

# Good Without God

What a Billion Nonreligious  
People *Do* Believe

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# Introduction

## Can You Be Good Without God?

This is a book about Humanism. If you're not familiar with the word *Humanism*, it is, in short, goodness without God. This is a book about the values, the history, and the future of the world's hundreds of millions of atheists, agnostics, and nonreligious people.

This is not a book about *whether* one can be good without God, because that question does not need to be answered—it needs to be rejected outright. To suggest that one *can't* be good without belief in God is not just an opinion, a mere curious musing—it is a prejudice. It may even be discrimination. After all, would you ever ask: Is it possible to be a good person if you're Muslim? Or Buddhist? Or Jewish? Or Christian? Would you feel comfortable working for an employer who implied that all gays and lesbians were immoral? Or all Democrats? Or all Republicans? How would you feel if your daughter were planning to marry someone who claimed that all Catholics were lousy, unethical human beings? Or all Protestants? This is the sort of all-or-nothing condemnation of a huge population one is making if one suggests that goodness and morality require belief in a deity.

And it's hardly a hypothetical suggestion: over decades of polling, a majority of Americans have consistently indicated a negative opinion of atheists and nonbelievers. Even in this enlightened twenty-first century, where we've proved ourselves ready for a black president and welcomed elected officials representing every group, approximately *half* of all Americans say they would refuse to vote for a well-qualified atheist candidate for public office. In other words, one out of every two Americans admits to being prejudiced against fellow citizens who don't believe in God. No other minority group in this country is rejected by such large numbers.<sup>1</sup>

This prejudice ought to concern us all. Because prejudice anywhere endangers not only its targets, but all who believe that we should be judged not by the color of our skin, or our gender, or sexuality, or by our religious preference or lack thereof, but by the content of our character. If we can convince ourselves today that one entire group comprising millions of people might be incapable of goodness, might be “no good,” then we harbor inside us the ability to turn against and hate any other group as well, and no one should feel safe.

It is not easy to live a good life or be a good person—with or without a god. The fact is that life is hard. Living well and being a good person are difficult to do. But that doesn't mean we should give ourselves permission to judge an entire group of people as incapable of goodness unless they're being good the majority's way.

Tolerant, fair-minded people of all religions or none do not dwell on the question of *whether* we can be good without God. The answer is yes. Period. Millions and millions of people are, every day. However, the question *why* we can be good without God is much more relevant and interesting. And the question of *how* we can be good without God is absolutely crucial. Those are the questions in this book—the essential questions asked and answered by Humanism. I invite you to explore these questions, and Humanism's answers, with me.

## Are You Religious?

If you're not religious—if you don't believe in God, you're not sure you believe in God, or if you think you believe in some kind of higher power but you

know you don't fit into any organized religion—you're not alone. Here's the good news: over a billion people around the world today are like you. All the major studies of world religious demographics, despite different methodologies, indicate that there are somewhere around one billion people on earth who define themselves as atheist, agnostic, or nonreligious. Even if we exclude the approximately half of nonreligious people who say they believe in some form of "spirit"—though I think it makes sense to include many of them—there are still more than half a billion people in the world who live without belief in God. And even in the United States of America, which we're told is the most religious of all the world's developed nations, the nonreligious now represent approximately 15 percent of the population, or approximately 40 million Americans. "Nonreligious" is the fastest growing "religious preference" in the United States, and the only one to have increased its percentage of the population in every one of the fifty states over the past generation. Almost one in four American young adults today has no religion, which suggests not only a growing trend but also that an even larger percentage of the United States as a whole may be secular in another generation. Granted, when pollsters ask Americans to identify themselves as atheists or agnostics, only a few million answer affirmatively. But those terms are attached to a stigma. When poll questions ask in a more round-about way, such as "Do you believe in God?" the number who say "no" or "not sure" is much higher. And the number of Americans who don't expect to have a religious funeral is in the stratosphere—nearly a quarter of us.<sup>2</sup>

What's more, there's plenty of evidence to suggest that nonreligious people *are* being good en masse. It has long been known that Humanists and nonreligious people have made extraordinary contributions to science and philosophy as well as to philanthropy and social justice. But sociologists have recently begun to pay more attention to the fact that some of the world's most secular countries, such as those in Scandinavia, are among the least violent, best educated, and most likely to care for the poor.<sup>3</sup> And as scientists are now beginning to document, though religion may have benefits for the brain, so may secularism and Humanism. Atheists meditating on positive secular images can gain the same benefits that religious people do from prayer. Strongly convinced nonbelievers may be among the least depressed people—along with strongly convinced believers. Nonreligious

Americans have even been shown to be far more likely than regular church-going believers to oppose U.S. government-sponsored torture or “advanced interrogation techniques.”

Some say that all these people have nothing in common beyond their nonbelief—or that, because they don’t call themselves by the same names or join the same organizations, we should not count or study them. This is nonsense. After all, Christianity is an incredibly diverse tradition as well, encompassing beliefs, customs, and organizations that range widely, from archliberal Unitarian Universalists in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to African American Baptists in Montgomery, Alabama, to Mormons in Salt Lake City, and far beyond. If we study Christianity as a big-tent tradition, or Hinduism (with its thousands of gods and traditions, which many of its followers have trouble agreeing upon), we have to study the nonreligious together as well. We may be a diverse group, but no more so than others.

Still, up to now, only a small percentage of so-called nonbelievers have seen themselves as part of a bigger group of like-minded people, let alone a movement capable of improving people’s perceptions of them or making the world a better place.

## Are You a Humanist?

If you identify as an atheist, agnostic, freethinker, rationalist, skeptic, cynic, secular humanist, naturalist, or deist; as spiritual, apathetic, nonreligious, “nothing”; or any other irreligious descriptive, you could probably count yourself what I call a Humanist. Feel free to use whatever terminology you prefer—that’s not important. We don’t believe a god created perfect religions or sacred texts, so why would we believe he or she created one perfect, sacred name that all doubters were required to adopt? And as we’ve seen in recent years with the success of the GLBT movement—or is it LGBT? Or gay? Or queer?—it’s not necessary to reach universal agreement about nomenclature in order to bring a massive group together to gain influence and recognition. The point is that as a Humanist, you’d be in distinguished company, along with Thomas Jefferson, John Lennon, Winston Churchill, Margaret Sanger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Voltaire, David Hume, Salman Rushdie, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Confucius, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Wole Soyinka,

Kurt Vonnegut, Zora Neale Hurston, Mark Twain, Margaret Meade, Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, Einstein, Darwin, and more than a billion people worldwide.

All this makes you and me adherents of one of the four largest life-stances on earth, along with Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. But if we are adherents, what is it that we adhere to? What, if anything, do we have in common? Do the diverse and often disparate multitudes so often dismissed as mere “nonbelievers” share any beliefs in common? Now that we are beginning to gain recognition—such as a positive mention in President Obama’s inaugural address or a story about us on the front page of the *New York Times*—it’s time to recognize that nonbelievers are believers too: we believe in Humanism.

## What Is Humanism?

Humanism is a bold, resolute response to the fact that being a human being is lonely and frightening. We Humanists take one look at a world in which the lives of thousands of innocent children are ripped away every year by hurricanes, earthquakes, and other “acts of God,” not to mention the thousand other fundamental injustices of life, and we conclude that if the universe we live in does not have competent moral management, then so be it: we must become the superintendents of our own lives. Humanism means taking charge of the often lousy world around us and working to shape it into a better place, though we know we cannot ever finish the task.

In short, Humanism is being good without God. It is above all an affirmation of the greatest common value we human beings have: the desire to live with dignity, to be “good.” But Humanism is also a warning that we cannot afford to wait until tomorrow or until the next life to be good, because today—the short journey we get from birth to death, womb to tomb—is all we have. Humanism rejects dependence on faith, the supernatural, divine texts, resurrection, reincarnation, or anything else for which we have no evidence. To put it another way, Humanists believe in life *before* death.

More formally, the American Humanist Association defines Humanism as a progressive lifestance that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment, aspiring to

the greater good of humanity. This approach, though affirmed by most of the world's hundreds of millions of atheists and agnostics, is not particularly organized. And yet it can be, and it already is in many places, though some secularists bristle at the thought that this is too much like an "organized religion." As we'll see, Humanism is a cohesive world *movement* based on the creation of good lives and communities, without God.

Nonreligious people often wonder why on earth, with all the abuses and scandals and illogical ideas religion is responsible for, is religion still so powerful? The answer is that for most, religion is not about belief in an all-seeing deity with a baritone voice and a flowing beard. It is about group identification—the community and the connections we need to live. It is about family, tradition, consolation, ethics, memories, music, art, architecture, and much more. These things are all good, and no one wants to or should be asked to give them up because of lack of belief in a god.

The truth is that at the present time, the above list of social goods—family, tradition, memories, music, etc.—is difficult to find communally outside traditional forms of religious affiliation or custom. And in truth, being a good person in a vacuum is not a very satisfying experience. Those of us who don't want to worship an invisible being or spend our days fretting about punishment in Hades do want to be able to share what we hold dear with our families and the broader world, and we want to be understood and appreciated for who we are. To do so we need community.

At the most important times of our lives—when we or our loved ones are sick and dying; when a new baby is born; when we want to affirm our love in marriage; when we want to educate our children not only about facts and dates, but also important values—we need to be part of a group. We need what, at least potentially, can be found or created in a *Humanist* community: a place where family, memory, ethical values, and the uplifting of the human spirit can come together with intellectual honesty, and without a god.