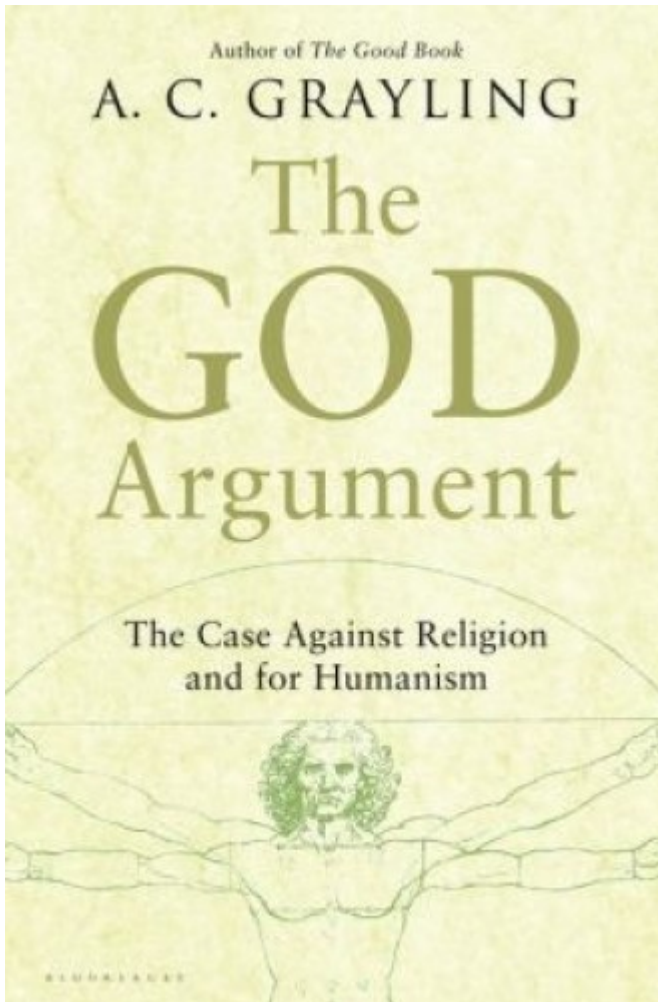


The God Argument, by A. C. Grayling

reviewed by [George Dennis O'Brien](#) in the [May 29, 2013](#) issue

In Review



The God Argument

By A. C. Grayling

Bloomsbury

Having written a weekly column in the *Guardian* and published a series of books on philosophy for the general reader, A. C. Grayling is a rarity: a well-known philosopher. Well known at least in Britain. Recently he has become a controversial

figure because of his role in the founding of the New College of the Humanities in London, a private institution with costly tuition. Opponents have attacked him for fostering an elitist enclave. Instruction in the humanities, elitist or not, is central to Grayling's life and work.

For Grayling, humanism rejects religion and replaces it, and *The God Argument* is a clear example of this antireligious fundamentalism. Fundamentalism generally operates by reducing legend to literalness. Biblical fundamentalists take the legend of Genesis 1 literally as history. Likewise, Grayling takes the most popular legend about the genesis of religion—it began as magic and has been replaced by science—as proven history.

Making legend literal is a clever strategy for both supporters and critics of religion. If the Bible is history in any sense comparable to, say, the history of the United States, there is a presumption that the historical actors existed. Since God acts all over in the Bible, God's existence would seem as certain as the existence of George Washington.

For Grayling, the legend that religion begins as bad science and ends with good science categorically excludes God. Religion as science requires that God cannot exist, if for no other reason than that natural science has no place for supernatural incursions. The sign on the lab door reads, "No entry for gods!"

The issue for biblical fundamentalists and for Grayling's tale about religion is whether the literal story is the true story. I will not rehearse problems with biblical fundamentalism, but Grayling's legend of religion's rise and fall is anything but surefire fact. Summing up his argument, he writes: "The cumulative case against religion shows that it is a hangover from the infancy of modern humanity. . . . Religions . . . derive ultimately from the superstitions of illiterate herdsmen living thousand of years ago." Having arisen, religions continue because people proselytize children, who, like those old sheep herders, don't know any better. Primitives think gods and spirits cause events that we now know are purely natural phenomena. God can be discarded like phlogiston as failed physics.

Grayling's story of the origin and meaning of religion is basically that found in E. B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871) and J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1891). Both thinkers accepted the 19th-century view that human thought had progressively evolved from primitive magic to modern science. The fact that Grayling repeats

antique anthropology is not itself a fatal fault, but it might make one wonder whether these are the only accounts of primitive religion in the field.

Of course, there are a number of theories: Freud thought religion was a form of neurosis; Durkheim thought it was an almost inescapable social construct. Closing the loop from Tylor, E. E. Evans-Pritchard's *Theories of Primitive Religion* (1965) argues that anthropologists may not understand the primitive mind at all. So is the proper construction of primitive religion magic, neurosis, social construct or "We don't know"? Grayling complains that Christians cherry-pick from the Bible. I would have to say that he has cherry-picked his theories of religion.

Ludwig Wittgenstein—about whom Grayling offers a useful short introduction—thought Frazer's view of primitive religion utterly wrongheaded. Why? Because Frazer, like Grayling, reduces religion to mistaken science.

Wittgenstein held that there are many different uses of language: "giving orders . . . playacting . . . cursing, greeting, praying." Religion for ancient shamans and modern priests rests on the ritual use of language, a distinct mode of linguistic behavior. According to the magic view, the primitive's rain dance is supposed to cause the rain to come. Wittgenstein wondered why, if that was the case, the rain dance was always held in the rainy season. It seems plausible that rather than causing rain, it was a ceremonial ritual celebrating rain. Ceremony is no minor part of human life. Wittgenstein declared at one point, "We could almost say, man is a ceremonious animal."

Wittgenstein concluded, "Frazer is much more savage than most of his savages. He cannot image a priest who is not basically a present-day English parson with the same stupidity and dullness."

That can also be said about Grayling. He cannot seem to imagine a pastor who is not committed to the most flat-footed factual reading of every sentence in the Bible. It is no great task to reject that vision of religion outright. (To be fair, Grayling does acknowledge the existence of high theology, but he generally dismisses it as "polysyllabic confusion.")

The God Argument has two distinct parts: the argument against God and the case for humanism. It would be difficult to fault the humanistic picture Grayling presents. He calls for forming a personal morality that is tolerant and open to rational dialogue, that avoids action that does harm to others and that values friendship and

seeks social justice. He notes that there are those who regard themselves as Christian humanists, but he remains suspicious of organized religion. Because religion arose in the infancy of the race and is perpetuated by the indoctrination of children when they are utterly dependent on parental guidance, it requires infantilism in its adult adherents. The heavenly Father or some local holy father tells the believers what they must believe and do. The essential structure of religion precludes the formation of reasoned personal morality.

At one point Grayling offers the names of 76 heroes of humanism, starting with Confucius and ending with Richard Dawkins. It seems an odd lot. Spinoza, one of the humanists listed, may have an unusual God, but that God is the centerpiece of his philosophy.

I was most interested in the inclusion of Jean-Paul Sartre. In "Existentialism Is a Humanism" Sartre scorns secular thinkers who "would like to abolish God with the least possible expense." Unlike Grayling, the atheist Sartre thinks "it very distressing that God does not exist." Indeed, he declares that "if God does not exist, . . . man is forlorn."

Coming from a philosopher as sophisticated as Grayling, *The God Argument* is disappointing. The existence of God is a considerable conceptual puzzle, doubts about divine reality abound, and there are many roads to atheism. Grayling has chosen the quick and easy path.