classical: "I am sorry that my convictions do not allow me to repeat my friend's offer. But I have had to abandon my humanitarian and egalitarian fallacies."

Mr. Humanist: "I hope that your wanderings in lonely places do not mean that you have any of the romantic virus still in your blood."

They sit and till a patch of soil that is too thin and weak to grow anything but a few rotting potatoes, symbolizing the over-diluted nature of these modern philosophies.

And, I have to admit, that is in part what you will find here if you are a member of a rich religious tradition. The book, however, does have its merits. Halloway is attempting to create a space where we can engage in ethical discussions and all be on the same page in a pluralistic society. Too often if our political and ethical debates, we are talking over one another. We don't have the same set of assumptions or values, and we de-humanize those with whom we are talking. Political discourse today is composed of a series of echo chambers, not really engaging with those from the other side in any meaningful way. I appreciate the attempt to revive true discussion, seeking to understand the values of those with whom you disagree.

But creating this space doesn't mean we have to sacrifice our own moral systems. Halloway admits this, but he speaks rather condescendingly to those who choose to remain in what he calls "intact moral communities":

People have the right to opt for what is called an intact moral community, if they want to. An intact moral community is a body, such as a religious group, that chooses to maintain an existing tradition in its entirety, in spite of the critical erosions of time and change upon it. Choosing to submit to an intact moral system is one way of avoiding the pain and expenditure of time that moral dilemmas place us in. We rarely reach final, universally compelling conclusions in moral debate, but we do have to make decisions for our own lives and the lives of others. The root meaning of the word 'decide' suggests the activity of cutting through, rather than painstakingly unravelling, a tangled knot. One way of dealing with moral complexities is to opt into a system and let it decide for us. This does not deliver us completely from intellectual argument, however, because we will continue to live in a larger culture that embraces a number of other moral approaches, but our act of submission to a particular system removes moral uncertainty from our lives by transferring it to an external authority whose judgements we obey. In other words, opting into an intact moral community will not deliver us from the pains of disagreement with others, though it may, as a decision in intellectual economy, release

us from personal doubt. There may be friction with other intact moral communities that operate from different premises, and there will be certainly conflict with groups that maintain an open approach to disputed questions.

That description perhaps fits Mormons to a T. He makes religious persons sound weak, because they have chosen to outsource their morality to authority figures. I admit that this is often done. To use some lingo from another book I just read, Halloway is describing a Stage 3 faith where religion is used as a source of identity and authority. Halloway himself speaks somewhere between a Stage 4 and Stage 5 faith that recognizes inconsistencies within belief systems and seeks to live in the reality of paradox.

I like that Halloway expects a lot of people. If we were to attempt to implement Halloway's system, people would have to respect others' differences of opinion, and they would have to give up easy solutions to moral dilemmas. Both of these are often not the case on both the right and the left.

Some may immediately accuse Halloway of moral relativism. I was concerned about that as well. One of his first chapters is called "Ethical Jazz." You are meant to improvise in the realm of ethics. Ethics is more often than not a choose between good and evil, but a choice between competing goods, and there has to be room for sway in one direction or another. Halloway seeks to distinguish his approach from moral relativism:

The situation of moral pluralism is not at all the same thing as absolute moral relativism. We can acknowledge and even celebrate the fact of different moral systems, without falling into the trap of believing there are no moral principles that help us to define what it means to be human. The challenge that faces us is to separate the basic principles that might help to guide us through what has been called the moral laze from the kind of absolute systems that claim to know the right answer to every moral dilemma that faces us.

I appreciate this approach, and I think it challenges both religious and non-religious folks to take ethical dilemmas seriously. He challenges religious folks to not be morally condescending to those who are not:

Religious moralists, in practice, flit between empirical and absolute justifications for their assertions, moving from the former to the latter when the argument is going against them... That is why the use of God in moral debate is so problematic as to be almost worthless. We can debate with one another as to whether this or that alleged claim genuinely emanated from God, but who can honestly adjudicate in such an Olympian dispute?

Halloway proposes several solutions to ethical issues in the public square from sex education, gay marriage, abortion, and drug legalization. In all cases, he suggests leaving ethical choices to individuals within a few clearly defined boundaries. Traditionalists will probably gripe more than others at these solutions. But I will admit that he examines the values at stake at all positions involved, and seeks to find a responsible compromise.

Despite his attempt at playing fair, Halloway clearly has some beef with traditional religious groups, and describes them as essentially power structures. He gets many of his ideas from Nietzsche that I wholeheartedly disagree with e.g.

From a psychological point of view 'sins' are indispensable in any society organized by priests: they are the actual levers of power, the priest lives on sins, he needs the commission of sins'... Supreme law: 'God forgives him who repents'-- in plain language: who subjects himself to the priest.

And it is from this strand that Halloway pulls most of his criticisms of traditional religion from. Chesterton

has my favorite response to Nietzsche:

If we said what we felt, we should say, "So you are the Creator and Redeemer of the world: but what a small world it must be! What a little Heaven you must inhabit, with angels no bigger than butterflies! How sad it must be to be God; and an inadequate God! Is there really no life fuller and no love more marvelous than yours; and is it really in your small and painful pity that all flesh must put its faith? How much happier you would be, how much more of you there would be, if the hammer of a higher God could smash your small cosmos, scattering the stars like spangles, and leave you in the open, free like other men to look up as well as down!"

But there are plenty of moments when I find Halloway to be profound. I like it when he acknowledges the need of authority to maintain moral systems and not devolve into moral relativity:

For moral systems to work, we have to accord them some kind of authority over us. The dilemma is that they then work too well, so that reforming them becomes difficult. But this, paradoxically, is a sign of their effectiveness. If they could be overturned without much of a struggle, they would lack the very authority they need if they are to condition us into some kind of conformity. Moral change is always bound to be contentious, though it seems to characterize human history. There are always those who defend the status quo, because it provides stability and continuity, and there are always those who push against it, because they experience it as morally stunting and imprisoning.

In this respect, I believe we shouldn't try to undermine traditional sources of authority, but we should try to teach people to approach them in more nuanced ways.

I like his challenge to all to stop advocating for moral positions from dogma, whether it be political or religious, and engage in the reality of moral dilemmas:

"For a moral judgement to be respectable, it must have something to say about just why a supposed wrong action is wrongful. If it fails to meet this test it is a preference and not a moral judgment at all."

I like his advocacy for a morality based on moderation as well as consent that works well for adding nuance to competing values:

In the sense defined by Aristotle, a virtue is a mean between two extremes of a good thing. There can be no virtue of an activity that is clearly wrong in itself, such as murder. Virtue applies to things that are good in themselves or morally neutral, but which we can easily abuse, if we are not careful. Virtue lies in finding the mean, the balance, between the two. The virtuous person lives a balanced life.

The book is well-written and gives a very ambitious vision of what ethical discourse could be. Despite disagreeing with him on religion and on some of his proposed solutions, but I find his approach to be refreshing. Which is exactly the point of the book.

Tim says

A consider, thoughtful and above all intensely reasonable exploration of why we should not rely on religion as a source of morality, and how a secular alternative should be constructed. For a Humanist like myself, there was a bit too much focus on Christianity in places, but the chapters covering drugs, abortion and

voluntary euthanasia were excellent. As with his book 'Looking in the Distance', this is an ideal work for anyone drifting away from religion towards un-belief, and even for the confirmed non-believer there is much to be learned from Holloway's approach.

Michael says

The start of this book is excellent. The author discusses difference between human morals and institutional morals. The later chapters where he discusses ethical approaches to reproductive sciences seemed a bit unfocused.

Worth reading for the ideas presented though.

Daniel B-G says

Interesting concept, but after 35 pages and two chapters, I had no idea what the author actually wanted to say, or even what he had said. There was no scaffolding to hold up the argument, which in itself faint like an indistinct echo of an idea.

Shishir says

Treat life as an Art as opposed to a science.

Music art and playfulness in all forms are spiritual experiences. Artistic creativity and ethics.

Adapt, evolve, take risks – play in life like you were a child.

Young skip to school, get fully absorbed in the now.

Humor smile fun enjoy jokes sports

Enjoy and ground yourself with nature.
