

Yuval Noah Harari – 21 Lessons for the 21st Century (2018)

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GOD

Don't take the name of God in vain

Does God exist? That depends on which God you have in mind. The cosmic mystery or the worldly lawgiver? Sometimes when people talk about God, they talk about a grand and awesome enigma, about which we know absolutely nothing. We invoke this mysterious God to explain the deepest riddles of the cosmos. Why is there something rather than nothing? What shaped the fundamental laws of physics? What is consciousness, and where does it come from? We do not know the answers to these questions, and we give our ignorance the grand name of God. The most fundamental characteristic of this mysterious God is that we cannot say anything concrete about Him. This is the God of the philosophers; the God we talk about when we sit around a campfire late at night, and wonder what life is all about.

On other occasions people see God as a stern and worldly lawgiver, about whom we know only too much. We know exactly what He thinks about fashion, food, sex and politics, and we invoke this Angry Man in the Sky to justify a million regulations, decrees and conflicts. He gets upset when women wear short-sleeved shirts, when two men have sex with one another, or when teenagers masturbate. Some people say He does not like us to ever drink alcohol, whereas according to others He positively demands that we drink wine every Friday night or every Sunday morning. Entire libraries have been written to explain in the minutest details exactly what He wants and what He dislikes. The most fundamental characteristic of this worldly lawgiver is that we can say extremely concrete things about Him. This is the God of the crusaders and jihadists, of the inquisitors, the misogynists and the homophobes. This is the God we talk about when we stand around a burning pyre, hurling stones and abuses at the heretics being grilled there.

When the faithful are asked whether God really exists, they often begin by talking about the enigmatic mysteries of the universe and the limits of human understanding. 'Science cannot explain the Big Bang,' they exclaim, 'so that must be God's doing.' Yet like a magician fooling an audience by imperceptibly replacing one card with another, the faithful quickly replace the cosmic mystery with the worldly lawgiver. After giving the name of 'God' to the unknown secrets of the cosmos, they then use this to somehow condemn bikinis

and divorces. 'We do not understand the Big Bang – therefore you must cover your hair in public and vote against gay marriage.' Not only is there no logical connection between the two, but they are in fact contradictory. The deeper the mysteries of the universe, the less likely it is that whatever is responsible for them gives a damn about female dress codes or human sexual behaviour.

The missing link between the cosmic mystery and the worldly lawgiver is usually provided through some holy book. The book is full of the most trifling regulations, but is nevertheless attributed to the cosmic mystery. The creator of space and time supposedly composed it, but He bothered to enlighten us mainly about some arcane temple rituals and food taboos. In truth, we haven't got any evidence whatsoever that the Bible or the Quran or the Book of Mormon or the Vedas or any other holy book was composed by the force that determined that energy equals mass multiplied by the speed of light squared, and that protons are 1,837 times more massive than electrons. To the best of our scientific knowledge, all these sacred texts were written by imaginative Homo sapiens. They are just stories invented by our ancestors in order to legitimise social norms and political structures.

I personally never cease to wonder about the mystery of existence. But I have never understood what it has got to do with the niggling laws of Judaism, Christianity or Hinduism. These laws were certainly very helpful in establishing and maintaining the social order for thousands of years. But in that, they are not fundamentally different from the laws of secular states and institutions.

The third of the biblical Ten Commandments instructs humans never to make wrongful use of the name of God. Many understand this in a childish way, as a prohibition on uttering the explicit name of God (as in the famous Monty Python sketch 'If you say Jehovah ...'). Perhaps the deeper meaning of this commandment is that we should never use the name of God to justify our political interests, our economic ambitions or our personal hatreds. People hate somebody and say, 'God hates him'; people covet a piece of land and say, 'God wants it'. The world would be a much better place if we followed the third commandment more devotedly. You want to wage war on your neighbours and steal their land? Leave God out of it, and find yourself some other excuse.

When all is said and done, it is a matter of semantics. When I use the word 'God', I think of the God of the Islamic State, of the Crusades, of the Inquisition, and of the 'God hates fags' banners. When I think of the mystery of existence, I prefer to use other words, so as to avoid confusion. And unlike the God of the Islamic State and the Crusades – who cares a lot about names and above all about His most holy name – the mystery of existence doesn't care an iota what names we apes give it.

Godless ethics

Of course the cosmic mystery doesn't help us at all in maintaining the social order. People often argue that we must believe in a god that gave some very concrete laws to humans, or else morality will disappear and society will collapse into primeval chaos.

It is certainly true that belief in gods was vital for various social orders, and that it sometimes had positive consequences. Indeed, the very same religions that inspire hate and bigotry in some people inspire love and compassion in others. For example, in the early 1960s the Methodist reverend Ted McIlvenna became aware of the plight of LGBT people in his community. He began exploring the situation of gays and lesbians in society in general, and in May 1964 convened a pioneering three-day dialogue between clergymen and gay and lesbian activists at the White Memorial Retreat Center in California. The participants subsequently set up 'the Council on Religion and the Homosexual', which in addition to the activists included Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran and United Church of Christ ministers. This was the first American organisation to dare use the word 'homosexual' in its official title.

In the following years CRH activities ranged from organising costume parties to taking legal actions against unjust discrimination and persecution. The CRH became the seed of the gay rights movement in California. Reverend McIlvenna and the other men of God who joined him were well aware of the biblical injunctions against homosexuality. But they thought that it was more important to be true to the compassionate spirit of Christ than to the strict word of the Bible.¹

Yet though gods can inspire us to act compassionately, religious faith is not a necessary condition for moral behaviour. The idea that we need a supernatural being to make us act morally assumes that there is something unnatural about morality. But why? Morality of some kind is natural. All social mammals from chimpanzees to rats have ethical codes that limit things such as theft and murder. Among humans, morality is present in all societies, even though not all of them believe in the same god, or in any god. Christians act with charity even without believing in the Hindu pantheon, Muslims value honesty despite rejecting the divinity of Christ, and secular countries such as Denmark and the Czech Republic aren't more violent than devout countries such as Iran and Pakistan.

Morality doesn't mean 'following divine commands'. It means 'reducing suffering'. Hence in order to act morally, you don't need to believe in any myth or story. You just need to develop a deep appreciation of suffering. If you really understand how an action causes unnecessary suffering to yourself or to others, you will naturally abstain from it. People nevertheless murder, rape and steal because they have only a superficial appreciation of the misery this causes. They are fixated on satisfying their immediate

lust or greed, without concern for the impact on others – or even for the long-term impact on themselves. Even inquisitors who deliberately inflict as much pain as possible on their victim, usually use various desensitising and dehumanising techniques in order to distance themselves from what they are doing.²

You might object that every human naturally seeks to avoid feeling miserable, but why would a human care about the misery of others, unless some god demands it? One obvious answer is that humans are social animals, therefore their happiness depends to a very large extent on their relations with others. Without love, friendship and community, who could be happy? If you live a lonely self-centred life, you are almost guaranteed to be miserable. So at the very least, to be happy you need to care about your family, your friends, and your community members.

What, then, about complete strangers? Why not murder strangers and take their possessions to enrich myself and my tribe? Many thinkers have constructed elaborate social theories, explaining why in the long run such behaviour is counterproductive. You would not like to live in a society where strangers are routinely robbed and murdered. Not only would you be in constant danger, but you would lack the benefit of things like commerce, which depends on trust between strangers. Merchants don't usually visit dens of thieves. That's how secular theoreticians from ancient China to modern Europe have justified the golden rule of 'don't do to others what you would not like them to do to you'.

Yet we do not really need such complex long-term theories to find a natural basis for universal compassion. Forget about commerce for a moment. On a much more immediate level, hurting others always hurts me too. Every violent act in the world begins with a violent desire in somebody's mind, which disturbs that person's own peace and happiness before it disturbs the peace and happiness of anyone else. Thus people seldom steal unless they first develop a lot of greed and envy in their minds. People don't usually murder unless they first generate anger and hatred. Emotions such as greed, envy, anger and hatred are very unpleasant. You cannot experience joy and harmony when you are boiling with anger or envy. Hence long before you murder anyone, your anger has already killed your own peace of mind.

Indeed, you might keep boiling with anger for years, without ever actually murdering the object of your hate. In which case you haven't hurt anyone else, but you have nevertheless hurt yourself. It is therefore your natural self-interest – and not the command of some god – that should induce you to do something about your anger. If you were completely free of anger you would feel far better than if you murdered an obnoxious enemy.

For some people, a strong belief in a compassionate god that commands us to turn the other cheek may help in curbing anger. That's been an enormous contribution of religious belief to the peace and harmony of the world. Unfortunately, for other people

religious belief actually stokes and justifies their anger, especially if someone dares to insult their god or ignore his wishes. So the value of the lawgiver god ultimately depends on the behaviour of his devotees. If they act well, they can believe anything they like. Similarly, the value of religious rites and sacred places depends on the type of feelings and behaviours they inspire. If visiting a temple makes people experience peace and harmony – that's wonderful. But if a particular temple causes violence and conflicts, what do we need it for? It is clearly a dysfunctional temple.

Not visiting any temples and not believing in any god is also a viable option. As the last few centuries have proved, we don't need to invoke God's name in order to live a moral life. Secularism can provide us with all the values we need.