

Is God the Source of Morality?

Bill Cooke

To non-religious people, the answer to this question is obvious. But for thousands of religiously-minded people, it is still valid to wonder how one can be moral without a God to direct and punish. And some fundamentalists go even further when they insist that one cannot actually be moral at all unless one is religious, by which they almost always mean their own religion. Either way, it was the topic for the latest high-profile debate between religious and non-religious people on important issues. This debate went under the banner of the Evangelical Union and a newish grouping on Auckland University called the Reason and Science Society. The Christian protagonist was Matthew Flannagan, sometime Christian Heritage Party activist, now lecturer at what used to be called the Bible College out in Henderson. Dr Flannagan writes a column for Ian Wishart's *Investigate* magazine and runs a blog on evangelical themes. And up against him was our very own Ray Bradley, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Simon Fraser University in Canada and Honorary Associate of the NZARH. The debate was chaired very ably, once again, by Professor John Bishop, head of the Philosophy Department at Auckland University.

Ray Bradley spoke first and went energetically about his task. Supported by a generous sprinkling of Old Testament passages, Bradley accused God as understood by in the Judaeo-Christian tradition of four serious charges:

- A. Crimes against humanity
- B. War crimes.
- C. Licensing mayhem and murder.
- D. Torture, including the torment of hell.

As most rationalists know, there is no shortage of blood-curdling passages where God does all these things. To be found guilty of any one of these crimes, Bradley argued, would prove that God could not possibly be the source of morality, let alone all four.

Bradley then outlined five propositions which theists believe about God.

1. God proposes things for us to believe and do.
2. God says he has caused, committed and condoned all the actions listed in A, B, C and D.
3. It is morally wrong to commit A, B, C or D.
4. God is omnipotent, omniscient, all loving (and all the rest of it).
5. A morally perfect being would not do anything that is morally wrong.

Theists, at various stages, believe all five of these, despite their blatantly contradicting each other. From this, Bradley concluded, God cannot possibly be a source of morality.

It was then Matthew Flannagan's turn to give his main address. Now I know that, as an atheist and friend of Ray Bradley, I'm bound to say that Flannagan's argument failed, or was

unconvincing. But it really was, honestly. The main problem with his address was not that the argument was unsound, but that he didn't actually have an argument. All he did was attempt to refute Bradley's argument. We were told before the debate began that Bradley and Flannagan had shown each other their main argument. This, apparently, was an attempt to ensure that they addressed the moot of the debate. This was probably in response to my refusal to engage William Lane Craig on the terms he so imperiously dictated. But where I then set out an argument explaining my action and offering a rival account, all Flannagan did was refute Bradley. At no time did he actually put an argument forward to demonstrate that God was the source of morality. When one questioner pointed this out, there was a spontaneous round of applause, suggesting it was a widely-held view. The closest Flannagan got to outlining his views on the subject was when he declared himself a supporter of divine command theory, one of the arguments used by the new generation of hard-line Christian apologists. Divine command theory is a form of moral foundationalism that argues all moral rules or requirements emanate from God's commands. Flannagan didn't give any rundown of the theory, he just nodded in its direction. Just as well really, since the divine command theory has been on the back foot ever since Plato wrote the *Euthyphro* about 2400 years ago.

So was Flannagan's refutation of Bradley in any way convincing? He claimed that Bradley's criticisms didn't address the issue of God's greatness. I would have thought that convicting God of crimes A, B, C and D would be a pretty clear indication of lacking an element of greatness. Even odder was Flannagan's attempt to explain all the barbaric passages of the Bible away with the sleight-of-hand known as context. None of the Bible passages Bradley quoted, Flannagan assured us, are commands to us. They need to be read in context. And they shouldn't be taken literally; they were metaphors, allegories, and all the rest of it. And some were disfigured by hyperbole. And in this way Bradley's argument was said to have missed the point because it was an argument against biblical inerrancy, not against the goodness of God.

Perhaps the most shocking admission from Flannagan was his claim that there must have been some overriding reason to justify God's actions in the Old Testament, some higher good being pursued we were/are unaware of. How God could be the sole legitimate source of morality when he can justify his many crimes in the Old Testament in the name of some greater good escapes me. And it probably escaped Flannagan as well, as we were not given any examples of such big-picture benevolence. And as Bradley was quick to note, even if some examples could be offered, the God being apologised for in that context would be too repugnant to contemplate. What greater good could possibly justify the crimes of A, B, C or D, no matter how watered down?

A lot of the audience was unimpressed by Flannagan's evasions. I was unconvinced that Flannagan was not doing what apologists so often do; explaining away the nasty bits of the Bible in the hope of preserving the credibility of the bits they like. I asked him if we should look to context and be aware of genre, metaphor and a tendency to hyperbole in, for instance, the ten commandments? He didn't answer that. I also asked would Jesus not be rather cross with him in the light of Matthew 5:17, which says 'Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.' Flannagan's answer was

extraordinary. Oh no, he assured the audience, Jesus's words don't apply to us because he was speaking at that time to a Jewish audience.

What? Has he really thought that through? When was Jesus, or Rabbi Yeshua as we should properly address him, *not* talking to a Jewish audience? If nothing he addressed to a Jewish audience applies to us, then we can safely close the New Testament in the knowledge that none of it applies to us. So, from now on, every time a fundamentalist tells you that Jesus has a message for you, you can assure the emissary that the message was only intended for a Jewish audience. When they harrumph that that sounds like secular humanism, you can assure them that, oh no, this comes from Matthew Flannagan, evangelical Christian and apologist for divine command theory.

It seems, then, that Flannagan is behaving as apologists the world over have done: explain away biblical passages when they are inconvenient to his own needs. And in such blatant disobedience not only Jesus but also to the Law Jesus himself said he was coming to fulfil. Look, for instance, at Deuteronomy 12:32 which says: 'Observe everything I command, taking nothing away and adding nothing.'

Another problem with Flannagan's approach was that it makes it next to impossible to reliably gauge what God's commands actually are. If the Bible is a hodge-podge of context, metaphor and allegory written by people of their times for their Jewish contemporaries, how are we then, in the twenty-first century, supposed to discern the content of God's divine commands? Is it not reasonable to suppose that if God is so uniformly excellent, he should have arranged for us a clear manual to guide us lesser beings? Apparently not. Presumably it leaves that vital role to the very few chosen ones who can correctly tell which bits of the Bible are to be read in context and which are God's divine commands. People like Matthew Flannagan.

It's fair to conclude that Ray Bradley got the better of this debate. He actually addressed the question and presented a serious argument why God could not be any positive source of morality. Flannagan, by contrast, was content merely to try and discredit that argument, but offered no account why we should consider God is in fact the sole source of morality. And Flannagan's attempts to discredit Bradley's argument either missed the point or raised even more serious objections.

Having said all this, there remains the question of what is gained by this twelve-rounds-of-boxing style debate. I was determined not to present to William Lane Craig the identikit Richard Dawkins account for him to knock around. I wanted to call into question Craig's claim to be giving the one and only viable account of what it means to be Christian. There's never only two equally-opposed viewpoints to any one question, and yet the debate format entrenches precisely this model. I would still prefer a less adversarial style of discussion of our various beliefs. At the end of this account many readers will go away thinking, "Gosh, what a fool Matthew Flannagan must be." Just as, I have no doubt, people will think of Ray Bradley after reading accounts of the debate from Flannagan's supporters.

But are we better off if this is the outcome of the debate? I don't think so. At the end of the debate Bradley pleaded with the audience to go away and think the issues through themselves. Quite right too. But maybe what's needed now is not another debate designed in this zero-sum way. Continuing with debates structured in this way gives fuel to moderate-minded people of all persuasions who suspect that all that's happening is two equally entrenched positions slugging it out with no-one actually listening to each other. What is needed now is a dialogue. Perhaps a theist and an atheist should come together and give an account of why they believe as they do and what they consider the implications of that belief to be. A dialogue of this sort would try to keep point-scoring and criticism of the opposing viewpoint to a minimum, focusing instead on outlining positively their own beliefs. Who's up for that?

Bill Cooke was editor of the *Open Society* from 1992 until 2008. His next book is *A Wealth of Insights: Humanist Thought Since the Enlightenment*.