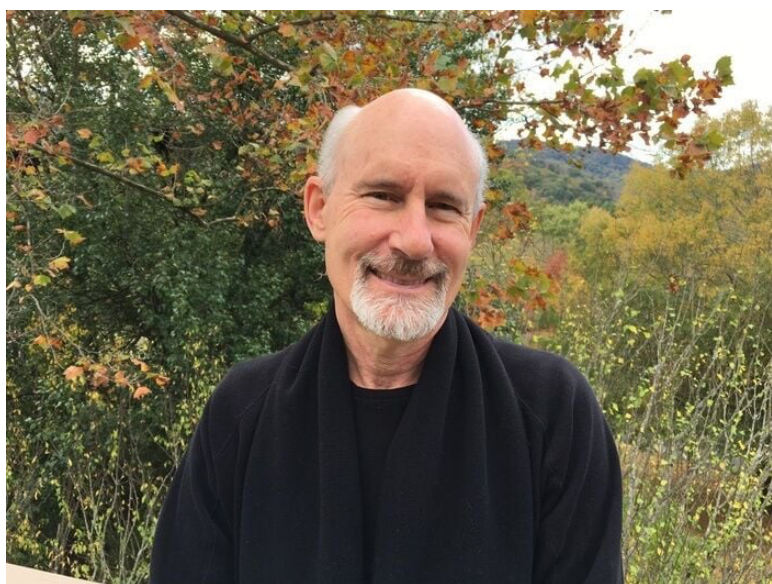




https://www.blackbeltnewsnetwork.com/religion/friendly-freethinker-do-you-have-to-believe-in-god-to-be-moral/article_d6fb472a-915d-42dd-9847-94c04b1c92e1.html

Friendly Freethinker: Do You have to believe in God to be moral?

By Chris Highland
Sep 21, 2026



It's one of the oldest questions often used as an argument for religion faith: Can you be a non-believer in God and still be a moral person? This of course assumes that a belief determines how good and right a person can be. "I believe in

God, therefore I'm a good person" doesn't really hold up to scrutiny. Obviously the flip side isn't logical either: "I don't believe therefore I'm good." Yet, without clear divine demands and commands, is it possible to live a moral life, or does this mean "anything goes," that you can do whatever you want without concern for the consequences?

One definition of morality states: "principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behavior." Some say that without belief in a deity a person cannot make those distinctions, that it's impossible to know what's right and wrong, good and bad, without a god, a book or a religious authority telling you. More assumptions here. What do these believers say when we point out there are many religions, books and clergy to choose from? Which divinity or sacred book in which religious tradition is the best guide to morality?

One religious teaching can get in the way of clearly understanding this dilemma: "righteousness." For those who believe a person must be spiritually righteous—in the eyes of God—to truly know what is right and wrong, there is no compromise. If you are "right with God," you can be right (righteous). This presents a bit of a problem for the righteous. It's too easy to become self-righteous. "I'm right with God, so I'm righteous, and I can tell you how to get right with God so you can be righteous like me." If a proper practice of morality means this kind of

“moralizing,” I don’t see that as helpful or very effective. We observe “moral” believers who don’t act very ethical at times.

As I see it, morality is somewhat different than ethics. Morality tends to be based on religious authority so it can conveniently be controlled by that authority (Thou shalt/Thou shalt not). Ethics are governing principles that can be practiced by anyone, regardless of religious faith. How we conduct ourselves, and take responsibility for our actions, seems to be the central point of ethics (should I or shouldn’t I?). The same can be said for morality, except that “being moral” usually falls back on instructions from ancient books and those who interpret those books to manage other people’s lives.

Given this nuanced distinction between morality and ethics, some might claim that you can’t be truly moral without a religion that tells you what being moral means, and how to be moral. Others might claim you can be an ethical person by following your natural intelligence and a rational sense of responsibility, learned through experience in family, school, culture—and yes, perhaps even in church, synagogue, mosque or temple. Truth is, through experience we learn there are consequences if we don’t take responsibility for our actions. Not pursuing an ethical path can have seriously harmful results. It’s certainly true there are some who don’t care

or “don’t know better.” Maybe they need some education, correction or better models for action, which may or may not come from religion.

SEAT BELTS: THE BEST TRAVEL INSURANCE



How do we face immoral or unethical behavior? Could there be common responses that include both religious and ethical guidelines? Why not be creative and at least try to address community challenges together? This can be a good opportunity to show a better way. Some who have moral standards might be able and willing to work with ethical humanists open to collaboration. For instance, drug or alcohol addiction might be tearing a community apart. Some religious groups might view this as “moral failure,” yet may choose to support a secular-based program focused on health and counseling. Another example could be a program in the local jail that provides counseling from an ethical perspective with the goal of re-integrating offenders into the community. Religious groups might support this, offering financial assistance, housing and jobs.

Can we come to any conclusions on the morality question? In my view, a person doesn’t have to believe in God, or practice any religion, to be moral. An ethical way of life is all about making good decisions to do good, to be a virtuous person. Treating others as we want to be treated

is a universal principle—found in many religious and ethical traditions—and anyone can live by this basic humanistic rule, though believers and non-believers can both fail to live up to that standard. That's a human decision problem, not a theological doctrine to use as an implement of judgment.

Chris Highland

2026

Chris Highland was a minister and chaplain for many years. He is a writer and teacher in Asheville, NC. www.chighland.com, (chris.highland@gmail.com)