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The Awkward Irony of the Atheist Sunday School

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Incongruous as it sounds, atheists are now organizing Sunday Schools. *TIME* magazine reports that many non-believing parents are concerned that their children are not adequately grounded in secular thought and feel left out of experiences like Sunday School that are common among their friends.

Reporter Jeninne Lee-St. John understands that the idea seems a bit strange. “On Sunday mornings, most parents who don’t believe in the Christian God, or any god at all, are probably making brunch or cheering at their kids’ soccer game, or running errands or, with luck, sleeping in. Without religion, there’s no need for church, right?”

Well, not exactly. Lee-St. John explains this new development:

But some nonbelievers are beginning to think they might need something for their children. “When you have kids,” says Julie Willey, a design engineer, “you start to notice that your co-workers or friends have church groups to help teach their kids values and to be able to lean on.” So every week, Willey, who was raised Buddhist and says she has never believed in God, and her husband pack their four kids into their blue minivan and head to the Humanist Community Center in Palo Alto, Calif., for atheist Sunday school.

Packing the kids in the minivan for atheist Sunday School is likely to sound more than a little strange to those accustomed to more traditional Sunday Schools (that teach children about God) but it is fascinating that atheists are concerned that their children need secular instruction.

It seems that many atheist parents are concerned that their children should learn at an early age how to deal with the challenge of living among Christian believers. Furthermore, these parents want to ensure that their children and teenagers learn their own secular values.

The report explains that the growing number of atheists and non-believers in the nation are becoming more concerned about their children, and are establishing both Sunday Schools and atheist youth camps in order to inculcate secular beliefs and morality within the next generation.

The magazine offers a very interesting description of what goes on at a model atheist Sunday School:

The Palo Alto Sunday family program uses music, art and discussion to encourage personal expression, intellectual curiosity and collaboration. One Sunday this fall found a dozen children up to age 6 and several parents playing percussion instruments and singing empowering anthems like I’m Unique and Unrepeatable, set to the tune of Ten Little Indians, instead of traditional Sunday-school songs like Jesus Loves Me. Rather than listen to a Bible story, the class read Stone Soup, a secular parable of a traveler who feeds a village by making a stew using one ingredient from each home.

Down the hall in the kitchen, older kids engaged in a Socratic conversation with class leader Bishop about the role persuasion plays in decision-making. He tried to get them to see that people who are coerced into renouncing their beliefs might not actually change their minds but could be acting out of self-preservation—an important lesson for young atheists who may feel pressure to say they believe in God.

My guess is that these atheist Sunday Schools will not be as successful as these parents hope. “I’m Unique and Unrepeatable” just can’t really compete with “Jesus Loves Me.” Children have not yet developed cynicism and, in general, are quite eager to believe in God. Children taught from the Bible in Sunday School learn that they were made by a loving God who cares for them — and then move on to learn much more about what the Bible teaches. No “secular parable” can compete with that.

In a strange way, the rise of atheist Sunday Schools illustrates the central dilemma of atheism itself. Try as they may, atheists cannot avoid talking about God — even if only to insist that they do not believe in Him. Now, atheist parents are organizing Sunday Schools as a parallel to the Christian practice. In effect, atheists are organizing themselves in a way similar to a local church. At least some of them must sense the awkward irony in that.

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