The Good Book: a secular bible
"made by" A.C.Grayling; Bloomsbury; £25.

I've always thought of A.C.Grayling as a thinking man's atheist. Unlike those tilters-at-windmills Harries and Dennett, Dawkins and Hitchens, Grayling actually puts up a coherent case for atheism. No cheap sneering for him. No betrayal of intellectual principle. No knockabout or baying or gratuitous insults. Where they belittle others with their own littleness, he digs deep into the wisdom he's accrued from his reading and reflection across the years and seeks to win followers by the force of argument. No sledgehammer stuff for him, just patient reasoning.

I once did a series of Thursday "Conversations" at Wesley's Chapel on the subject of atheism and A.C.Grayling was one of my interviewees. He was unfailingly courteous, resolute in making his case. What I found frustrating was that I didn't seem able to find ground we could both stand on as we explored the world of ideas together. He simply cannot entertain religious belief as having a legitimate claim on the deliberative process. For all that, I thoroughly enjoyed our discussion.

The physical attributes of this massive tome need to be described before we look at its contents. They tell us as much about this daring endeavour as anything we read within its covers.

This is a volume that runs to 600 pages. It would be a better read on kindle than under the covers. Its material is distributed in fourteen sections and it's worth rehearsing the whole list. So we have Genesis, Wisdom, Parables, Concord, Lamentations, Consolations, Sages, Songs, Histories, Proverbs, The Lawgiver, Acts, Epistles and The Good. Resemblances to the Christian Bible are, of course, deliberate. The contents spread throughout these sections are said to be "conceived, selected, redacted, arranged, worked and in part written" by Grayling.

I've no doubt that the publication of this volume was intended to coincide with the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible. Its material is presented in double columns just like older versions and there are chapters and verses too. Whatever else one says about it, one simply has to admit that this is a prodigious piece of work. In his "epistle to the reader," the author describes its contents as "distillations of the wisdom and experience of humankind, to

the end that reflecting on them might bring profit and comfort." He sees it as letting "light in upon ignorance and falsehood." "Our time," he concludes, "should be counted in the throbs of our hearts as we love and help, learn and strive, and make from our own talents whatever can increase the stock of the world's good." Who can possibly be against that?

Wrestling with this volume brought to my mind my reading of Aldous Huxley's *Perennial Philosophy* over forty years ago – a similar compilation of ideas drawn from the major civilisations of the world. Huxley, of course (unlike Grayling), was happy to admit religious and spiritual insights into his material. I was also reminded of my attempts to understand the Ba'hai faith which, it seems to me, brings together all the nice and sugary bits of everyone's religious faith while ignoring the uncomfortable material. I miss the angular and the problematical; it's this that's always drawn me to a body of ideas. When everything's smoothed out and dumbed down, it all begins to feel like intellectual complan. And that's how this compendium felt like to me.

So many of Grayling's "Songs" have the feel of Virgil's eclogues or Wordsworth's "Lucy" poems. They are simple and pastoral. "Dawn's breeze" and "the western wind" blow gently through them. But I found myself wondering what exactly they contributed to Grayling's project. And I could ask a similar question about the re-telling of incidents from the Trojan wars which exude the influence of Homer. They are certainly interesting and, in general, well told. But what is the purpose of placing them in this anthology? Just for the pleasure of rehearing them? Or to make some deeper point?

I read Grayling's Proverbs Chapter 55 on "Doubt" during the same week that, for my preaching purposes, I was faced with the story of doubting Thomas. It didn't contribute much to my homiletic needs. The chapter can be quoted in its entirely. "1. An honest person can never surrender an honest doubt. 2. Who doubts nothing knows nothing. 3. The wise are prone to doubt." There. You have it. Again and again I found myself saying "So what?"

There is no sustained attack on religion in this volume. It is simply squeezed out. We are urged to be wise, good, self-controlled; temperance is honoured

and so is courage. We are urged to “seek always for the good that abides” and told that “there can be none except as the mind finds it within itself.”

Since it was Christianity which fostered what we now call “humanism” and brought so many of the noblest ideas and accomplishments ever known to humankind, I don’t find it difficult to engage with the secular forms of humanism that prevail in our day. We can show with great pride how our faith has contributed generously to the aesthetic, philosophical, cultural and spiritual treasuries of civilisation. We can welcome a book like this one whilst regretting the impoverishing result of its author’s refusal to allow religious insights to colour or enlarge his view.

Grayling concludes his introduction by making a large claim. “This is a good book,” he writes, “as well as a book of the good, its words from mighty pens, its thoughts from votaries of the right and true. It is a text made from all times for all times, its aspiration and aim the good for humanity and the good of the world.”

I was left wondering whether this monumental publication will add to the wisdom of the ages or whether it simply amounts to hubris on the author’s part. And yet….. he’s such a nice man, so clever and stimulating. There’s something missing, something that would bring all his brilliance to life. How I’d love him to find Jesus!