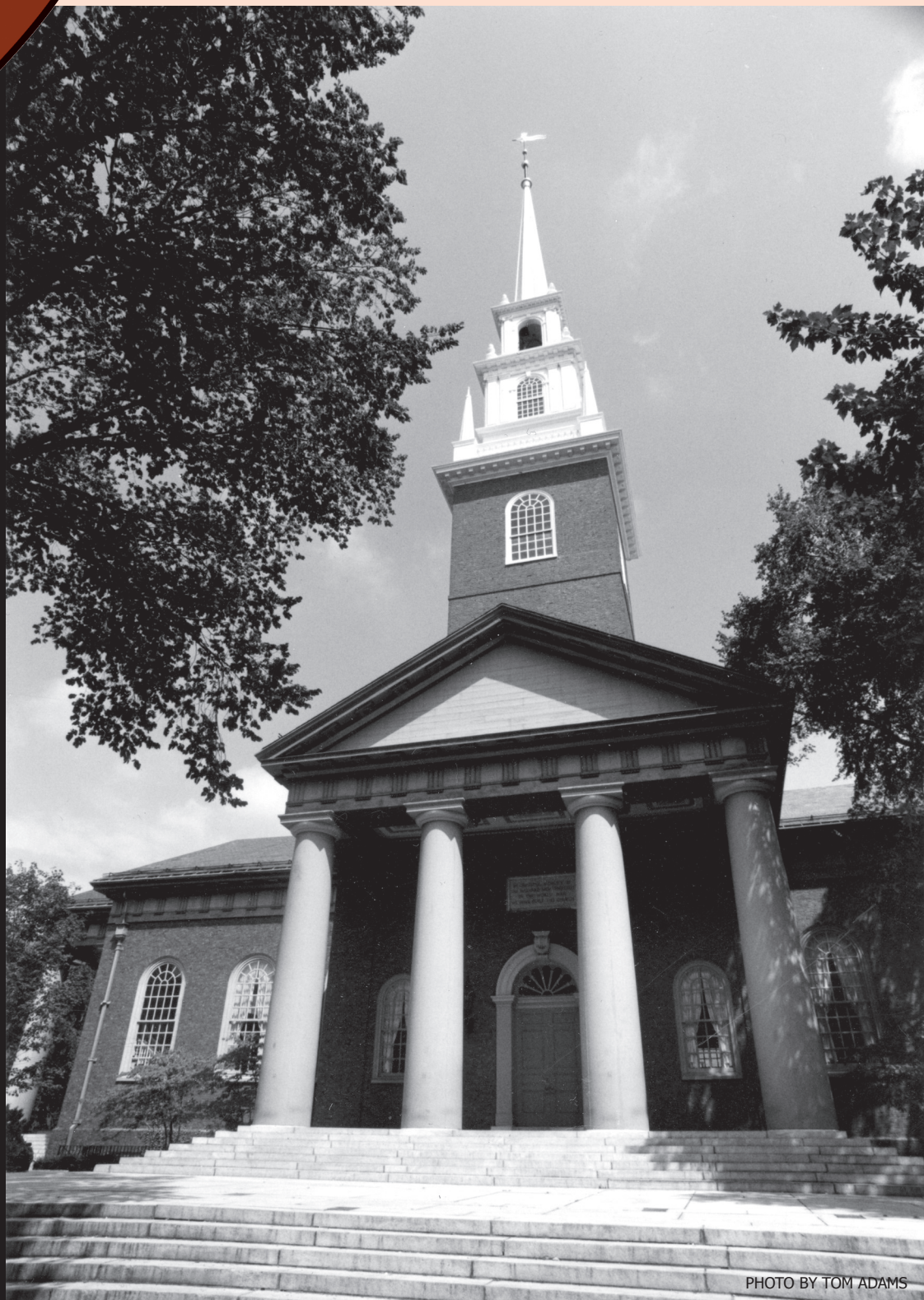




# HARVARD HUMANISM: BEYOND THE WALLS OF THE SECULAR CATHEDRAL



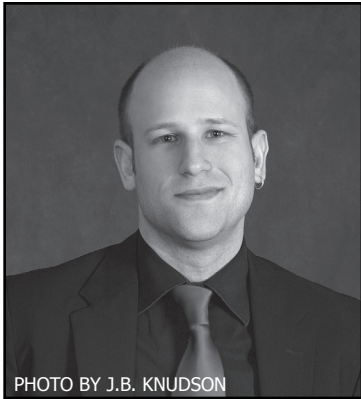


PHOTO BY J.B. KNUDSON

GREG M. EPSTEIN GREW UP IN NEW YORK CITY as a self-described “assimilated and disinterested Reform Jew” and began studying Buddhism and Taoism as a teenager. He later spent a college semester in Taiwan with the aim of studying Ch’an (Zen) Buddhism in its original language and context. He returned to the United States having realized that Eastern religions didn’t necessarily have greater access to truth than Western ones, and promptly traded his scholar’s robe for a microphone. Epstein worked in the music industry for a year, recording and performing rock music professionally, and left disappointed by the negativity of the industry culture. Finding himself at a turning point, Epstein says he may have been forced into attending law school had he not discovered humanism and the possibility

of a career as a humanist chaplain. In 2005 he received ordination as a humanist rabbi from the International Institute for Secular and Humanistic Judaism. He holds a BA (Religion and Chinese) and an MA (Judaic Studies) from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and is currently completing a Master of Theological Studies at the Harvard Divinity School.

## The *Humanist* Interview with Greg Epstein, Humanist Chaplain of Harvard

by David Niose

**The Humanist:** How long have you been humanist chaplain of Harvard?

**Epstein:** I took over the position in 2005. Most people have no idea Harvard has an endowed, permanent humanist chaplaincy—much less that we’ve been around for over thirty years now.

**The Humanist:** It’s unusual for a humanist leader to work in an official position such as a chaplain at a university. And you work at not just any university, but at Harvard. How do you see the significance of your job?

**Epstein:** In his landmark book, *The Good Society*, sociologist Robert Bellah commented that the university is the secular cathedral. In the secular world, Bellah says, universities come closer than any other institution to having the prestige, the influence, and the power to inspire that cathedrals have in the religious world. It follows, for better or for

worse, that Harvard has been seen as the ultimate secular cathedral. For example, the American Humanist Association’s most prestigious award has been its Humanist of the Year Award. Of the fifty-plus individuals who have received that award since 1953, ten of the recipients have taught at Harvard. That’s an astounding ratio.

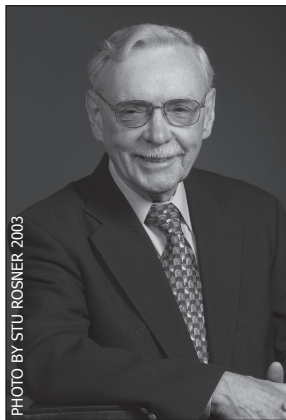
**The Humanist:** It’s true that many prominent humanists have taught at Harvard. But your position as humanist chaplain isn’t exactly a teaching position, is it? How is the humanist chaplain different than a professor?

**Epstein:** That’s right, the humanist chaplaincy at Harvard, rather than being a standard academic chair or institute, is dedicated to what we call “building, educating, and nurturing a diverse community of humanists, agnostics, atheists, and the non-religious at Harvard and beyond.”

To give it some context, Harvard was founded in 1636 by hard-line Puritan Calvinist Christians. Eventually though,

Harvard shifted to become a center for liberalizing Christianity and Unitarianism, and in the modern period it has been repeatedly accused of godlessness, though in fact it has slowly and fitfully adopted the ideology of religious pluralism.

**The Humanist:** How does this history relate to the humanist chaplaincy?



FORMER HUMANIST  
CHAPLAIN TOM FERRICK

**Epstein:** Well, once universities began to include more than one religious point of view, it became clear that they needed clergy to serve the different communities. In the 1970s, when Tom Ferrick arrived at Harvard to found the humanist chaplaincy, Harvard had Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish chaplains. Tom raised the question of whether humanism could be considered enough of a main-

stream and important philosophical tradition to be among those represented, especially given that Harvard never officially renounced its standing as a “religious” university, and therefore the school’s chaplaincies represent, at least in theory, its ethical foundation. Tom was accepted and was even given an office in Memorial Church, the huge church that sits in the very heart of Harvard Yard and for many symbolizes the university as a whole.

The ultimate significance of the humanist chaplaincy is that a respectable “secular cathedral” for today must not only give lip service to pluralism but should actually make space for many communities and points of view. In fact, one of Tom’s important accomplishments was helping to bring Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, and even evangelical chaplaincies to campus. Humanism then is one among many given full inclusion.

**The Humanist:** Speaking of inclusion, I understand you’ll soon be hosting one of the biggest events in the chaplaincy’s history and that it will feature a multicultural lineup of speakers.

**Epstein:** Yes, we’re very excited about it. In April Salman Rushdie, Amartya Sen, E. O. Wilson, the folk singer Dar Williams, and too many others to list will join us for a three-day event to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the humanist chaplaincy at Harvard. We’re investing a

lot of time and energy into this because we feel the time has come for us to help humanism make an impact on the national and international level.

**The Humanist:** As a humanist chaplain, will you be engaging in the culture wars, perhaps speaking out against creationism, or even against religion in general, the way others such as Richard Dawkins or Daniel Dennett have been lately?

**Epstein:** Ah, yes, Dawkins and Dennett, plus the author Sam Harris—a former professor of mine at Harvard Divinity School refers to them semi-seriously as “the unholy trinity.” I have great respect for all three, and I agree with Dawkins and Dennett on their naturalistic, nontheistic view of the universe. But I take an extremely different approach than they do to representing humanism.

**The Humanist:** How so?

**Epstein:** First of all, it can no longer be enough to hope that Harvard will in and of itself act as a secular cathedral, just as it’s not enough to rely on what Gary Wolf dubbed “The New Atheism” in his November 2006 *Wired* magazine cover story. The cover text of that issue read: “No Heaven. No Hell. Just Science.” Well, it’s true and important that humanists don’t adhere to the idea of a heaven or a hell, and we do value science as the best tool humans have for understanding the world around us, but “Just Science?” To me that language raises the concern, often quite valid, that the new atheism is too cut off from emotion, from intuition, and from a spirit of generosity toward those who see the world differently. In short, it represents the “head” of humanism, an over-intellectualized, disembodied approach. To be relevant in the twenty-first century we must also emphasize the “heart” of humanism.

**The Humanist:** It sounds like you’re on to something there.

**Epstein:** I do see a movement taking shape that is positive rather than negative, with the potential to reach millions of young people in the coming generation or two. In response to the *Wired* article we should call this approach “The New Humanism.”

This new humanism is noteworthy in three ways: it’s multicultural, it’s inclusive, and it’s inspiring. Of course none of these notions are completely new, but one could argue that they haven’t been emphasized enough by the organized humanist community.

**The Humanist:** Let's address the first of the three points you just made. Humanism is often seen as growing out of Western culture, arising out of the European philosophical tradition, but you like to refer to humanism as being multicultural. What do you mean by that?

**Epstein:** Humanism has its roots in every culture from around the world. A few years ago, Salman Rushdie and I discussed the idea that Muslim culture is rich with humanistic heritage that can be traced back to the democratizing tendencies of Cyrus and ancient Persia, and to the great medieval philosophers Ibn Sinna and Ibn Rushid, who ironically helped preserve Aristotelian philosophy for the West. And there are millions of atheists and agnostics in the Muslim world today. We must embrace them and understand that they don't visualize humanism as merely a straight path from ancient Greece to the Enlightenment to Richard Dawkins the way some do in the United States.

For similar reasons, I've made a point of reaching out to the aforementioned Amartya Sen, and also to Tu Weiming, two great Harvard professors. Sen is a Nobel Prize-winning economist and a world-class philosopher on issues such as rationality and economic development, but he is also deeply rooted in Indian culture, politics, and philosophy. His most recent writing begins to stake out a kind of authentically Indian humanism. He points out, for example, that ancient Sanskrit has more atheist and agnostic literature than any other classical language in history. Tu is a great advocate for Confucian humanism, and we need to hear him because we don't draw nearly enough from the thousands of years of humanistic literature, art, music, and philosophy of East Asia. The beauty of all this isn't just that we're tapping into more than half the world's population here. It's that once we begin to deeply explore humanism's diverse roots, we can finally begin to use it as the peace-making tool it should long ago have become. If humanists from around the world are empowered to meet eye to eye in mutual respect, they might then be more able to assist in building peace between their different nations.

**The Humanist:** You mentioned earlier that humanism should be multicultural but also inclusive, presumably of nonhumanists. How can we do so while maintaining the integrity of our own outlook?

**Epstein:** If people take only one thing from my work, let it be the idea that an authentic, passionate, committed humanist—and yes, atheist—must accept the dignity of other beliefs. Some atheists want to erase religion, the way some religious fundamentalists want to erase human-

ism. My humanism is an embracing philosophy. It says, let's understand ourselves enough to know why we disagree, then let's trust ourselves enough to care about each other and work together toward common goals.

The great contemporary hero of this approach is E.O. Wilson, the Harvard scientist and our humanist chaplaincy board member, who has worked so hard to bring humanist scientists and evangelical Christians together to address global warming. Ambassador John Loeb Jr. will also be talking in April about how the Touro Synagogue, to which George Washington wrote his famous letter in 1790 promising all people not mere toleration but full inclusion in American society, is a classically humanistic symbol of inclusiveness. Even Richard Dawkins gets the value of the approach, if you catch him off guard. He was blogging a few months ago about how he hadn't known what to say to a U.S. college student who confided in him that he was considering suicide. Dawkins wrote that if this had happened at Harvard he would have referred the student to the humanist chaplain. But, ironically, he added that at Oxford he would have recommended the Anglican chaplains, many of whom, he said, are "very nice people."

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**The Humanist:** Some might say that the inclusive, nonconfrontational approach isn't the best way to get noticed in today's United States. How would you respond?

**Epstein:** My humanism is not a proselytizing humanism. I don't go out trying to convince people to abandon belief in God, hoping that will somehow cure all ills. However, my humanism is not a silent humanism either. The difference is the approach: ours should be to educate anyone—everyone—about what humanists *do* believe in. Why we see God as a human creation, not vice versa. Why we feel this life, this world, is the only one we have. And especially how such beliefs help us to live good, meaningful, productive, and joyous lives. This isn't an approach designed to make humanists the dominant majority, but it certainly will make us a strong and respected minority.

You know, nothing breeds more raw passion than extremism. But many of us who would be embarrassed to support either religious or anti-religious fundamentalism still want to be part of a cause, a community, or even an experience larger than just ourselves. We need inspiration,

and even though humanism as a philosophy is so inspiring once you really come to understand it, it has failed to connect with millions of people because so many humanist leaders have allowed themselves to believe that their role consists primarily of talking or writing about why this or that theological argument is wrong.

**The Humanist:** Beyond multiculturalism and inclusiveness, what else is new and inspiring about the “new humanism” concept?

**Epstein:** Lectures and debates are important, but we must also *sing* and we must *build*. I mean that metaphorically and literally. Metaphorically, when humanists gather, there ought to be emphasis on beauty and not just fact. The *experience* of humanism should sing, whether we’re silently meditating or listening to each other’s worries, concerns, and expressions of joy. You know, my first “job” out of college was as a singer in a rock band. Now there’s a religion for you. All the secular kids whom we whine aren’t joining the American Humanist Association? They aren’t studying Sharia law or the Book of Revelations. They’re at concerts—rock, folk, hip-hop. Good music speaks to us. It lifts us up. Humanists need to find a way to sing together literally as

well. I’m looking forward to doing so with the brilliant Dar Williams and a number of other musicians at Harvard in April.

And by building, I mean we need to build each other up—maybe by visiting each other in the hospital as a humanist community, or taking hikes and walks together while cleaning up parks and communities, or working as a group to protect the environment. We also need to build actual structures. How many U.S. humanist groups and communities have their own buildings? Can you imagine a U.S. Supreme Court session in some rented elementary school classroom, with justices sitting around on those little orange plastic chairs? Our groups never really have a chance to build up the political, charitable, educational, or social work we do because we don’t have our own spaces. At Harvard, whether it takes one year or ten, we plan to change that, so that the next time our chaplaincy holds an important anniversary celebration it will take place in a beautiful new humanist building.

**The Humanist:** New buildings, new voices, new humanism.

**Epstein:** You got it! ☺

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