

Lessons from Greg Epstein's Good Without God

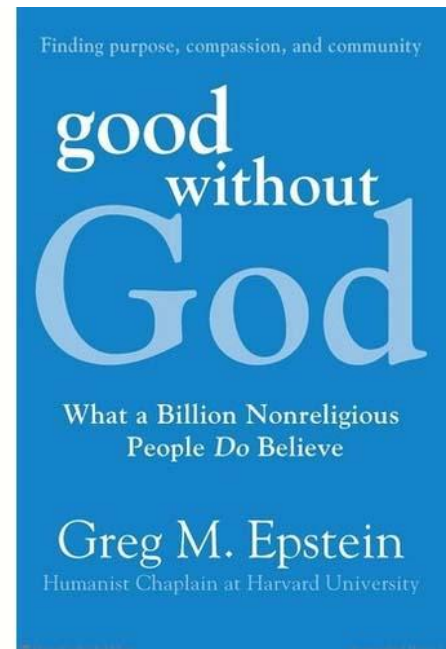
What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe

WHY THIS TOPIC?

- I didn't grow up in an organized religion, but am deeply interested in spirituality and faith
- In the Western world, organized religion is declining and agnosticism/atheism are growing; I want to understand why
- I've always believed you can learn a lot from organized religion to live a more meaningful, fulfilling life
- Epstein's writing is clear, accessible, and he's young enough to include contemporary references (eg, pop culture) and "no bullshit" language

WHO'S THE AUTHOR?

Greg Epstein is the Harvard community's Humanist Chaplain. He grew up in Flushing, New York, as part of a Reform Jewish family, and has extensively studied Buddhism and Taoism.



WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

Note: this is not a CliffNotes; I look for themes and insights to help us live a good life.

- Americans have generally negative opinions of the nonreligious (in particular, atheists), but the nonreligious/"religious in name only" community is the fastest growing segment
- Humanism is a leading non-religious philosophy and community. What is humanism? A desire to live with DIGNITY. To be the "superintendent" of your own life, to *lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment, aspiring to the greater good of humanity.*
- What is the value of organized religion (eg, Christianity)?
 - When today's biggest religions were created, people lived in a world of suffering - religions helped people alleviate suffering through prayer and a belief in heaven
 - People don't like randomness - religion helps explain things (like why we die)
 - Provides community and group identity, a key human need
 - Lays out a set of rules for good conduct (for example, the Golden Rule)
- Non-religious belief has existed since the dawn of mankind, and is prevalent among history's greatest thinkers (eg, Spinoza, Thomas Jefferson)
- Epstein believes most people are driven by "striving" for money, status, looks, respect
- Love is the key to human survival and success. However, we believe marriage should solve all problems and be based on passionate love. This can cause deep disappointment
- It's not as simple as just being helpful to others. That can cause us to be TOO unselfish (Epstein believes some selfishness is necessary)
- Morals change over time...at one point, some organized religions believed slavery was morally acceptable. If we ascribe to unchangeable morals, we may end up committing grievous acts
- If Humanism is about dignity, then how do you define it?
 - There are 4 characteristics...
 - i. Self-awareness
 - ii. Responsibility for your own life
 - iii. Refusal to find your identity in material possessions

- iv. Belief that your behavior is worthy of imitation by others
- o ...and 3 moral obligations:
 - i. Strive for mastery and control over my own life
 - ii. Be reliable & trustworthy
 - iii. Be generous
- The core of any religion or life philosophy is the day-to-day...how you make 100s of decisions big and small
- Epstein suggests Humanist alternatives to a variety of beneficial religious practices including:
 - o Nonreligious alternatives to prayer, such as meditation, to cope with stress and fear
 - o Nonreligious methods to celebrate key life events (eg, marriage, childbirth) and festivals (e.g., Christmas)

Key snippets from the Humanist Manifest III [full document [here](#)]:

- Knowledge of the world is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational analysis
- Humans are an integral part of nature, the result of unguided evolutionary change
- Ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience
- Life's fulfillment emerges from individual participation in the service of humane ideals
- Humans are social by nature and find meaning in relationships
- Working to benefit society maximizes individual happiness

WHAT ARE THE IMPORTANT LESSONS?

Lesson #1: Pay it forward

Learning to pay it forward can add a tremendous sense of meaning and dignity to our lives. Simply put, it feels good to give to others, whether we get back or not.

QUESTION: When was the last time you did something nice for a stranger? How did it make you feel? This is super, super small, but two weeks ago at the local post office, I saw a lady struggle with her heavy boxes and helped carry them to the service counter. It felt nice - but I was in a good mood, having just come back from a run. I need to remember to be that nice even when I'm not feeling great.

Lesson #2: Ask good questions

Indeed, we Humanists can take pride in our passionate belief in a morality based on unfettered inquiry, on compassionate questioning. Call us "the keepers of the question."

QUESTION: :)

Lesson #3: Stop striving

I agree with Epstein (and Rick Warren) that most people are engaged in "striving" for material, superficial, short-lived gains. A little bit is good, too much is not.

I suspect that what drives most people in this world, what really might be the world's largest religion, is one form or another of what we can call "striving." Do you know any strivers? These would be people for whom the meaning of life, whether they admit it or not, is get, get, get as much as you can. Get really rich, get really powerful, get the nicest cars, the nicest babes, the nicest jobs, whatever.

QUESTION: What is the greatest thing you are striving for? How can you reduce that desire? For me, that's public approval. I'd like to do more things that I know may upset others, if I believe in it and know it's the right thing to do.

Lesson #4: Live with dignity

Not a huge fan of the word "dignity", especially as an overarching life philosophy (I think a concept of the Good Life is better)...but the moral obligations are worth practicing.

What did Epicurus declare we should do? He insisted we must examine all that we do, all that we choose to love and value, and choose only that which is worth choosing—that which produces what is often translated into English as “happiness.” But to say that Epicurus championed human happiness, if we take only the simplest and most commonsense meaning of that word as shallow, fleeting pleasure, is to cheat the author of this ancient Humanistic wisdom. And it is to cheat ourselves. Epicurus believed in the value of pleasure, but not just any pleasure. He was devoted to that quality we might simply call human dignity.

QUESTION: In which moral area are you weakest? For me, that's reliability. I can be a big flake, especially with friends. I need to make commitments only when I intend to keep them, and do everything I can to keep them.

Lesson #5: Personal growth is critical

Humanists are progressives, meaning that, though we may disagree in good faith on particular economic, security, or social policies, we believe we have the opportunity and the responsibility to help make progress toward a world that will be fairer and more just, more loving and accepting of difference than the world we were handed by the fates.

QUESTION: In what areas have you improved the most and how can you continue that progress? For example, I read a lot of nonfiction books, so over time I've learned a lot about random stuff. But I've also forgotten a lot. Recently, I've begun to write short summaries of every book that I read, as a way to retain what I've learned, and to share them with friends.

RELATED AND INSPIRING CONTENT

- What Shamu Taught Me About A Happy Marriage - an important lesson for all of us [\[link\]](#)
- The Humanist Manifesto (the original) [\[link\]](#)
- The Humanist Manifesto III (seen as the successor to the original) [\[link\]](#)
- Bertrand Russell's Why I Am Not A Christian - wise, Humanist-like life advice [\[link\]](#)

GREAT QUOTES FROM THE BOOK

Humanism is a bold, resolute response to the fact that being a human being is lonely and frightening.

Besides, books on science, though often containing much useful information about the world around us, can less often say important things about what we ought to value most in life, or why.

What really matters is whether we live according to our values, and that takes hard work and a hundred hard choices every day.

Other Christians like to emphasize that if we lose God, we lose “absolute values,” without which we will end up in the moral gutter.

People need community. Not just out of some whiny desire to be hugged or avoid loneliness—we need community because we succeed best in life when we can count on reliable help from a wide range of individuals with a range of skills and talents, all of whom know us personally enough to treat

us as their own when we are in need.

We just don't like randomness, so we look everywhere around us for little "signs" that the mysteries in the universe have a purpose and that the strange things that happen to us every day were "caused" by some sort of watchful force.

If religion is ancient, then Humanism and atheism are most likely almost as old, because as long as we humans have believed, we have also doubted.

Therefore wisdom is a more precious thing even than philosophy; from it spring all the other virtues, for it teaches that we cannot live pleasantly without living wisely, honorably, and justly; nor live wisely, honorably, and justly without living pleasantly.

A good life used to mean a life of suffering. Why? Because nearly everyone was suffering so much from lack of decent food, shelter, medicine, and leisure time that the best way to prevent panic was to assert that "your suffering is good for you." So Jesus became a suffering role model.

Marx was also among the first great examples of the danger in assuming that, absent a perfect religious salvation, we can or should ever hope for a perfect secular salvation. There are no utopias. No utopian vision, godly or godless, must ever be allowed to justify violent repression or the coercion of conscience, no matter how noble the ultimate goals.

As Gaylor reminds us, the historic treatment of women by almost every major world religion is reason enough to seek out the good without God today.

Ironically, in recent years the author who has best understood the human drive for meaning and purpose is the Reverend Rick Warren, pastor and author of *The Purpose Driven Life*. Warren's book has been such a huge success because he has recognized our need for purpose beyond self-centeredness and because he has seen that many nominally religious and nonreligious people are struggling with a sense of purposelessness today, even as they gain in both scientific knowledge and material prosperity.

The more common striver, though, is the person who works and works and works toward a goal he can never attain, or who attains it and then realizes: I can strive all I want but it's to no end; all is vanity. These are stories I hear all the time: I worked all my life to get a great job. I got the job and I was bored, it didn't fulfill me...I worked for years to get the best education. I studied for years and years, and when I graduated I wasn't sure if I was any wiser than when I began...

There are biological reasons why the biggest motivator for the largest number of human actions and decisions is our desire for romantic, sexual, and other kinds of love.

What should the relationship between religious and nonreligious people be? There is a one-word answer: pluralism. This doesn't mean the end of all differences between us, or even competition among us. It means that competition should be, as in the Qur'anic turn of phrase, to "compete with one another in good works."

In short, when we talk about prayer, we're really talking about the equivalent of a highly versatile, always available, perfectly legal, free, non-physically addictive or intoxicating drug.

Weddings, funerals, birth, and other such ceremonies not only predate all the currently extant major world religions, they almost certainly predate organized religion itself.

Christianity is as often a culture as a religion. You can see it not only in the kinds of traditions

represented by our dinner itself, but also in the clear sociological differences that separate American Protestant groups much more than does theology: Baptists tend to be poorer, Methodists more middle class, Presbyterians