

***Equal Time for Freethought* interview with **Greg Epstein**, author
of ***Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do
Believe*****

interviewed by Matthew LaClair

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Equal Time for Freethought: Today, we have a very interesting guest, like always here on the show; this is Greg Epstein. He is the author of the new book [*Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe*](#). Some may have seen the phrase "good without God" here in New York City subway systems recently, and that has to do with the release of this book. Epstein is also the [humanist chaplain at Harvard University](#). He [blogs](#) for *Newsweek* magazine and *The Washington Post*, and has been featured by [National Public Radio](#), BBC Radio, *Newsweek*, [U.S. News & World Report](#), and more.

Greg, thanks for coming on the show today.

Greg Epstein: Thank you very much for having me.

ETFF: Sure. So first, let's talk about what it is that you do at Harvard. You're the "humanist chaplain." What is a humanist chaplain? And then further, what is it that you do in your position there?

Epstein: Sure. So I work as a chaplain for humanists, atheists, agnostics, and the nonreligious at Harvard and beyond. I would say that I call my role building, educating, nurturing a diverse community of humanists and the nonreligious. I help organize the community, I help educate the Harvard community about humanism, and I fulfill a role in peoples' lives when they need wedding ceremonies, funerals, baby naming ceremonies. That mark the most important moments in their lives in a secular way, but in a way that acknowledges that having a community of people around us enriches our lives.

ETFF: So as long as you've been there, in this particular position, have you ever come across people, in Harvard or in the general community where you are, that have been opposed to the fact that there is, in fact, a humanist group to begin with there? And then also further than that, have there ever been events that you've held where you've seen any sort of problems with other groups that have been in the particular community? Or have they been, for the most part, respectful and tolerant?

Epstein: I have to say, Matt, for the most part, I've received a very, very warm reception here. From my religious colleagues at Harvard, from everybody at Harvard who knows that I'm here representing and helping build a community of humanists, atheists and the nonreligious. I get along with everyone from my evangelical colleagues to Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, et cetera. I would say that there are probably some people who in their private thoughts or what have you may have problems with it. But I think that they really know better at this point, because we're here on campus and we're so prominent and it's very easy to spot us and to know why we're here; I think people have really gotten the point that I make in my book, which is that if you think it's not possible to be good without God — you know, the

book is called "Good Without God" — and people ask, "Is it about whether you can be good without God?" And that's the point that I make, which I make in all my work at Harvard, which is: if you think you can't be good without God, that's not just your opinion, that's not just a question that you're raising, it's a prejudice. And it might even be a form of discrimination.

ETFF: Yeah, I completely agree with you there. And I'm glad that you brought up the book, because that's what we're here to talk about today, for the most part, with you. Just to begin with: how did you decide to write the book? What was it that you had in mind as you were writing it, and what you thought you wanted to accomplish when it was finished and people read it?

Epstein: Well, it's funny. I mean, I got involved with humanism, I did not know that humanism even existed as a movement. Even though I had studied religion in high school, and then I majored in religion in college, I had never in any class about religion or in any of my readings discovered the word "humanism" until I was about 23 or so. And I know that youth rules on this program, Matt, so I won't say anything disparaging my having been 23 at the time. But anyway, I discovered the word "humanism" and I got involved with the organized humanist movement. And I quickly discovered that I was wanting more literature to help me discover what humanism was like, what it meant to be a humanist, especially for this generation. I felt like a lot of the good books that I was reading about humanism sort of talked about it from a perspective from a generation or two ago. And then it was very interesting and very helpful when a lot of books came out about atheism in the last few years, talking about what nonreligious people don't believe. But I was really looking for a book that spoke to this generation about: what do nonreligious people *believe*? What *do* we stand for? What *is* the humanist movement all about?

And I was in a class here at Harvard as a graduate student. I took it with a famous religious scholar named Diana Eck, and we were reading liberal, progressive intellectual voices from Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam. And I was happy to take the course. It was nice to see that there *are* liberal voices from all the world's religions. But I said to her, "Well listen, if you're gonna cover all of these, this is fine. But why don't you have a book that's progressive, new voice, from the humanist perspective, from an atheist perspective?" And she said, "Hey, that's a great idea! Why don't you write the book? I'll help you put together the proposal."

ETFF: Wow.

Epstein: And I said, "Well, I wasn't really talking about—", but then I realized, well yeah, we probably do need more books. And so I got started writing at that point, and it took a few years, but here we are.

ETFF: And you dedicated your book to Sherwin T. Wine. Can you tell us a little bit about who he was and why you decided to dedicate this book to him?

Epstein: Sure. So my book is dedicated to somebody who had the title of "rabbi", of all things. And Sherwin Wine is someone who was proudly, in my mind, *the* leading, but at least one of the leading figures of the 20th century for saying, or arguing, that from a nonreligious or atheist or agnostic or humanist perspective, we can have a positive

community that gives people a sense of belonging; a sense of being able to be part of something and celebrating the important times in life, and being alongside people who are of like minds. And building a positive, better world together in some of the same ways that religious communities might; but without any of the dogma, any of the superstition, any of the revealed religion that you might be used to in other churches or synagogues or et cetera communities. And he in fact did this from a Jewish perspective. He was somebody who grew up in a Jewish community; very much identified with his Jewish *culture*, his Jewish roots, the fact that his family was Jewish, but not from a believing point of view. Half of American Jews today say that they're not religious Jews, that they're just cultural or secular Jews. And that was him. And he said, "Listen, we're going to have a Jewish community for people like us. We're proud of our culture. We don't think it makes us any better than anybody else, but we're proud of it. It's part of who we are. And we want to embrace that while at the same time embracing that we're humanists, that we're no better than anybody else, that all human beings are equal, and that we want to live a life that embraces the here and now, *this world*, *this life*, nature and what we have from birth to death, that's our one shot, we gotta make the best of it that we can." That was what Sherwin taught me.

ETFF: And I think that your view and his view are very similar, in the sense that I think you would be considered more moderate than what are called "the new atheists" now, such as Christopher Hitchens, people like that. What do you think the approach of humanists and other nontheists should be in dealing with extremists? And actually, perhaps an even harder question for some people is: what kind of approach should be taken towards moderates? Should we be confronting these people and attempt to have discussions about religious belief, about what humanists believe? Or is that something that, really, we have to discuss amongst ourselves first before we go out and start talking to others?

Epstein: Well Matt, I think that these are really important questions, and I'm glad that you pose it as two separate questions. There's one question which is: what should humanists and the nonreligious do about religious extremism? How should we approach religious extremism? And then there's the other question, the second question, which is: what should we do about religious moderates? People with whom we disagree on theology, we disagree on the nature of the universe and whether there's a God or not; but we agree, probably, on many, many political, social, cultural issues. And so I think that it does require us to have two different responses.

For religious extremists — people who would take away our freedom; people who would disrespect us because we don't believe in a God, because we are humanists; people who would take away the separation of church and state; people who would deny people the freedom of choice; et cetera — these people need to be opposed, and they need to be opposed firmly, and they need to be rejected. And humanists do that. We say, "Listen, we are standing up with all our might, with all our voice, with all our strength. For freedom, for the freedom of inquiry, for freedom in politics, et cetera." And so that's really a key.

But then we are able to say, I think— My view is that we humanists can be generous enough, we are strong enough now. There are a billion nonreligious people in the world; there are 40 or 50 million nonreligious people in the United States. That makes us maybe the largest minority in the United States. And so we're strong enough now to be generous, and to say, "Hey. We acknowledge that you can be good without God and you can also be good with God." That we are not trying to say that we are the smartest and the best in every single issue and that you just have to bow down to us. No. We just want to be acknowledged as

one group of human beings, just like anybody else. And we want to be able to work alongside people with whom we disagree. Everybody's got something that they disagree with, and there's something that they disbelieve in. Christians don't believe in Islam; Muslims don't believe in Christianity. But can we work together to build a better society, a better country for everyone? I think we can, and I enjoy working alongside religious people as long as they understand me as a humanist, as long as they understand the "without God" part of the "good without God". We can be good together as long as I can be good without God, they can be good with God.

ETFF: And I think that's something that many people who do believe in a God get very confused about. When they know what humanism is, or even if they know what atheism is. I think more people probably know what an atheist is as opposed to a humanist. So one point that they will make, or they'll think in their minds, is "What's the point in being good if there is no God?" And also, even further than "What's the point?", I think even harder for them is, "Well, if this is it, if this is the one life that I have, and after it that's it, how do you as a humanist or a nontheist (don't believe in God), how do you remain a happy person? And how do you continue to do good things in the world if you know or you're pretty sure that this is really the only shot we have?"

Epstein: Yeah. I talk about these questions in detail in the book. And I tell a lot of personal stories, as well as looking at some of the history of the philosophy of these questions. And so for somebody who's wanting an in-depth answer, I really encourage them to check out the book. I have a whole large chapter about it, that I call "*Why be good without God?*" I say, "Look, let's not ask whether you can be good without God." If you're asking "Can you be good without God?", that's prejudice, but if you're asking "*Why do you wanna be good if it's not to get rewarded in Heaven or to escape punishment in Hell?*", then that's a legitimate question, and let's have it in detail in the book.

But for now, what I would just say is two points. One, it is kind of sad, to me, to think that there are people who have to worry that there's no reason, other than a God who rewards and punishes, to live a good life. I personally feel like somebody who's thinking that way is missing out, is missing out on some really wonderful things about this world that we live in, and some really worthwhile things at least. Because the goal of life, the thing that we're trying to be rewarded by, is definitely not happiness all the time. I talk about this in the book too. That it's true: nothing we can do is going to make us happy all the time. And so if your goal is, "OK, well I don't want to get rewarded by God, but I want to be happy", well, good luck with that. Because that's just not the way the world is. The world is so imperfect, if there was a God in this world, he'd be doing a lousy job of rewarding good people and punishing bad people. And we know that.

But there's something else that I argue that we can pursue, and that's the sense of dignity. The sense that we are for ourselves and also for others. And it's something that I talk about. Some of us humanists can actually agree with some of the religious theology that's out there, except for the part that talks about the God and the supernatural and whatever. There are Christian thinkers, or other religious thinkers, who talk in some helpful ways. Like OK, I talk about Rick Warren, who writes this book [*The Purpose-Driven Life*](#). And it's a very famous book. It's sold a ton of copies. In fact, they bill it as "the bestselling nonfiction hardcover work of all time", which then makes me think, "Excuse me, does that mean that the Bible is fiction?"

ETFF: I always wondered that too.

Epstein: Exactly. But anyway, Rick Warren says in his book a lot of it that humanists have to reject. But he says also: it's not all about you. That the world's life is not all about you, and if you're trying to just get everything you can for yourself, you're gonna end up very disappointed. Because life is about more than just yourself. And as a humanist I totally agree with that. And I talk in the book about how we need to get involved with other people, with caring, with community, with compassion, and really pursue those things as a humanist. That that's the "good" part of the "good without God". I just disagree with Warren when he then goes on to say, "Oh, well, the only thing that you should be involved with that's not just you is Christ; and a very conservative, literal understanding of Jesus Christ." I mean, that stuff we gotta reject. But on the other points we can find common ground.

ETFF: At this point, I'm probably going to be a little bit of a pain here, but I'm hoping that we can get a good discussion out of this part of the show. One thing that I noticed throughout your book, and obviously on the cover as well, is that you use the term "nonreligious" fairly often. And I know somewhat what you think about the whole term debate: do we use this word or that word? In the introduction you have a small subsection that says, "Is Humanism a Faith?" And then you say, "Asking whether Humanism is a religion or not is little more than a semantic 'gotcha' game." For me — and this is something I really thought about a lot after reading your book and during it as well — first, I guess I'll ask you: when you decided to use the term "nonreligious", why did you decide to use that term?

Epstein: Well, there are two ways of understanding the word "religion." One is the popular sense, which is that religion involves gods and the supernatural and magic and miracles and all the rest. The second way is more of a sociological definition of religion, something that anthropologists and sociologists from [Émile] Durkheim to Clifford Geertz — and I won't drop any more fancy names — have said that religion is something that involves a way of looking at the world, it involves a set of traditions, a community, et cetera. So if you wanted to define humanism as a religion in that sense, in that second sense, there would probably be any number of reasons why that could be correct. But I think, better to define it in a popular sense as "not a religion", because most people when they think of religion think of gods and other things that aren't involved in humanism. But I just wanted to acknowledge that there are people out there who are not religious who are humanists, who are atheists and agnostics, but really think of their humanism, of their way of being an atheist, as their equivalent of a religion. It's the way they live; it's what they believe; it's what they're most passionate about; it's the people that they identify with; it's their history; et cetera. And that can be healthy.

ETFF: And the reason that it came to my attention so strongly wasn't because— I really haven't called myself anything at this point; I haven't self-identified as religious or nonreligious; I haven't really gotten into it. But looking at it from a legal standpoint, looking at it particularly in the United States, there was a particular Supreme Court case in 1961, *Torcaso v. Watkins*, which defined humanism as a religion officially in the United States. I think also Ethical Culture, they are also self-defined as a religion.

And another term that I saw on the front of the book was the term "chaplain", and I was trying to grapple with: how does the term "chaplain", which would be the popular equivalent, as you say, of religion; how could that be involved with nonreligion? And so it was an

interesting point that kept popping up in my mind. I wasn't quite sure what you were trying to say.

Epstein: Well the word "chaplain", this can seem like an oxymoron to people, "humanist chaplain". And I just say, "Look, if it's an oxymoron to believe that people who no longer believe in God still want caring and community and can still use somebody who's coming from a professional perspective helping them to organize that, well I'm happy to be that walking oxymoron, that's doing community and compassion without God." But I will say this. The way that we can get around these hairsplitting legal issues is: humanism is a life stance. That's what I talk about in the book. And this is a word that I didn't invent. It comes from Europe, where in Europe there are many, many, many millions of people who've identified actively as humanists. It's not like the United States where most people haven't even heard the word "humanism". And one of the things I'm trying to do is help to popularize humanism so more people have heard of it, more people can get involved, and we can build the influence of the nonreligious in America.

But anyway, in Europe they have many millions of humanists, and they are actively calling themselves "humanists" as a life stance. And what a life stance means is: it's not a religion. No gods, no supernatural, nothing outside this world, we have this one shot to make it, make our lives count, and that's it. So therefore the pressure's on us to really be the best people we can be, because we don't get a second chance in Heaven or Hell. And so that's what we believe; we're not a religion. But we're more that just a philosophy of life, because this is what we do, this is what we are. And any protection that you're gonna give to a religion under law, you need to give us the same. Any advantage that you're gonna give to religious people, you need to give to a humanist as well. Because we're certainly no less deserving of anything, from a tax exemption to what have you, than any religious person. We are equal citizens. And we have to be treated as such in every way.

ETFF: But if we are in fact equal to these other religious groups; if, for example, tax exemption goes along with religion; then wouldn't humanism be referred to as a religion, if we are going to get the same rights as other groups that are identified and understood as a particular religion?

Epstein: Sure. So what I would just argue there is that the proper term that the U.S. should be using is the term that Europe is using, which is "life stance." That the U.S. should be affording every advantage; whether it's, again, conscientious objection, to tax exemption; to a religion or a life stance.

And by the way, again, I acknowledge: if you're looking from a sociological point of view or from a political point of view, then it's fine to call humanism a religion. But let's just acknowledge that if you're thinking of a religion as involving gods, supernatural, miracles, magic, et cetera, we're not. It's a complicated word, but that's not our cross to bear, if you will. That's the problem of people who are making the laws, not those of us who are simply choosing to live the most honest way that we can as humanists and nonreligious people.

ETFF: A little bit later in the book, you say that you are "a humanist by faith". That was actually the one point where I got myself really confused. Only because I was thinking, "Well, if he's writing this book from the perspective of what the popular meanings of these terms are, the popular meaning of the term 'nonreligious' being supernatural, gods, things like that; wouldn't then 'faith', in that particular case, also be directly associated with, as we would

say, the popular term of 'religion'?" Or in this case, do you find that to be different?

Epstein: Right. So faith is another one of these tough words. And I say in the book: the point really is, what is a good life? And the point is really that we are trying, as everything we can possibly do, to live a good life, to build a good world, the best world that we can possibly build. It won't ever be a perfect world, and we acknowledge that as humanists. We're never going to get to some heaven, all right. But make *this* world as good as it can be for ourselves, for our loved ones, for all human beings; and for the sake of the natural world that surrounds us, and that sustains us, and that we've placed in great danger. That's the point of the book. And what we call all of this, the terminology of it, that's hairsplitting. And we can talk about it, but let's just acknowledge, though, that the most important point is humanism, is the "good without God" part.

But in this point, on the point of faith, right. I think it's just an acknowledgment that we can't prove a negative. Just like you can't prove that there *is* a God. We can't prove, in a mathematical way, a negative. You can't prove that anything doesn't exist. And so the point is that yes, humanism is a faith in the sense that we choose to believe that there is this world because this is the only world that we have ever known and can ever know. So I guess what we're saying, really, as humanists to me is, "Sure. Everything you might choose is a faith. But what is your faith based on? How much evidence do you have to support your faith?" And what I think humanists would simply argue is that we feel like we have much better evidence to support our decision, our choice to be humanists, than we would have to support any other choice. That's our honest way of looking at the world. It's as truthful as we can be to ourselves and to what we see.

So in that sense, I don't think we need to be allergic to the word "faith". I quote Joss Whedon in the book, the TV writer and director, who says that, "Look, the enemy of humanism is not faith. The enemy of humanism is fear; it's ignorance; it's the darker part of humanity. Faith in God is belief in something without any evidence whatsoever. But faith in humanity, faith in humanism, is faith in something with a tremendous amount of evidence to the contrary. So we're the true believers. We're trying to do good without God, good in this world." That takes real passion.

ETFF: Well, I have to say, overall, I completely agree with you that the whole point of the book, and I think that's why that particular part of the title is in larger font: "good without God". I think that the overall point of the book is fantastic. And one thing I would like to suggest for people who do go out and read this book, is to look at the overall message. And I think, Greg, you did a fantastic job as far as getting the general message across. And I'd like to thank you again for coming on the show, and I hope people will go out, read the book, and have some fun and learn a lot of things.

Epstein: Well I do, and I hope people can get involved. That's the point, is that we need to work together to build a better world for everyone. And that is really the essence of humanism to me. So I encourage people to read the book. You can learn in the book about all the organizations you can join and all of the different ways that you can get involved in making the world better as a nonreligious person, for nonreligious people, and for all people.

ETFF: Absolutely. Well, thanks again for coming on the show.

Epstein: Thank you so much, Matt. It's a pleasure.