

**CAN WE BE GOOD
WITHOUT GOD?**

JOHN BLANCHARD



EP Books (Evangelical Press), Registered Office: 140 Coniscliffe Road, Darlington, Co Durham DL3 7RT

admin@epbooks.org

www.epbooks.org

JPL Books, 3883 Linden Ave. S.E., Wyoming, MI 49548

orders@jplbooks.com

www.jplbooks.com

© John Blanchard 2007

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

First published 2007

This edition 2016

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-78397-147-3

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations in this publication marked 'NIV' are from the Holy Bible, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

CAN WE BE GOOD WITHOUT GOD?

IN DECEMBER 2005 A FILM PRODUCED IN HOLLYWOOD and shot mainly in New Zealand swept into Britain on a tidal wave of publicity. Costing \$150 million to make, it had already attracted huge audiences in the United States. Now, as it reached the homeland of the author on whose book the screenplay was based, the response was phenomenal, not least from professional film critics. One critic opened his review by saying, 'Here is a wonderful, colossal, stupendous film... This is not just a "must see" but a "must see again and again".' He went on to call the acting quality 'exceptional', the special effects 'breathtaking' and the climax 'truly amazing'. Other newspapers added their enthusiastic endorsements: 'magical', 'enchanted', and 'sensational' were all employed.

Almost as remarkable as the chorus of commendations was the fact that the film had none of the elements often found in modern movies. Although it contained some lively battle scenes, there was no sleaze, no profanity, no salacious sex, no gore

and no nudity. Instead, it championed faith and morality.

The film was *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the first of an intended six films based on *The Chronicles of Narnia*, a series of books written by C. S. Lewis some fifty years earlier. In its opening weekend box office takings grossed \$67.1 million and attracted rave reviews from coast to coast. The *New York Daily News* rated it 'a thrilling success', the *San Francisco Chronicle* said it was 'a movie of intelligence and power, of beauty, universality and largeness of spirit' and the *Baltimore Sun* called it 'downright ennobling'.

Not everybody agreed. After the film's British premiere Polly Toynbee let fly in *The Guardian*. She found some of it 'toe-curlingly, cringingly awful', saw the whole thing as being 'profoundly manipulative' and 'dark with emotional sadism' and approvingly quoted author Philip Pullman's condemnation of *The Chronicles of Narnia* as 'one of the most ugly, poisonous things I have ever read'. The key to understanding Toynbee's devastating outburst becomes clear at the end of her review, when she attacks the film's central character as 'an emblem for everything an atheist objects to in religion'. She was writing not as an objective film critic, but as a hard-core atheist, convinced that, as we face the constant conflict between good and evil, there is no God to whom we can turn. In her own words, 'No one is watching, no one is guiding, no one is judging and there is no other place yet to come... There is no one here but ourselves to suffer for our sins, no one to redeem us but ourselves... We

need no holy guide books, only a very human compass.’ This sets the scene perfectly for all that follows in this booklet.

The starting point

Polly Toynbee’s main point is that in the absence of God we are perfectly capable not only of redeeming ourselves from the harmful effects of evil, but of drawing a clear distinction between evil and good in the first place. All we need to make the all-important distinction is ‘a very human compass’. But is this the case? Unless God exists, can we even discuss whether anything is ‘good’ or ‘evil’? Do these words have any real meaning unless God is central to our world view? This is the real starting point.

Everyone has a world view, as it simply means the way you look at anything at all — including history, the natural world, your own life and the lives of others. It governs your basic beliefs about all reality, including your total outlook on the universe and your own place in it. Put even more succinctly, a world view is how you view the world. To use a simple illustration, different world views are like people looking at the same scene through differently tinted sunglasses. Your world view influences everything you think, say or do, because it is what you assume to be true before you claim that anything else is true — and it is easy to see that this radically affects your view of ethics and morality.

The word ‘ethics’ is defined in the *Oxford Dictionary of English* as ‘moral principles that govern a person’s behaviour or the conducting of an

activity', while the same dictionary defines 'morals' as 'standards of behaviour; principles of right and wrong'. The two words are obviously closely related, though their meaning is not strictly identical. In very simple terms, 'morals' *define* what a person believes to be right or wrong, while 'ethics' is *the study of* what a person believes to be right or wrong — and both ethics and morals depend fundamentally on an individual's world view. For example, Polly Toynbee saw exactly the same images and heard exactly the same soundtrack as the critics who praised *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* to the skies, yet, as the final flourish of her review makes clear, her withering attack was not triggered by a difference in intellect, nationality or cultural prejudice, but by her world view.

For our present purposes we can divide world views into three categories. Firstly, there are those that assume a world without God — such as humanism (man is at the centre of everything), materialism (nature is all there is), existentialism (there are no universal values) and nihilism (nothing is of any ultimate significance). Secondly, there are those tied in to one of the countless religious systems man has invented over the centuries. These range from Hinduism (which offers over thirty million gods) to Zoroastrianism (which says there are two) and include a bewildering cascade of concepts in which God is seen as a force of nature, cosmic energy, a spirit living in all material elements or (as in the case of Islam) as an austere and remote Ruler 'so far above man in every way that he is not personally knowable'. Thirdly, there is the one which sees the

God who reveals himself in the Bible not only as the Creator of all reality outside of himself and the sole and sovereign Ruler of all his creation, but as one who created human beings as moral agents, who is passionately concerned for our moral well-being and who calls us into a living relationship with himself. This is the God I have in mind in writing this booklet, and the question we need to ask and answer is this: can we even talk sensibly about good and evil unless this world view governs our thinking?

Kant's wall

Many of the world's greatest thinkers have wrestled with our question. One of the real heavyweights was the philosopher Immanuel Kant. His 'big idea' was that all knowledge could be divided into two 'worlds'. One comprised the things recognized by our five senses — sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch — while in the other Kant placed God and anything that could not be recognized by our senses or scientifically demonstrated. He then in effect put a 'wall' between these two worlds and said that as human beings we did not have the ability to climb over this wall and get to grips with the second 'world'. It is ironic that whereas his first name — 'Immanuel' — is a Hebrew word meaning 'God with us', Kant's teaching has led millions to believe that, far from being 'with us', God is walled up in a world we are unable to reach!

As Kant placed morality on the far side of his 'wall', he was saying that judgements about right and wrong were matters of personal opinion and it is