

## Can You Be Good without God? A Spirituality for Humanity

Sunday, January 5, 2020  
Unitarian Universalist Society

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching  
Reflection by Celia Buckley (printed after sermon)

Hymns: #1000, Morning Has Come; #86, Blessed Spirit of My Life, #1008, When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place.



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### Sermon

There are millions of people of goodwill and peaceful intentions in the world who, simply and honestly, don't believe in a supernatural supreme being. They don't believe in God, or they don't think it's possible to know if God exists as a distinct being. I know many people with such beliefs, in this congregation and other UU congregations. Also I know lots of non-theists who don't participate in a congregation but who put their goodwill to use in other causes and organizations. It's not surprising or shocking for me to realize this. Unfortunately, however, for many people in this country and the world, it's unsettling—very unsettling—to consider that atheists live and move among us.

Greg Epstein is the author of the bestselling book, *Good without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe*. Since 2005 Epstein has served the campus community of Harvard University as its Humanist Chaplain. Since 2018 he's also been the Humanist Chaplain at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.<sup>1</sup> He has a graduate degree in religion and another in Jewish Studies, and his cultural heritage is Jewish.

For the past century, many people have adopted the term *Humanism* to describe their life

stance.<sup>2</sup> Humanists are people trying to be ethical, trying to live by the values of honesty, compassion, freedom, personal responsibility, and participation in the common good. At the same time, most Humanists don't believe in a supernatural supreme being or in a future life after we die. They also don't accept or believe in a supernatural origin for any religious texts or rituals. They see all religions not as God-given realities, but as human creations to serve human longings.

Epstein estimates there are from a half-billion people to one billion people around the world who don't believe in God. In human history, there have always been non-believers—in all parts of the world. Secular people have played important roles in the world—as humanitarians, philosophers, artists, educators, activists, leaders of movements, scientists, inventors, and of course, the primary role of loving parents rearing their children. Surveys indicate that 15 percent of the U.S. population identify as “non-religious,” and their share of the population is growing.

Can you be good without God? Epstein says this is not a question to answer. No, he says: the question “needs to be rejected outright. To *suggest* that one can't be good without belief in God is not just *an opinion* [or a curiosity] ... it is a prejudice.”

For useful conversations, he says, we should ask *why* do we strive to be good and do good? His answer is that our motivations include empathy, fairness, compassion, and a sense of human dignity. All of these are human capacities; when we use them, we live a good life. Humility also is a motivation. We can be stirred into humility when we consider the mysteries of the universe. We can be humbled when we feel reverence before the wonders of nature. Other motivations to do good things include our gratitude—gratitude for this world, for the people around us, for any good fortune, and for just being alive. These human capacities are why we are called to be good and why we feel that life *is* good.

In defending the virtue of non-theists, Epstein says: “Would you ever ask: Is it possible to be a good person if you're Muslim? Or Buddhist? Or Jewish? Or Christian?” Unfortunately, some people do ask such questions. Since prejudice persists and many people still ask, “Can you be

good without God?" I do want to answer the question: Yes, you can be good. Many people are.

I grew up in a time and in a town where hearing it whispered that someone was an atheist could be troubling for many people. At the very least it was material for eyebrow-raising gossip. And since non-theists weren't comfortable being open about their non-belief, they stayed in the closet with it. As a result, we all presumed there were few agnostics and atheists: "Certainly not here!" "Certainly not in *my* family!" Such denial allowed prejudice to fester and allowed the false notion to persist that atheists were not worthy of respect or trust. In the Soviet Union and China, atheism was imposed on the people as the ideology of the State. Religious people were pushed underground or persecuted in those countries. Some groups still are persecuted for beliefs that the State doesn't like—such as Muslims in both China and parts of the former Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1950s, during the early years of the Cold War, some U.S. religious leaders and politicians wanted to make explicit how different this country was from Communist countries. So they led a movement to alter the Pledge of Allegiance. A new phrase was added, so it now says: "one nation, under God."<sup>4</sup> In other words, they wanted the pledge to demonstrate and say: we are not like those atheists! Yet that added phrase in the Pledge of Allegiance is wrong—*this* is a nation under a Constitution.

Social scientists say that Scandinavian countries have some of the lowest levels of religious belief and religious identity in the world. Are Scandinavian countries full of selfish, mean, murderous, or dishonest people? During my airport layovers last July in two Scandinavian cities, they seemed okay, but what can you tell from an airport? Better to look at statistical studies, in which most of those non-religious countries in Scandinavia rank as "among the least violent, best educated, and most likely to care for the poor."

Part of the prejudice against non-theists is the assumption that life must be easier without any commandments to follow. You can get away with *so much* without any divine standards to be judged by. (That's what some think.) Well, just look at how many Christians in the public eye break the

Hebrew Bible's commandments against adultery and stealing. It amazes me, but the current U.S. President somehow gets identified as Christian. Yet he lies and slanders other people constantly. He's breaking the Ninth Commandment: "Thou shall not bear false witness against thy neighbor." No, it's not easier for atheists. We must acknowledge that living an ethical and good life is a challenge for *everyone*. Epstein says: "To live according to our values...takes hard work and a hundred hard choices every day."

Humanists and atheists value science and the scientific method. It's worth noting that many liberal, moderate or mainstream religious people also value science and reason. The global Catholic Church, for one, accepts evidence-based theories about human evolution and the geological age of this planet. A diverse number of religious leaders take as established facts the reality of human-caused global warming and the ongoing climate chaos. Yet science-inclined atheists are not prepared to take a leap of faith toward God. They don't believe in God because they see no proof. To be sure, they know that many other people do testify to their experience of the reality God. This may be powerful to hear. But Humanists want evidence that can be verified in a repeatable experiment.

Yet there is one belief that calls for a leap of faith by any Humanist, and that's the Humanist affirmation of the worth, dignity and potential of human beings. Josh Whedon is a film director and screenplay writer in his 50s. He's known for "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "Firefly," the popular TV series. Whedon is also an outspoken atheistic Humanist. He has said: "The enemy of Humanism is not faith—the enemy of Humanism is hate, it is fear, it is ignorance, it is the darker part of [human nature which] is in every Humanist, and [in] every person in the world...But faith is something we have to embrace. Faith in God means believing ... in something, with no proof whatsoever. [In contrast,] faith in humanity [which Humanists profess] means believing ... in something with a huge amount of proof *to the contrary*." Thus, Whedon says, "We [Humanists] are the true believers."<sup>5</sup>

Even though Humanists are happy to live life with a non-theistic or agnostic outlook, many Humanists are not comfortable thinking of themselves as having a spirituality. “I’m just not spiritual,” some will say, even saying it to the ministers of their UU congregation. I think it depends on what you consider to be spiritual. The late William R. Murry was a Unitarian Universalist minister and a Humanist. He served UU congregations and then was president of our UU theological seminary in Chicago. In his book *Reason and Reverence*, Murry writes:

Life is a spiritual journey, and we are always on it/ whether we recognize it or not. Spirituality is *not* a new concept. It is an old word... with new meanings for today, meanings that humanists as well as others can value. [Spirituality] is the result of living in deeper, more meaningful, and more loving ways/ and [living] with devotion to causes greater than one’s self.<sup>6</sup>

Even if we might be comfortable not believing in the divine, we still must ask ourselves what gives meaning to life. Epstein writes: disbelief alone “cannot meet our deepest human needs for connection and inspiration.” One purpose of his book is to show non-theistic people the opportunities to participate in spiritually meaningful but non-theistic rituals and practices. These include activities which most people have thought of as the possession of theistic religions. Such activities include ceremonies for the life cycle—a blessing for a new child, a wedding, a memorial service, a house blessing, a moment of thanks at mealtime. They include serving the larger community, practicing generosity, making music, appreciating the visual arts. They include listening without interruption to invite others to share from the heart. They include sacrificing some of the things you value in order to benefit the common good—like some of your money, your time, your control and your comfort.

While many kinds of spiritual practice are expressed in the language of belief in a supreme being, the *needs they address* are deeper than any belief system or faith tradition. Epstein invites us to consider the act of prayer. The impulse that leads to prayer is a human survival mechanism. Epstein

says: “One of the first things we learn to do as infants is to cry out to those seemingly omnipotent beings surrounding us.... We cry out our needs and longings—for food, warmth, comfort.”

Adult human beings have created things like prayer because “the child inside crying out against uncertainty and fear never entirely leaves us.” In these troubling times, of course, many of us cry out for peace. We cry out for honesty and integrity in government, for decency and respect among all people. We cry out for mercy and compassion for those who are vulnerable in this country and on the other side of the border. In these troubling times, we ask for courage for the living of our days. In all times, of course, we wish for the health and healing for our loved ones, for safe journeys and lives of joy and purpose. Human beings have motives and reasons to pray, whether or not we believe a deity has the power to respond or even to hear us.

In one of his examples for a Humanist prayer practice, Epstein suggests: “Sitting down quietly each day, alone or [with others], and focusing on what is good for you, without God.” That certainly works for many folks in our UU congregations. Yet for others among us, using a divine metaphor is helpful—like invoking the Blessed Spirit of My Life or acknowledging the God of our Heart stirring within, as we do in today’s hymns. Neither names nor metaphors are requirements, however.

The important part is taking a moment for noticing, reflecting, discerning, appreciating and giving thanks. A moment of opening to a new way for us to be in the world. A moment of inviting a better way of responding to the stress around us. A moment of asking for courage.

For me, one purpose of speaking of God and to God—one reason for opening to the Divine Spirit in a practice of prayer, is that it reminds me that I am not God. The world does not revolve around me or my agendas or my opinions or my certainty about how things really should be. This recognition—this reminder that we are not in control of the world—is a proven way to promote spiritual health. The Quaker teacher and spiritual guide Parker Palmer said this: “Spirituality is the eternal longing to be connected to something larger than [your] own ego.”<sup>7</sup>

Greg Epstein used to sing with a rock band. When he quit, he announced he was going to enter graduate study in religion. A disappointed fan couldn't understand why. They said, "Music *is* religion!" They wanted to know, why would he need to leave it to do religious work? Epstein affirms that yes, music does provide inspiration to all kinds of people. But he says, "The problem with the idea of music as a secular religion is that a concert is not a community." Of course, it can provide moments of togetherness, but a musical event is not an ongoing, sustained community.

Humanist values assert that participation in community is the essence of what it means to be human. Whether we are theistic or not, we cannot experience the fullness of life if we are isolated from other people. Christian writer Alister McGrath has written: "People want to belong, not just believe... Identity is about belonging somewhere."<sup>8</sup>

This is why so many of us here are motivated and happy to put our time, talents and support into the mission, ministries, and programs of this congregation. Participation in a community of shared values—a sustained and ongoing community—can meet what Epstein identifies as our common human needs for shared rituals and a sense of community and belonging.

As Epstein says, the question is not "Can we be good with or without God?" He says the question is "How can we be good together?" Given the diversity of beliefs among religious and secular people around the world, we must find ways not only to coexist in peace, but ways to collaborate in making our communities better. Given the size and impact of the human population on the globe right now, we must find ways to cooperate.

As he says: "To live according to our values...takes hard work and a hundred hard choices every day." This is why connecting with others is crucial.

Life is a spiritual journey, and we are always on it whether we recognize it or not. Let us recognize what a blessing it is to have companions on the journey.

May our journeys be safe, if not always comfortable ones. May we have courage. On the journey, may we find ways to give and receive, to give help and to receive help. Let us travel in peace, travel with wonder, travel with love. Let us travel together with open minds, open hearts, and helping hands. Amen.



### Personal Reflection by Celia Buckley

#### **Daily Practice**

I first visited a UU church in 1991. Although I *thought* I was attending a music concert, it was a music *service* offered by 2 traveling UU lesbian musicians. I was captured. I had been searching for "something". I got clean and sober in 1991, & the 12 step programs *insist* on finding a higher power to get & stay abstinent from addictions.

I railed against the concept of God & being a puppet on a string, subject to a "plan" that some omnipotent god had in store for me. As an atheist, I felt trapped. However, I was truly fearful of dying from my drug addiction. Fortunately 12 step programs also advise that you can choose or create your own idea of a higher power. I was positively influenced by an articulate atheist early in the program. So I tried to "act as if" some power existed. 12 step programs inform us that our best thinking or attempts to control everything in our lives rarely works to overcome addiction. The 12 steps

involve letting go of our self-will and “turn it over” to a power greater than ourselves.

I have now developed a daily practice. As an agnostic, I'm really not sure how it has happened. Indeed, over time I have asked the energy of the Universe to help me treat my body with more care and respect... A few years ago I began a Pilates exercise program for my chronic back pain. Strengthening my abdominal core and improving my posture is a hallmark of Pilates through certain exercises. I had rarely been compliant outside the studio.

But now, for over a year, I get up early in the morning before the dogs or usually my wife Marion. I turn on the coffee & then get on the floor in the plank position for about a minute.

- During this minute, I recite my variant of the 12 step prayer of turning over my will.
- I ask the Spirit of Love & Life to help free me from my addictions & control.
- I ask the spirit to help me to be kind, open & honest.

I then do 20 modified push ups & 50 abdominal crunches. I get my cup of coffee & sit in my special place, hoping for a cat to sit on my lap. I place my hand on my chest & state that I am a beloved child of the Universe & that I am enough.

My concept of a higher power has evolved over the decades. I still don't believe in a god or a god consciousness but I embrace the interconnectedness of all things on our planet & solar system. As a complex being made of stardust, I've quit trying to understand the why or how of who I am. I now recognize my daily morning practice seems to be a type of spiritual practice I somehow feel called to do.

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<sup>1</sup> See MIT's Division of Student Life website:

<https://studentlife.mit.edu/rl/who-we-are/greg-m-epstein>

<sup>2</sup> Epstein credits Unitarian minister John Dietrich with coining the terms humanistic and Humanism in 1915 to refer to this non-theistic religious and ethical movement. Greg Epstein, *Good without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe* (New York, 2009: HarperCollins), 170.

<sup>3</sup> See “Persecution of Muslims” on Wikipedia:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persecution\\_of\\_Muslims](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persecution_of_Muslims)

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Owen Jones, “The Man Who Wrote the Pledge of Allegiance,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, Nov. 2003. Accessed Jan.

4, 2020: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-man-who-wrote-the-pledge-of-allegiance-93907224/>

<sup>5</sup> Quoted by Greg Epstein, *Good without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe* (New York, 2009: HarperCollins).

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in William R. Murry, *Reason and Reverence: Religious Humanism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Boston, 200: Skinner House Books), 115.

<sup>7</sup> Murry, *op. cit.*, 114.

<sup>8</sup> Epstein, *op. cit.*, 174.