



# WHY GOD IS GOOD FOR YOU

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**BY GREG  
SHERIDAN**



# Why God Is Good For You

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# Foreword

**I**t may be an inappropriate time to consider the status of religion in the public sphere. For decades, every vestige of the religious impulse from public life and discourse seems to have been actively expunged. In 1971, 86 per cent of Australians identified with Christianity. By 2016, the census showed only about half the population identified even nominally with Christianity.

However, religion seems to be working more often into the public discourse. In *God is Good For You: A Defence of Christianity in Troubled Times* (Allen & Unwin, 358pp), Greg Sheridan deals with the place of religion and faith in a democracy. He sets out how modern Christians have never worked so hard to make the world a better place, at a time when their faith has never been less valued.

In the following pages, Sheridan tells us about past and present national leaders who subscribe to various Christian persuasions: Anglicans, Catholics, Baptists and Uniting Church, as well as growing minorities like Coptic Christians and Pentecostals. These include Kim Beazley, John Howard, Kevin Rudd, Tony Abbott, Peter Costello, Bill Shorten and Malcolm Turnbull.

For decades, Greg Sheridan has been one of our nation's finest minds on politics, culture and international affairs. No one explains Australia's place in the world better than the long-time foreign editor of *The Australian* newspaper. He is also a prolific author of several influential books.

On August 2, Greg Sheridan addressed the Centre for Independent Studies on his latest thesis before taking questions from senior scholar Peter Kurti and the audience in our packed-out lecture room. We publish an edited transcript of the event with pleasure.

**Tom Switzer**  
**Executive Director**  
**The Centre for Independent Studies**



# Why God Is Good For You

To be lectured at by a journalist about God is really sort of the weirdest thing in the world, and shows how broad-minded God is that he would be willing to talk to a journalist.

So what would I know about God? We journalists certainly know a good deal about sin and wickedness, and vice and cruelty and unhappiness. And that's the other side of life of course.

People often ask me 'why did I write this book?' One reason is because of the last book I read. I had the great pleasure of going to a number of writers' festivals around Australia. Byron Bay, the Sydney Writers Festival, Melbourne Writers Festival, the Festival of Dangerous Ideas. That wonderfully misnamed thing — never has there been a more predictable bunch of ideas collected. And at those festivals by the way, I think I played the role of a semi-domesticated orc brought down from the hills, amongst a large gathering of very concerned hobbits, who were armed with their ploughshares and their pikestaves and who were willing to deal with the orc if he caused trouble, but who nonetheless in their broad mindedness tolerated him there for a while.

But I was struck that amidst the hundreds of books at all those festivals, there was not one — not one — which was pro-Christian or which celebrated the Western tradition in any way. And this is an astonishing change from 50 or 60 years ago.

In the 1950s, the best-selling books across secular culture were all Christian books. I'm not quite sure when Thomas Merton wrote his great memoir, but it sold three million books. You know, he went on to become a Cistercian monk who took a vow of silence and never stopped prattling for the rest of his life. God bless him. Because in the Catholic Church, we embrace paradox. We understand paradox.

And Henry Morton Robinson's novel, 'The Cardinal', and so on. All of these books were massive bestsellers that secular culture was devoted to. And, they not only had a genuine religious quality, they were a celebration of a cultural inheritance. And now, that cultural inheritance has sort of disappeared from our culture. And I thought that's very weird. How can it be that there is not a single book from that point of view?

The more I thought of it, the more I thought we are actually erasing from popular culture — and to a large extent from our educational institutions — any knowledge of the ideas and beliefs and transcendent values which formed our culture and formed our society. Now in taking this road, we're going down a very eccentric path for any part of humanity.

In my day job, I'm the foreign editor of *The Australian* newspaper, which means I'm sort of sentenced to perpetual contemplation of Donald Trump. One of the great joys of this book was that I escaped from Trump for a few months. And there were people who would ring me in January and say, "Did you see what Trump said about China?" And I'd say, "Look, comrade I'm in a Trump-free moment. My mind is in the book of Genesis. I'm reading Brendan Purcell's jokes. Trump can live without me for a month, you know." But it became clear to me that the road we're travelling down is a very eccentric road.

As foreign editor I spend a lot of my time in Asia. And of course, all throughout Asia religion is a dynamic, central, normal part of human life. It's absurd to imagine Indonesia without a religious identity or Thailand or most of the parts of Asia. You might proffer China as an alternative but Christianity is on fire in China. There are more Christians in China than there are members of the Communist Party. The force that the Communist Party fears, the only force in the whole of society, is religion. Not only Christianity but Buddhism, Falun Gong and various other religious outcrops.



So it's a very weird place where we're going. Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand and North America. North America is more religious than we are, but it's got the same trends. The majority of religious folks are older folks. The majority of older folks are religious folks. So when the old folks die off, the young people are much less religious, and they are a bit less atheist than we are.

We are a bit more atheist than, say, Britain is, but we're all heading in the same direction. And I wanted to answer some questions for myself in this book. What will the loss of God mean for our society? The truth is human beings are formed in a culture. And a culture without God will form radically different human beings from the ones we've had before. This is not remotely to idealize the past and I don't in my book anywhere idealize the past.

The past, that foreign country had plenty of devils of its own. I'm not defending the past, but not everything in the past was bad. And when you throw things out, sometimes you throw out good things, and a culture without God will form different human beings. What is the basis for human dignity without God? I think the loss of God threatens both the distinctiveness and the universality of the human experience in the West.

If there is no God, if human beings who have derived their unique status historically from their divine relationship with God, if there is nothing, if we are just a chancy, outcrop of the biosphere, then really we have no more claim on special consideration than a cockroach. And, if our message to all of humanity is, "Just follow your dreams", that's a very bad message because human dreams are often terrible nightmares. What if your dream is to kill six million people? What if your dream is to have sex with six-year-olds? What is to prevent you following this dream?

The only thing that prevents you then is the mediation of power. Say you're in this nature and world where the only thing that counts really is power. That is not only dangerous, it's evil and it's antihuman. So I think the loss of God will be very bad for our culture. It's also very bad for human beings. Part of this crisis of faith that we're living in — in my opinion — is a crisis of knowledge. You don't believe because you know belief like love is an act of the

will rather than an act of the intellect, but nonetheless it's hard to believe if you don't have any knowledge.

Of course, that's not to put any limitations on the way that God reaches out to people and people find God. Nonetheless, if you wipe out Christianity from the public culture, it's very difficult for people when they finally have their own crisis of unbelief, to come back to anything, because they've never had anything in the first place to come back to. And of course, in the words of GK. Chesterton, when people stop believing in God they don't believe in nothing, they believe in anything.

And they go to very weird places as a result. So, I thought the lack of knowledge of basic teachings, history, truths, content of Christianity was shocking. It's shocking in state schools. It's shocking in Christian schools. It's shocking in state universities. We've recently seen this appalling controversy where the ANU, the Australian National University — a splendid place really — rejected the idea of a bachelor's degree in Western Civilisation. And the rejection, the popular impetus for the rejection, the campus protest was that this would privilege in a racist way the west. Western civilisation means genocide, invasion, oppression and so on. And yet every book that was proposed for the syllabus of this course in Western Civilisation was a critical book.

I'm just in the process of making my first acquaintance with Dante. So naturally, I'm full of doctrinaire knowledge on this matter. But Dante's poem was in many respects a critique of the corruption of medieval Christianity. The idea that by studying the Great Books of Western Civilisation you can have an uncritical view of Western Civilisation is completely absurd. But, to keep that knowledge away from university and school students and ordinary average citizens struck me as an act of vandalism. So my book is a little contribution. It's a thimble-full of content into an ocean of confusion.

Then there was the question of the rationality of belief. I'd never read the New Atheists because I had no interest in them really, but I thought I'd better read them for this book. And what a chore it was. Honestly, they make Donald Trump look attractive really. But I went through this unbelievably tedious book by Richard Dawkins

— *The God Delusion*. It is the most pompous book I've ever read. He conceives of himself as sort of the pope of atheism really, and it's just full of ex-catheter petri statements of infallible truth on his part. I read Christopher Hitchens. Much better writer than Dawkins, much more fun. Full of outrageous dishonest things about Christianity.

But having read the New Atheists, I realised they're actually not making a rational case. Their arguments are so silly that they just fall over themselves. But what they are doing is acting as old fashioned bishops. They're just confirming the faithful in the atheistic faith, that their beliefs are sound and sensible. So they're mobilizing the dynamic of celebrity to authorise the atheist belief of the society, and of course Atheism is a religious belief like any other.

But it's such a weird belief. I do believe that you cannot rationally prove God or disprove God. But God is certainly rationally the most likely explanation. And everything in the New Atheist case was just on its face so abundantly absurd. So they say the universe is 14 billion years old. 'Well obviously God wouldn't waste his time spending 14 billion years before...' How would they know what God would do? Not only that. It strikes me as absolutely characteristic of God that he would spend 14 billion years preparing a beautiful gift.

That's not an argument ... that's just a prejudice on their part. Similarly, one of the central arguments they make is that religion is improbable, therefore it's untrue. But the explanations they provide as alternatives are unbelievably improbable, and require such magical thinking. For example, one of the reasons to believe rationally in religion is that almost all human beings throughout history and across all cultures have had a hunger for God. And our strongest desires always indicate a corresponding strong reality.

So we're hungry, that indicates food. We're lonely, that indicates friendship. We're tired, that indicates the reality of sleep. Every profound desire we have indicates a corresponding reality. So how do you deal then with the profound desire for God? So some evolutionary atheists say, well the religious disposition is just a pro-survival wrinkle of the human mind because it promotes cooperation. And therefore, now that we've passed through that stage of evolution, we can dispense with that.

But of course that argument can be turned on the atheists themselves. How do we know that their latest view is not just an evolutionary outcrop of the human mind, just a strange oubliette of evolutionary development? Why do we believe that's true? Another problem they have is that human life and all life is so improbable. Our universe is so improbable. If the Big Bang had been a bit stronger, the planets would have just kept shooting away. If it had been a bit weaker, the planets would have collapsed back in on themselves.

The sweet spot that produced the universe and then the sweet spot that produced carbon — which produced life — then the sweet spot which produced any kind of living creature... it's all so unbelievably improbable. The fact that a thing is improbable doesn't mean it's not true. And believe me, that's one thing that a life in journalism teaches you. Especially a life in political journalism. Only things which are improbable are true.

But the atheists then have this problem; how do they explain the improbability of our universe when it's the improbability of religion which they've used to attack religion? One of their explanations is to say, "Well obviously, there are an infinite number of universes and we've just lucked into the one which happens to be good for life." So you think to yourself, to use that marvellous Yiddish saying, "Oy vey. You don't believe in God but you believe in an infinite number of universes without a speck of evidence?"

And this is kind of a laughable argument. Where did this idea of an infinite number of universes come from, there's no evidence for it... it's a preposterous idea. And yet, this is the kind of honoured thinking of our time. This is sophisticated, honoured thinking. So I thought these arguments are so feeble that anyone could pull them apart. So let's have a go and do it. And of course it is really shooting fish in a barrel. It's not really hard work.

There was a chapter which I enjoyed writing on the rational belief. Then there are a few other chapters I want to alert you to. One was on the Old Testament. The Old Testament gets a terrifically bad press, especially from the New Atheists. They say the God of the Old Testament was homophobic, genocidal, misogynist, control freak, blah, blah, blah. And of course they spectacularly misrepresent the Old Testament. I must say that I've benefited tremendously

from Jewish commentators on what in the Jewish tradition will be called the Hebrew Bible, and in the Christian tradition is called the Old Testament.

Christians understandably read the Old Testament looking for the New Testament. But in fact, it's good to respond to the Old Testament just as a reader, just as a journalist, just a human being. And it is a great, great story. Full of great individual stories. It had very good sub-editors. It always names the names, and it always humanizes the story. It always moves along at a rollicking pace. And it is fantastic.

It is fabulous to read the book of Jonah. Jonah was sent to Nineveh to preach to a bunch of people he hates, and he doesn't want to save them because they're rotten. He tries to run away, and God flings him into a whale for three days. And then he has to come back and has to preach to these Ninevites. No, goodness me, they actually accept his preaching and they repent. He's like the Mel Brooks characters in *The Producers*. They created this musical to fail and instead it succeeded. And Jonah is angry.

Now, there are very serious and profound lessons in Jonah. Not only about obedience, but about the universality of God. The universality of the God of the Old Testament is, he's come back time and time and time again. Against all the popular press, which says the Old Testament God is local and not loving. In fact, the Old Testament God is universal and loving. He forgives the people of Nineveh and he spares them the terrible fate that he had foretold them, because they repent. In the Book of Ruth, Ruth is a Moabite. The Moabites are enemies of the Israelites. And Ruth marries Naomi's son. Naomi's son dies, Ruth moves back from Moab country to Bethlehem, and she sends her daughters-in-law away.

And Ruth won't leave, and she utters that magnificent declaration of passionate human solidarity, "Where you go, I will go. Where you rest, I will rest. Where you die, I will die. Your God will be my God. Your people will be my people. And may the Lord punish me if anything but death separates us." And then it is a great, great short story, Ruth. It is the best short story I've ever read. And in the end, Ruth saves Naomi and then Naomi saves Ruth. And then Ruth becomes the great-grandmother of David — the greatest of the Israelite Kings. A central figure in the Bible has a Moabite great-grandmother.

Again the universality, the melody of the particular and the universal. But how can you just wipe that out of the human consciousness and say we're not going to expose our kids to that. They're going to have to do the Safe Schools program, but they're not, under any circumstances going to read the Book of Ruth. And then the final chapter I'll tell you about, was a chapter about the Middle Ages, which is heavily indebted and very explicitly and honestly indebted to the great Oxford scholar Larry Sittentop.

The cartoon version of intellectual history is: the early Christians who tried to live by the gospel were persecuted. Constantine converted to Christianity, and it became a state religion. Then Christians persecuted everybody else. We've then got a thousand years, the Dark Ages. Nothing good happened, it was all superstitious. The world was run by terrible priests. And then hallelujah, we got the Renaissance and the Enlightenment and we repudiated superstition and modern decency began.

Wrong, wrong, wrong. Every aspect of it is wrong.

In fact, everything we like in modern liberalism emerges organically from Christianity, and is debated and elucidated throughout the Middle Ages. So very early on, in the very early church, there are debates about religious freedom. And of course Christians often did not live up to the tenets of religious freedom. Obviously, it goes without saying. I'm not whitewashing the sins and crimes of Christians at any point. But there are great statements in favour of religious freedom. The early church was a great proponent of human rights because every human being had an immortal relationship with God.

Women, slaves and foreigners... All the people marginalized in the ancient world were suddenly given human dignity. The new morality was a better deal for women than anything that had ever gone before. The great interesting historian Rodney Stark says that it was the appeal to women which led to the great expansion of Christianity because it was so much better a deal for women than had ever gone before. Christian families didn't kill their female children. So they had a lot more daughters than other families, and the daughters eventually told their husbands what to do, which is the normal circumstance.

The husbands converted as a result of the women converting. The dialogue about what is church and what is state was a very long dialogue all through the Middle Ages. Popes making great pronouncements. Yes, infidels have souls. The interplay of religious traditions. Thomas Aquinas was hugely influenced by Moses Maimonides. This is a tremendously rich, intellectual period of history, almost completely unknown to anyone in contemporary Western society — and yet it lays the foundations for contemporary Western society.

So my little contribution is a 30-page chapter which gives you the cheat notes. It at least directs you to the primary sources. Then finally, the second half of the book is a reported part of the book about particular Christians. The chapters which have got most attention were the two chapters I wrote about politicians. I interviewed 14 serving and former politicians including Malcolm Turnbull and Bill Shorten.

When some extracts of this were run, the vituperativeness of online debate is such that instantly, the online reaction was, “Those typical Elmer Gantry politicians spruiking their beliefs. Big hypocrites that they are just trying to get the religious vote.” Nothing could have been further from the truth. I tell you the Brexit negotiations were a walk in the park compared to the complexity of the negotiations I had to undertake to get these politicians to agree to these interviews.

Those very few people who have asked politicians about their religious beliefs have typically asked the question, “What effect does your religious belief have on your policy?” That’s a perfectly legitimate question. That’s not the question I asked them. I asked them, “What do you actually believe? Do you pray? Do you believe in God? Do you believe in an afterlife, that you’re going to see your parents again? What do you think is ultimately the deepest transcendent spiritual reality?”

And all of them across the parties, from the left of the Labor Party to the conservative elements of the Liberal Party, impressed me profoundly with the depth of the inner life that they revealed, which they assiduously keep hidden from the public. Two of them had been sort of forced into becoming public Christians; Tony Abbott and Kevin Rudd. But the rest of them had really not ever spoken about

these matters in public before. They were very, very reluctant to do so. And yet I was immensely impressed with each one of them.

There is a big hinterland, a deep inner life with all these people, and it's a pity. I don't necessarily want to become Americans where they wear their faith on their sleeve every minute of every day, and everything is related to their notional, denominational faith affiliation. But I think we could do a bit better than never speaking about it at all. And the subtext of that chapter was meant to be, these are very smart people. They believe in Christianity. Maybe it's worth a second look.

I found great dynamism and spirit of liveliness and great growth. I called one chapter, "Signs of new life." So the overall picture of Christianity is of statistical decline, but there are tremendous movements that are doing fabulously well, and I was utterly non-denominational about it. I was very impressed by the Pentecostal church that I went to see in Melbourne. And I think successful religious movements have bold, strong leadership, a very clear message, and worship which is coherent and beautiful.



# Greg Sheridan

## in conversation with

# Peter Kurti

**Peter:** You've told us why you wrote the book. But as I was listening to you I was wondering who did you write the book for? Did you have in mind a disciple of Richard Dawkins that you were wrestling with? Or are you writing for that group of Christians you calling now to be a bold minority and getting them to gird their loins? Who do you have in mind.

**Greg:** A very fair question. And the truth is I don't know really. I write books partly in my head, for my sons. I think this is something you ought to know. They very sensibly don't read my books because I'm their dad. But nonetheless, I think this is something I'd like them to know. And I have a fantasy that when I'm singing in the celestial clouds and they've retired, they'll say, "Well I wonder what the old man was on about," you know, and they'll read it.

But look, it's intentionally non-denominational and it intentionally comes from first principles. So I hope Christians looking for a bit of encouragement might read it, even if they find things that I've got wrong or that they disagree with, they might be encouraged by seeing these arguments made and these other voices. I hope that open-minded atheists might read it. It's perfectly okay to be an atheist. There's nothing wrong with that. It's a rational position and all of that.

But it's good to know what you're rejecting, rather than rejecting a caricature or fantasy of something. And, because I think this is a mainstream subject which ought to be open to mainstream people, I think there's a certain utility for the book across society as it were. Society is better, it's more civilised when lots and lots of people with different views come together and talk things over.

**Peter:** And that's presumably part of the situational awareness that you talk about in various stages of the book. You alert people, particularly Christians, to the need for what you call a military image. I think you make use of situational awareness. Is that more than just knowing what the cultural terrain is? Is there more to it than that?

**Greg:** Well I have a tremendous weakness for military metaphors you know. The force in the battle which wins is typically the force with superior situational awareness. And what it means specifically, is the ability to integrate a lot of information, which comes from many diverse sources in real time — in battle space time as they call it.

You want to know who's on your right flank, who's on your left flank, how many howitzers your enemy has got; all that sort of thing. And one of the problems with Christianity is that even believing Christians have not quite realised the cultural circumstances that they're in, where in effect we are a minority. Now it's liberating to be a minority. You go on the attack instead of being on the defence.

You don't mind being attacked yourself. You expect it. You're psychologically much more prepared for it. Whereas if you still think that you're representing a settled consensus, that's very problematic because the society won't ever live up to that. And your response won't be very effective to those challenges.

**Peter:** You're coming at this as a foreign correspondent and as a foreign editor of many years standing. You've travelled the world, and you've seen many areas of conflict. One of the big arguments against religion is that it's the source of war, it's the source of conflict, and religion causes more wars than anything else. In the course of your travels and your work, do you think that's true?

**Greg:** No, I don't really. The book also tries to trace the causes of why we got to this atheist moment. And one of the causes is the reputational damage that was done to Christianity by the wars of religion. There's no doubt that we Catholics persecuted Protestants, Protestants persecuted Catholics. We all were fighting with each other. Very often, it was in fact just one state fighting with another state. But they gave it a religious identity.

That was a grievous blow to the reputation of Christianity historically. The contemporary situation; I don't think all religions are the same and you know there are people who pursue conflict in the name of religion. And Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote a beautiful book about this, *Not In God's Name*. And again, this is more a problem in the Islamic world. My book doesn't write about Islam because it hasn't been formative in the West, and it hasn't been formative in my life, and it's basically a book about Christianity.

I don't think religion causes conflict, but religion doesn't magically transform its adherents into no longer suffering from the problems of the human condition. We are a fallen species you know. And in the human condition, is a tendency to war and violence and conflict. Religion has always tried to tame the beast and appeal to the better angels. It is not always successful, but I don't believe religion itself causes war. I certainly don't believe Christianity or Judaism or Sikhism, the three religions I write about, cause war anywhere in the world.

You can make a bit of a case about Islam. And there I think it's very often sort of state power, and there can be intercommunal hostility. On the other hand, I'm a bit unhappy about the very things I'm saying because I think it's always mealy mouthed if somebody says they're going to war because of a religious conviction — you've got to sort of take them at their word. I think Islamic State falls into that category ... and al Qaeda.

However, spending an enormous amount of my time in Southeast Asia, I don't think Southeast Asian Muslims are inclined to go to war for religion. That's not to say they have a perfect record of tolerance either. But I don't, in general, think religion causes war. And of course whenever you take religion away, you get something much worse. You get Robespierre, you get Pol Pot or you get Stalin.

**Peter:** Mentioning Southeast Asia, you referred in the book and in your remarks that it is a profoundly religious region. It sounds to me as though you fear that if we don't take religion seriously in our society, we're going to miss something of great importance in the countries that form our neighbourhood, as it were.

**Greg:** I think that's true although that's not a very important reason for having religious belief. Generally speaking, we relate to Southeast Asia in a more or less unknowing way. The culture — except the immigrant experience — we're not really very expert in Southeast Asia. In fact I think we're very feeble at it despite what we tell ourselves. But I think the loss of God is much more important for what it means for us ourselves. Although it does have this geostrategic consequence.

We are going to be competing with much more vigorous societies. So, I wonder if we have no belief in the transcendent, if we'll have sufficient vigour and belief in ourselves to prevail, so to speak, in those geostrategic circumstances.

**Peter:** And an important part of that is doubt, and you like paradoxes as a Catholic. But you talk about the paradox of doubt and the importance of doubt actually in, in the life of faith, which is a difficult thing to explain to people who are not believers. How do you yourself live with that sense of the paradox of doubt?

**Greg:** Well, journalism can have effects on the human soul which are not entirely always fabulous you know. But it does have a great lesson; which is, "I want the copy tonight". It doesn't have to be perfect, it's got to be now. And you always have to live with doubt otherwise you couldn't function. Because the calumnies against faith are so great that we no longer understand that faith is really the basis of reason.

So my parents told me that I'm their son. I think they're probably telling me the truth, but I haven't really established it and proven it. I don't have any proof that this is the case, I haven't taken any DNA swabs and established beyond a doubt. So it's a justified belief. It's a reasonable belief, but the reason I believe it is because I have faith that they are telling me the truth. And 90% of the things we believe in life, we believe on the basis of faith of that kind. It's not irrational, but the belief is not a belief of rational proof. And one of the polemical tricks of atheists, is to say any paradox or any doubt means that the whole thing is untrue.

Whereas of course, God for his own reasons set things up so that you can come to him rationally and you can believe in him with faith, but it's not self-evident — because if it was self-evident you wouldn't need faith. That's the human condition. I'll give you one other example. I believe in the doctrine of the bodily resurrection. So that people will live on eventually in a physical form. But the human body seems inherently built for decay and corruption and change.

So how's it going to work through eternity? I don't know. It doesn't really matter to me that I don't know. There is an infinity of things that I don't know. I put the key in my car. I have no idea why it works. I've even less idea why my computer works. It still works.

**Peter:** Do you think the politicians you talked to are also comfortable with the paradox of doubt?

**Greg:** I was very impressed by these politicians, and I think they're much more impressive as individuals. So I'm not really making a claim about the political class. These are 14 individuals who I interviewed. And I guess I knew that they all had some element of faith in their lives or I wouldn't have tried to interview them. I was very impressed with the way they dealt with this in their own lives. Penny Wong said to me, "most things I approach intellectually. I don't approach religion intellectually and I've never, never had the thought that I could live without God."

And there is an experiential element, as there is for most people. Roger Scruton argues that the strongest rational reason for belief in God is the long human experience of God. Of course the atheist won't allow that any human experience of God is valid. They say that that's all just mumbo jumbo. It's psychobabble or something. But in reality, you can't deny that experience.

So rationality, if you take it to an extreme — hyper-rationality — it's not actually rational any longer, because rationality is just a part of the portfolio of human faculties which we use to try to discern the truth. Intuition in motion. Many other things come into it, and of course experience. So all of those politicians I thought, had in their own lives come to grips with these matters quite extensively.

**Peter:** So in some ways I think we get anxious about the lack of rationality of religious belief when we hear politicians talking about religion, because we don't want politics to be tainted by irrationality. And I was struck by the fact that you say a number of times in the book— actually it was the best bit of the book — that Christianity does not adjudicate between left and right, and that comes through very clearly in the interviews with the politicians.

It left me wondering though whether you think Christianity has anything to say in politics or should it be completely free? Should religion and Christianity get out of the political arena. Maybe another way of asking the question is, what does it bring to politics?

**Greg:** That's a good, complicated, difficult question, which I can easily answer in an aphorism or two without any trouble at all. Christianity certainly does bring things to politics, but it doesn't adjudicate between policies, which are well-intentioned and which are not inherently evil. So, a lot of people on the social democratic left quite reasonably say they are inspired by the social justice tradition of Christianity. That's perfectly okay. A lot of people on the free market side of politics are a bit tongue tied about religion.

And one of the great pioneers of changing that was Michael Novak of course. But really they're pursuing the same end. They're pursuing the end of human welfare. In India, a key policymaker said to me once, "You know the critical thing in India to alleviate poverty is to enlarge the formal sector of employment, because when you move off the farm into working for an employer, your life experience is vastly better materially than when you're living subsistence on the farm."

One of the reasons we can't increase the formal sector is because we have insanely restrictive trade union laws which are designed to benefit trade unions. Now, the original impulse for passing those laws was to benefit a worker as opposed to a boss. Someone with less power, as opposed to someone with more power. The consequence of that policy is to freeze out millions of people from a more affluent life. Now, the person I was talking to I presume was a Hindu. But what would Christianity say about this?

Christianity would say that the desire to help a large number of people, or to help everyone, is the Christian imperative. But if you come to the view that you can help people by deregulating the labour market, and someone else comes to the view that you can help people by more regulation in the labour market, I don't think Christianity adjudicates between those two things. Christianity certainly adjudicates about the sanctity of life. It certainly adjudicates about the need for human dignity, to be respected. It's one reason it has such a lot to say about the life issues.

And it infuses an ethic which is to seek the good and to be altruistic, to love the stranger and so on. It's not the only religion that has those ethics, but it certainly does have those ethics. However, politics is mostly fairly straightforward and dull really. I mean it's kind of interesting, and it sells newspapers and it is important, but that's not the essence of life. The essence of life is much, much deeper than that.

And the robust Australian disinterest in politics can be a problem, but in many ways it's a very good thing. Australians are concerned with much more important things than who runs the post office. It's very important that people be concerned with who runs the post office. You've got to get that sort of stuff right. But that's not the transcendent stuff of humanity.

**Peter:** Do you get a sense that the politicians you spoke to, and perhaps the political class, take this view of religious freedom seriously?

**Greg:** I think they're rather confused about it. I'm not talking about the foreign politicians I interviewed, because I didn't ask them about this issue. So it would be unfair for me to comment about them in relation to this issue. But to comment generally about politicians, I think they're very confused about the issue. Christians and other religious people in Western societies are not persecuted in the way Christians are persecuted in the Middle East or in Pakistan or in China. Nonetheless, the environment is becoming more hostile.

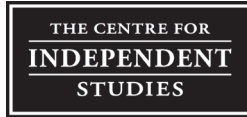
Stephen MacAlpine, an evangelical pastor from Perth that I quote says, "Christians are now living in exile. They expected to go into exile in Athens where there would be a lot of interesting discussion.

Instead they find themselves in exile in Babylon.” The secular culture is becoming much more hostile to Christianity, and there will be a series of issues about religious freedom.

I’ll tell you honestly, I think the decision to intrude on the seal of the confessional is a wrong abridgement of religious freedom, when it certainly won’t do anything to help abused children. There’s going to be a battle over what schools and Christian universities can teach. Already you’re seeing quite a lot of that. You’ve seen a lot of that in the UK and in Canada and so on. I think the state is now going to increasingly be inclined to use coercive power to intimidate Christian institutions.







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# Why God is Good for You

Conversation with *The Australian's* Foreign Editor **Greg Sheridan** and CIS senior research fellow **Peter Kurti** on the intellectual, historical and cultural case for belief in God.

Australia and many parts of the West are losing faith in God. And yet the Judeo-Christian tradition has created and underpinned the moral and legal fabric of Western Civilisation.

Where the moral certainties that underpin Australia's institutions and laws are no longer held by the majority, we – both the believers and non-believers – find ourselves in a fraught situation.

In his new book, *God Is Good For You* (Allen & Unwin), Greg Sheridan sets out how modern Christians have never worked so hard to make the world a better place at a time when their faith has never been less valued.



**Greg Sheridan** is an eminent journalist and commentator, who has been the foreign editor of *The Australian* newspaper since 1992.

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