

The Holy Grayling

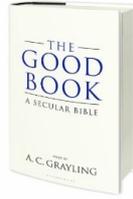
AT FIRST GLANCE, it seems a shameless display of chutzpah to mimic Holy Writ by calling your latest tome *The Good Book* and subtitling it 'A Secular Bible' (or, in America, 'A Humanist Bible'). To mix our mythologies, has Grayling the presumption to imagine he is some kind of modern Moses bringing the tablets of Athena down from Mount Olympus? And is not the phrase 'secular bible' the very model of a modern oxymoron?

Yet Grayling would freely admit that there cannot be a secular bible in the sense of a sacred, binding text for the obvious reason that Humanists and secularists are essentially freethinkers who 'transcend the teachings and the teachers' and seek the truth themselves. Indeed, no one needs this kind of bible because everyone has the potential to find things out and read for themselves, which is precisely one of the themes of his book and one of his Ten Commandments in the final chapter.

Nonetheless, the word 'bible', from the Greek 'biblia', simply means 'books', and Grayling would argue that he has as much right to its usage as anybody else. Of course, by appropriating both the word and the style and dividing the text into books, chapters and verses, he is in effect engaging in demythologisation and has thus annoyed some Christians who think that he is being 'sacrilegious'. For them, the Bible is not to be mimicked or mocked and, while they have not advocated burning *The Good Book* or its author, there has been no shortage of poison pen ad hominem derision and ridicule.

There are, however, disadvantages in aping the biblical format. Grayling has edited and redacted more than a thousand texts, in the same way that the Bible has been put together from writings by many hands, without footnotes or accreditation. This absence is frustrating and pointless, as well as being unscholarly. In the collection we call the Bible, source references were early removed to create the impression that it is all the 'eternal word of God'. It is a deception which Grayling ought to condemn instead of copying. The result is that we do not know the historical context of his sources, though there is a list of some of the most used authors at the end of the book (which cheekily includes Grayling himself, though strangely not Shakespeare). We may play the game of 'spot the author' for a while, but eventually it becomes a strain and a bore.

The first book, *Genesis*, on science and the scientific method, is clearly an updating of the work by Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* ('On The Nature of Things'), and is one of the best. We are here, not in the garden of Eden, but in Newton's garden. Science is praised as our greatest endeavour, and knowledge is lauded as 'freedom, freedom from ignorance and its offspring fear; knowledge is light and liberation'. Kant is quoted: "Dare to know: that is the motto of Enlightenment". Various scientific laws are then enunciated, such as the law of conservation, Occam's Razor, the uniformity of physics and the primacy of evidence. Bacon's call to search for the truth ends this excellent beginning.



The next chapter on *Wisdom*, on the other hand, I found annoying. Here the lack of sources began to grate. I recognised the quote from Walter Pater's book on the Renaissance: "To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life". But I never worked out what ecstasy Pater was talking about, so its relevance is not apparent. I also spotted Montaigne's quote from Cicero that "to learn how to philosophise is to learn how to die", but again the secret of this wisdom is elusive. And that is part of the problem with Grayling's book: the whole enterprise seems to be disjointed and lacking in structure. Some of the sections, on *Parables* and *Songs*, for example, lost me completely. And the style, which is stilted and flat when it should be poetic, doesn't help.

The most glaring example of this randomness is the book on *Histories* – a third of the entire work at nearly 200 pages – which is based on the accounts by Herodotus and Thucydides of the Persian War of the 5th century BCE, which of course included the famous battles of Thermopylae, Marathon and Salamis. Grayling presents it as the war 'on which the hinge of history turned', of 'how the West defended its birth from the assault of the East' and of how the West, 'smaller in number, weaker in power, yet stronger in resolve and greater in genius, kept the infant civilisation free'. So the barbaric bad guys were in the Persian East and the freedom loving good guys were the Greek West.

This raises a number of questions. First, is it accurate? After all, history is written by the victors, who in this case were the Greeks. Grayling clearly thinks that this conflict resulted in a victory for the 'Enlightenment', and we Humanists would tend to agree. But it is all a bit too simplistic. Moreover, the question arises whether he is projecting this history on to the present 'clash of civilisations'. Is he saying, in effect, that there is a similar despotic eastern Muslim threat to modern western liberal Christian-Humanist civilisation? And why does he have to retell the war in 187 pages? This is surely mere self-indulgence on his part. War isn't any more romantic because it happened in a dim and distant past. Yes, it wasn't all slaughter like the Old Testament, but war is hell anywhere, at any time.

The title of Grayling's work is of course deliberately chosen, not only to parody the Bible but also to offer thoughts on the 'good' life. There are indeed many good ideas in this curate's egg of a book, including his own 'Ten Commandments': "Love well, seek the good in all things, harm no others, think for yourself, take responsibility, respect nature, do your utmost, be informed, be kind, be courageous: at least, sincerely try".

This is infinitely preferable to the negative orders of the other 'good' book, which may at times be much more poetic but lacks the generosity of spirit that pervades Grayling's writing. I won't be dipping much into Judaeo-Christian Holy Writ, but – despite its faults – I will return to *The Good Book*. After all, it is so refreshing to read a bible which doesn't mention God or Jesus once.