

EDITORIAL

Can we have good without God? Will we be good without God? These are perennial questions. Atheists typically think the answer to be both is 'yes', while many religious believers remain convinced that the answer is twice 'no'. Bruce Anderson, a columnist with the *Independent* newspaper, recently wrote:

...one point should have occurred to the adherents of [atheism], at least in a Christian country. Even if they reject faith, it might be better if not too many others followed their example. In the West, we have a vast cultural and intellectual heritage. But our ethical heritage is sadly depleted.

The suggestion seems to be that, whether or not atheism is true, it might be better if the man in the street retained his religious convictions, lest he become ethically unhinged.

This concern has repeatedly been expressed down through the centuries. Even the Enlightenment thinker Voltaire would not allow his friends to discuss atheism in front of his servants, saying,

I want my lawyer, tailor, valets, even my wife to believe in God. I think that if they do I shall be robbed less and cheated less.

George Washington warned that morality can be maintained without religion, Even Adolf Hitler insisted that '[s]ecular schools can never be tolerated' because a morality that is not founded on religion is built 'on thin air'.

Of course, there are many ethically committed atheists, but their moral behaviour, it's often suggested, is parasitic – it draws on religious heritage and capital that is now rapidly being depleted. Here, for example, is the 'godfather' of American neo-conservatism, Irving Kristol:

For well over 150 years now, social critics have been warning us that bourgeoisie society was living off the accumulated moral capital of traditional religion and traditional moral philosophy.

Gertrude Himmelfarb, another neocon, also favours the view that we are

...living off the religious capital of a previous generation and that that capital is being perilously depleted.

So too does Ronald Reagan's Supreme Court nominee Judge Robert K. Bork:

We all know persons without religious belief who nevertheless display all the virtues we associate with religious teaching...such people are living on the moral capital of prior religious generations... that moral capital will be used up eventually, having nothing to replenish it, and we will see a culture such as the one we are entering.

Whether we can have, or will be, good without God is a topic to which I will be devoting a special issue of *Think* in the near future. In the meantime, Paul Kurtz's excellent article in this issue will serve to get the ball rolling...

Stephen Law, Editor