

## **RODNEY D. HOLDER**

### **Editorial**

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#### **The Bible, Ethics and the New Atheism**

The American Humanist Association (AHA) recently ran a campaign which argued that belief in God is unnecessary to sustain morality. Indeed they argued, especially from some of the more blood curdling passages of the Old Testament, that biblical morality is evil. While the AHA is highly selective in its quotations, completely ignoring the sublime aspects of scriptural teaching, there is nevertheless a challenge to be met in those passages where the immoral is apparently commended (or even commanded), especially for evangelicals and those with a high view of Scripture. This is a task, I suggest, for biblical scholars, especially in this 400th anniversary year of the King James Version, when, we trust, a great deal more Bible reading will be encouraged.

In any case the AHA is of course completely mistaken about how Christian morality is justified. Fundamentally it is based on the idea that human beings are made in the image of God and are therefore of infinite value, and this informs all Christian ethical thinking. In natural law ethics, for example, it is argued that what makes for human flourishing is given to us in human nature and is apprehended by the human conscience. Virtue ethics is concerned with the development of character and is about the kind of society we want to build. Where secular moralists share the same values as Christians this can be ascribed to our common humanity and possession of the image of God.

The real issue is about whether humane Christian values can be sustained in the absence of the underlying belief that warrants those values. Increasingly we are being told how science ‘explains’ morality. Even if science tells us how certain traits such as altruism have biological homologues in the animal world, or how ‘moral’ behaviours developed because they are of ‘survival value’, this tells us nothing about the objective truth of moral norms.

One significant point from Archbishop Rowan Williams’s brilliant book on Dostoevsky<sup>1</sup> is that, contra the new atheists, there is no basis for morality *without* God. If the source of morality is simply the human will then there are no grounds for asserting the unique value of every human person. An abstract view of human happiness then results which is prepared to engage in mass slaughter for the general good. Whether that is inevitable is a moot point but Dostoevsky could be regarded as a prophet of the atheistic totalitarian regimes which came to power in the twentieth century in his own country and elsewhere.

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1 Williams, R.D. *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction*, London: Continuum (2008)