

Can we be good without God? A central question of any moral crisis: A central question of any moral crisis

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [March 22, 2003](#) issue

Some have suggested that recent scandals in the world of business, politics and the academy are practical consequences of a worldview that has pushed God out. Morality needs God, the argument goes, and without God the social fabric will be torn by uncontrolled greed, lust for power and striving for glory.

Clearly, however, you can also have a good deal of “immorality” even if God occupies a central place in your worldview. Scandals in the religious communities are proof of this, if proof is needed. Moreover, convictions about God sometimes explicitly underwrite morally reprehensible acts, as when greed and violence are justified on religious grounds. What should we conclude from the fact that those who believe in God both do evil and legitimize their deeds by belief in God? Only that belief in God is compatible with “immoral” life, not that morality does not need God.

But does morality need God? A fine and accessible book on the subject is *Why Bother Being Good? The Place of God in the Moral Life*, by John Hare, professor of philosophy at Calvin College. He is one of the most important Christian moral philosophers writing today (see *The Moral Gap* and *God's Call*). He argues powerfully that morality does need God. His point is not that a person who doesn't believe in God can't be good—there are many such people, and some of them live lives worthy of saints. The morally rigorous 18th-century philosopher Immanuel Kant considered 17th-century Jewish rationalist philosopher Baruch Spinoza to be such a person. But because saintly atheists live better than they believe, says Hare, they lack some essential beliefs that sustain the kind of life they lead. They cannot make sense of their own moral lives.

One standard way to argue that morality needs God is to show that we must make an appeal to God if we want to give an adequate answer to the question, “Why

should we be good?" In the second half of his book, Hare offers a version of such an argument, mainly by discarding the available alternatives as inadequate. The authority of morality is not just obvious, and it is not grounded in the demands of reason. Moreover, it cannot come from the need to be true either to our human nature or to the community to which we belong. It would take too long to give Hare's reasons for discarding these ways of construing why we should be good. But by using the process of elimination, Hare is able to argue that the authority of morality can come only from God's will and God's call.

Often people who argue that morality needs God stop after showing that God is the only adequate source of morality's authority. Hare does not. God is relevant not only to why we should be good, but also to how we *can* be good. Our ability is indeed a problem. All of us experience a demand for a morality that is "too high for us given the natural capacities we are born with." We try various strategies to help ourselves out, such as "puffing up our capacity" or "reducing the demand." But these are clearly futile, for our natural capacity remains hopelessly limited and the demand inescapably high.

To be able to be moral, argues Hare, we need "moral faith: . . . the faith that it is possible for us to be morally good in our hearts and the faith that the world outside us makes moral sense." Moral people have to believe both that "their capacities have been transformed *inside* themselves" and that "the world *outside* is the kind of place in which happiness is reliably connected with a morally good life."

A different way of putting this second condition is simply to say that "moral people need to believe that they do not have to do what is morally bad to be happy." The point seems well taken: if we are persuaded that we cannot satisfy the demands of morality and that we will be miserable when we do, we are not likely to try to be moral. Hare argues that the "moral faith" necessary for leading moral lives demands faith in God—the one who can transform hearts providentially leads the world in such a way that (in the end) virtue will unite with happiness.

So are we back to the claim that one cannot lead a moral life if one does not believe in God? Not quite. For whether we believe in God or not, God may be at work in the hearts of people and in God's providential leading of the world. But if Hare is right, then the "morality we are familiar with requires a theological background if it is going to make sense." This does not prove that theological doctrines are true. It shows that "if we want to hang on to this morality and reject the theology, then we

will have to find some substitute to do the work that the theology used to do. It is not going to be easy to find such a substitute.”

In the face of the scandals that have shaken the confidence of people in business, government, academia and religious communities, leaders of the Christian churches take on the mantle of critics who complain about the state of the “world” and, less often, the mantle of reformers who offer ways to improve it. If Hare is right, they should not neglect their primary task of witnessing to the God of Jesus Christ. We appeal to God to answer two central questions that lie at the heart of any moral crisis: “Why should we be morally good?” and “How can we be morally good?”