

A Church for Atheists?

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“The last thing atheists want to see is their rational set of ideas yoked up with the trappings of a religion,” says Daniel Dennett of Tufts University. “We think we can do without that.”

Oddly enough, Dennett was responding to the proposal that atheists should form something like their own church — a church of unbelief. It seems that at least some atheists miss what Dennett calls “the trappings of religion.” They want a church for nonbelievers.

Writing in the April 21, 2008 edition of *New York* magazine, Sean McManus tells of a resurgent atheism. Encouraged by the literary success and media profile of the so-called “four horsemen” of the New Atheism (Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris), the atheists want to institutionalize their worldview.

McManus takes his readers back to the 1877 founding of the [Society for Ethical Culture](#) in New York City — an organization that in 1910 built a “secular cathedral” on Central Park. As McManus explains, the organization’s patrons did not believe in God, but they were worried “that society might fall apart if it didn’t have a church.”

McManus describes the group’s “secular cathedral:”

Founded by Felix Adler, the son of a rabbi, to drive social-justice initiatives and promote good without God, Ethical Culture walks like a church and talks like a church—congregants sit in pews, rise to sing hymns, and pass around a collection plate. But at one of their Sunday-morning meetings in January, their Senior Leader, in a very unchurchlike fashion, cited agnosticism as the only intellectually defensible religious position. More to the point, Epstein is eyeing the group’s building as a prototype for the church of New Humanism. Modeled on a Greco-Roman coliseum, Ethical Culture has semi-circular pews to promote conversation and a low stage designed to minimize the distance between leader and congregation.

Now, with the numbers of unbelievers rising in surveys, some atheists believe it is about time to mainstream atheism — and that just might require looking more like a church, while others want nothing at all to do with anything that looks like a church . . . even one without God.

As McManus explains:

So some atheists are taking seriously the idea that atheism needs to stand for things, like evolution and ethics, not just against things, like God. The most successful movements in history, after all—Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc.—all have creeds, cathedrals, schools, hierarchies, rituals, money, clerics, and some version of a heavenly afterlife. Churches fill needs, goes the argument—they inculcate ethics, give meaning, build communities. “Science and reason are important,” says Greg Epstein, the humanist chaplain of Harvard University. “But science and reason won’t visit you in the hospital.”

Many atheist sects are experimenting with building new, human-centered quasi-religious organizations, much like Ethical Culture. They aim to remove God from the church, while leaving the church, at least large parts of it, standing. But this impulse is fueling a growing schism among atheists. Many of them see churches as part of the problem. They want to throw out the baby and the bathwater—or at least they don’t see the need for the bathwater once the baby is gone.

Well it is certainly true that science and reason do not make hospital visits, but it is difficult to see how a church of unbelievers would offer much comfort. McManus' article begins with Richard Dawkins poking fun at the idea that belief in God offers solace. "Isn't that a little childish?" he asked. Atheism just doesn't have much to offer when it comes to spiritual assurance. How could it?

Even as some atheists want a church, and others have called for atheist Sunday Schools for children, other atheists see this as heresy and an abandonment of the true unfaith. As Ellen Johnson, president of American Atheists, stated: "Our members have left religion and don't want any part of that."

The New Atheists apparently agree. As Richard Dawkins says, "In the larger war against supernaturalism, frankly, it doesn't help to fraternize with the enemy."

Or, as Daniel Dennett more calmly retorted, "We think we can do without that." He probably can "do without that." After all, no one is fooled by a secular cathedral.

Photo: New York Society for Ethical Culture auditorium, looking from the stage.

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