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“Gen-X Humanism for the Passionately Confused?” — A Chaplain for Unbelief at Harvard

Monday, September 17, 2007



Harvard University’s humanist chaplain considers himself something of a ministerial vanguard — a help and inspiration to fellow unbelievers. Furthermore, he is evangelistic in his promotion of unbelief as a foundation for meaning. Preparing to preside over a funeral service, he carries a book of readings appropriately titled *Funerals Without God*.

David Abel of *The Boston Globe* describes the chaplain, Greg Epstein, age 30, as “a kind of ministerial paradox, a member of the local clergy who disavows God, preaches to atheists and agnostics, and seeks to build the equivalent of a church for nonbelievers and others skeptical of or alienated by religion.”

The fascinating aspect of this story is the fact that humanists would need chaplains. Why do atheists and agnostics need clergy? The reason is quite simple — they can’t get around the big questions. A funeral requires us to face those questions as much as some might like to avoid them. Even if an atheist has no ground for hope in a life to come, he can at least be comforted by the knowledge that someone with ministerial credentials is there to commemorate his death.

As the paper explains:

In a world where zealots crash planes into buildings in the name of God and politicians use the Bible to craft public policy, Epstein sees himself as in the vanguard of an emerging movement fueled by the rise of skepticism, advances in science and technology, and a spreading aversion toward radical religious ideologies and traditions. He and other humanists, who also call themselves atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, secularists, or brights, point to a survey published in January by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, which found that 20 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 25 say they have no religious affiliation or consider themselves atheists or agnostics — nearly double those who said that in a similar survey 20 years ago. Another Pew survey in March concluded the nation is witnessing a “reversal of increased religiosity observed in the mid-1990s.” Today, 12 percent of Americans surveyed age 20 and older describe themselves as not religious, up from 8 percent in 1987. “This change,” the survey’s authors wrote, “appears to be generational in nature, with each new generation displaying lower levels of religious commitment than the preceding one.”

There is reason to believe that Epstein may indeed be the vanguard of an emerging movement. Unbelief is all the rage these days, with best-selling books promoting atheism and secularists newly emboldened to trumpet their numbers and influence. An academic community like Harvard University, while far from completely secular, does offer a far more secularized environment than would be found in the heartland. Given the tenor and worldview of the academic elites, a humanist chaplain at Harvard makes sense.

Epstein prefers to call himself a humanist rather than an atheist because humanism is a more positive term, he explains.

“Atheism is what I don’t believe in; humanism is what I do believe in,” he says. He defines humanism as a “philosophy of life without supernaturalism that affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment aspiring to the greater good of humanity.”

Of course, non-supernaturalism is the very heart of atheism. So it is hard to see why affirming non-supernaturalism is more positive than affirming atheism. Either way, the point is to create or find some meaning for life without God.

The report in *The Boston Globe* does make the point about the generational dimension here. As Abel reports:

Students on college campuses and others have begun to organize nonbelievers. The number of campus groups affiliated with the Secular Student Alliance, for example, has increased by more than 50 percent in the past two years, to more than 80 groups, says August E. Brunsmann IV, executive director of the Albany, New York-based alliance. Since January, the Center for Inquiry in Amherst, New York, a science-promoting umbrella group, has sponsored or helped organize more than 50 atheist outfits on campuses from the University of Georgia Law School to the University of Texas at Austin to Kent State University in Ohio, says D.J. Grothe, the center’s vice president of outreach. The MySpace atheist and agnostic group has grown by about 10,000 members a year since it began in 2004 and now is about one third the size of MySpace’s largest Christian group, says Bryan J. Pesta, an assistant professor of management at Cleveland State University, who moderates the group.

Also:

Here in the United States, where atheism remains a relatively weak current against the tides of religion, the rising interest in Godlessness is most visible on college campuses and among recent graduates. Many of them regard religion as the perpetuation of superstitions and mythology and see the world’s largest faiths as sowing division and enmity more than the peace they profess.

The university context is also important. Steven Pinker, a cognitive scientist at Harvard who was named “Humanist of the Year” by the American Humanist Association last year, argues that science is progressively taking over all of religion’s domain. Secularism and unbelief are the coming reality, he advises. In his words, “More and more of what used to be the domain of religion has been ceded to science. It’s the trend of modernity. I think this is a tide. We’ve seen it happen everywhere else in the developed world. This is the direction of history.”

There can be no doubt that unbelief is seeing a resurgence of sorts on many college and university campuses. Of course, many thriving evangelical ministries exist within those same precincts. Measuring the actual growth of atheist numbers and influence remains difficult.

Meanwhile, Epstein has become something of a controversial figure himself. It seems that not all nonbelievers are pleased with his approach. Epstein has challenged some of the more strident voices within the secularist movement, angering the more ideological among them. R. Joseph Hoffman of the humanist Center for Inquiry called Epstein’s approach “Gen-X humanism for the Passionately Confused.”

This is how Abel describes part of the funeral service performed by Epstein:

Then he addresses death by quoting Sherwin Wine, a humanist Epstein considered a mentor. “It is so overwhelmingly final that it fills our lives with dread and anxious fear,” Epstein says. “We cry out at the injustice of destiny and wait for answers that never seem to come.”

To cope with it, he says, humanists need a certain courage. “Courage is loving life, even in the face of death. It is sharing our strength with others, even when we feel weak. It is embracing our family and friends, even when we fear to lose them. It is opening ourselves to love.”

Before closing with a meditation on the precariousness of life, Epstein offers lines adapted from a familiar Christian burial rite.

“His body we commit to be burned and returned to the cycles of nature,” he says. “Earth to earth, dust to dust, ashes to ashes.”

Even in attempting a humanist and non-supernatural funeral service, Epstein draws upon the language of the Christian tradition.

Joseph Hoffman may call this “Gen-X humanism for the Passionately Confused,” but it sounds more like a humanism that knows it needs help — an anti-supernaturalism that craves the supernatural.

Atheism is the church of defiant unbelief, but many like Greg Epstein seem less defiant than confused. As a matter of fact, very little separates these unbelievers from the unbelievers in so many liberal churches who still claim a Christian identity but reject the truths central to Christianity. Like Rev. Epstein, they want the candles and liturgy — just leave out the truth stuff, please.

It is telling that the article in *The Boston Globe* begins and ends with a funeral service. As Sherwin Wine rightly observed, at a funeral all an atheist can do is “wait for answers that never seem to come.”

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