

The Variety of Irreligious Experience: Boston as a Case Study

by Maria Greene

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Where do you go if you have moved beyond your religious beliefs, if you ever had any to begin with, but you still crave community? Not just drinks in a bar with friends kind of community, or a book club kind of community, or a political organizing kind of community. What if you want a loving, wildly supportive, all ages, let’s-find-purpose-and-meaning-together kind of community? A make-the-world-a-better-place kind of community? To most people, that sounds like a church or a temple.

Nonreligious “communities beyond belief” are popping up and catching on throughout the world, and the area where I live is particularly thick with them. There are now so many options just within driving distance of my home outside of Boston that I could (and sometimes do) go to two or three of their events on a single day. In this essay, I’d like to introduce you to them as a way of acquainting you with the national organizations they are part of and to the idea and promise of communities beyond belief in general. We’re going to proceed on our tour from oldest to newest and then conclude with some thoughts about the future.

First Parish XYZ, Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations

The oldest tradition of nontheist community in the Boston area is Unitarian Universalism (UU). As the headquarters of the Unitarian Universalist Association,¹ it is not overly surprising that there are seventy-three UU congregations within twenty-five miles of Boston,² forty-seven of which have “First Parish” or another “First” in their name. This generally indicates they were established back in the day when you had to build a meetinghouse and call a minister in order to be chartered as a town in New England. These congregations may be the descendants of those state-supported, Puritan churches, often started in the early 1700s, but they’ve come a long way theologically since then.

As a movement, Unitarian Universalism is officially creedless and welcomes people of all beliefs (or none), but it also maintains congregational autonomy. This means you will find as many different styles on the nontheist-to-theist spectrum as you find congregations. What’s interesting about the Boston area is the relative scarcity of

explicitly or primarily humanist UU communities. In spite of the progressive nature of New England culture in general, the UU congregations in the Boston area are more likely than those of other parts of the country to be “churches” (as opposed to fellowships or societies for instance) and to have a distinct Protestant Christian feel, if not an explicitly Christian identity. This area has the largest number of congregations (twelve) that are dual-affiliated with the United Church of Christ, a liberal Christian denomination. Essentially, the congregational autonomy that led to the various heresies that eventually moved Unitarianism and Universalism beyond Christianity is counteracted by the pull of history for many of these congregations.

UU congregations around Boston, like everywhere, are particularly strong places for families, with generally excellent children’s education programs, youth groups, and inter-generational volunteer opportunities. Music is also strong at most congregations, with many supporting coffeehouse series of performances, regular classical concerts, as well as opportunities for singing in choirs and performing in different kinds of instrumental groups. Many New England UU congregations also continue the Lyceum tradition, sometimes called Forums, where they sponsor speakers on a wide range of topics that are generally open to the public and are religiously neutral. While being welcome to families, the average age of UU members is in the sixties, there are more women than men, and the membership is primarily white. A notable feature of UU congregations is the strong welcoming of LGBTQ people.

In summary, it is not difficult to find humanist community in Boston-area UU congregations because a significant percentage of the members individually identify as nontheist or at least agnostic, and because there is explicit welcome at the Association level for the nontheist worldview. Most Boston-area UU ministers and congregational leaders, often at least agnostic themselves, are sensitive to that and tailor their services and their programs accordingly. (This is with exceptions, such as the dual-affiliated churches, of course, but it is easy to identify them from their websites.) Only three congregations in the Boston area have humanist groups (Arlington, Concord, and Worcester), but it is easy to feel like you are in community with like-minded people, partly because of the emphasis on shared humanistic values such as the inherent worth and dignity of all people. With a little shopping around, made easier by the density of congregations, it is usually possible for a humanist to find a community in which they feel comfortable, or comfortable enough to benefit from the other benefits the community brings, especially for their children.

Boston Ethical Community, American Ethical Union

Boston Ethical was founded in 1955 as the Ethical Society of Boston. The members recently voted to change their name to Boston Ethical Community (BEC) to project a more modern image and to reflect their aspirational emphasis on supportive community.

The Boston Ethical welcome statement³ says,

Our aim is to build a supportive community of people who share a vision of society based on our core values: honesty, justice, compassion, responsibility, and courage. This community promotes these values by engaging in important social issues, seeking to both understand them and take action on them. We are committed to working toward a more ethical society and a world that lives by humanist values.

Like the UU congregations, Boston Ethical considers itself a religious fellowship, but unlike most of the UU congregations, uses exclusively secular language. Although they welcome individuals with theistic beliefs, as a group they always operate from a naturalistic point of view. Similar to but even more so than the UU congregations, as the welcome statement indicates, the emphasis at Boston Ethical is on ethical values in action: “deed not creed.” They share this emphasis with the other twenty-one Ethical Societies nationwide that make up the American Ethical Union (AEU),⁴ which was founded in 1889.

Boston Ethical has met at various venues over the years, mostly in Cambridge, since they do not have a building of their own. They also do not currently have a professional Leader (as the AEU calls their clergy), but have weekly platform addresses from visiting lecturers. As the community’s membership has gotten older they have discontinued their children’s education program, but they still have many adult education programs besides the Sunday platforms, such as book and movie groups, as well as regular opportunities to gather socially. Music at the gatherings is generally classical, and the mood is comfortably intellectual. They are fairly balanced by gender, but race, class, and age diversity is low.

Though there are larger and growing Societies, for instance in New York, St. Louis, and Washington D.C., the aging of the membership and the retraction in Boston is mirrored in several of the other Societies nationwide. So too is the intention to modernize and to take steps to make the movement more relevant and vital. Boston Ethical Community and the Ethical Culture movement it is part of have a proud history that is not over yet. Boston Ethical is currently a great place for middle-aged and older adults who are particularly concerned with social justice. For families who are willing to pitch in and cooperatively create family-friendly opportunities, there is support and programs from the parent organization that could make it a great place to do so.

Kahal B'raira, Society for Humanistic Judaism

Kahal B’raira (KB) is a “Congregation for Humanistic Judaism” that was founded in 1976 and that currently meets at the Fayerweather Street School in Cambridge, MA. As their home page states,⁵ “Humanistic Judaism offers an alternative approach to Judaism, including non-theistic celebrations of Jewish holidays and life-cycle events and a love of Jewish heritage.”

KB has a Sunday School for grades Pre-K through 7th grade, a Youth Group, and various adult education programs. The Bar-Bat Mitzvah program is popular; even some adults and people who are not Jewish participate. An important part of the community

is their holiday celebrations including Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and all the major Jewish holidays that they celebrate “with secular humanist values.”

KB also puts their secular humanist values into action by supporting community members experiencing crises via the Caring Committee, through a Social Action Committee, and through social action efforts woven into the Sunday school and other programs.

KB does not have a resident humanistic rabbi, so their Sunday programs are led by members of the congregation. The Sunday programs and holiday celebrations include music from their small band of musicians and singing from many traditions including traditional Jewish sacred music “when appropriate.” Twice a year they host a rabbi from the Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ)⁶ for an entire weekend of lectures, services, and other events.

SHJ was formed in 1969 and is currently the parent organization of twenty-eight communities in the US and Canada. “The Society for Humanistic Judaism mobilizes people to celebrate Jewish identity and culture consistent with a humanistic philosophy of life independent of a supernatural authority. As the central body for the Humanistic Jewish Movement in North America, the Society assists in organizing and supporting congregations and in providing a worldwide voice for its members.”⁷ SHJ is affiliated with the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism (IISHJ), which provides professional training for leaders and educators and trains and ordains humanistic Jewish rabbis.

For Boston-area individuals and families that are culturally but not religiously Jewish, who are in interfaith relationships, or who have an interest in Judaism, Kahal B’raira is a welcoming and thriving community to join.

Humanist Community at Harvard, The Humanist Hub

The Humanist Community at Harvard (HCH)⁸ evolved from the Humanist Chaplaincy at Harvard, founded in 1974. The Chaplaincy primarily served the needs of Harvard students, faculty, and staff, but now, as HCH, it has broadened the community to humanists, atheists, and agnostics from all over the greater Boston area. The community meets at 1:30 every Sunday at the Humanist Hub in Harvard Square, which opened at the end of 2013 to be “a center for humanist life.” Greg Epstein is the Hub and HCH’s Executive Director, as well as Harvard University’s Humanist Chaplain. Epstein came to Harvard in 2005 after being ordained by the IISHJ as a Humanistic Jewish Rabbi, and also earned his master of theological studies degree from Harvard Divinity School. Greg is the author of the 2009 book *Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe*.

As the website describes it, “The Humanist Hub is a place where you can **connect** with other people, **act** to make the world better, and **evolve** as a human being.” Programs include the Sunday Speaker Series, a Discussion Group, a Mindfulness Meditation group, Family Social group, and more. The Humanist Learning Lab is the Sunday school program for children through age 11. The Values in Action program helps provide social action volunteer opportunities to all in the community, including family-

friendly activities, and often collaborates with other faith communities. There is something going on at the Hub almost every night of the week, and special classes and new programs are introduced regularly.

Epstein is an innovator, and HCH and the Hub is a place for experimenting with new models of secular community. It is also an incubator where assistant chaplains are trained and then sent off to found chaplaincies at other universities, so far including Stanford, Yale and Tufts. Epstein and former staffer James Croft (now an Ethical Culture Leader working as the Ethical Society of St. Louis' Outreach Leader) are in the process of writing a book for Simon and Schuster to be called *Godless Congregations*.

Events at the Humanist Hub are professional, and Epstein's leadership and standing as a spokesperson for humanist community mean that the speakers for Sundays and special events are the best and the brightest – not just in the humanist movement but in social justice movements and even pop culture. The house band, led by Tom Anderson, is talented and plays good rock and even some original music composed in collaboration between Anderson and Epstein. (There is no group singing except occasionally at holiday events.) The crowd that comes to events is diverse in age but mostly in their late 20s and 30s. There is a good mix of men and women, but the crowd is mostly white (which is common for all of the communities profiled here).

HCH and the Hub are not part of a larger organization, unless you consider the college humanist chaplaincies a movement, but Epstein has dabbled with developing a nationwide network in the past and it is likely that he will pursue that in the future. The publication of the *Good Without God* book was followed up with a well-attended conference on "The New Humanism." We can hope that another conference will follow the publication of *Godless Congregations*, on the topic of humanist community.

Sunday Assembly Boston, Sunday Assembly Everywhere

The first Sunday Assembly Boston (SAB)⁹ event was held in November of 2013, followed by a few months of planning before regular monthly Assemblies got underway in April, 2014. The volunteer leadership team not only organizes the monthly assemblies, which have been held at various Boston colleges and lately at the Democracy Center near Harvard Square, but also organizes frequent trivia nights, game nights (which are co-sponsored by the Humanist Hub, Boston Atheists, and Greater Boston Oasis), brunches, and other social events. SAB also occasionally organizes volunteering events like park cleanups.

SAB assemblies follow the parent organization's model of lots of sing-alongs to "cheesy pop songs," either karaoke style or with a live band, with readings, a short "Doing Their Best" talk by an Assembly member, and a slightly longer talk by a guest speaker in between the songs. All of this is followed by "tea and cake." The speakers' topics tend to be on more personal, inspirational themes and are generally not as academic or social justice-oriented as the previously described communities.' There is always a lot of laughter at SAB events.

The regulars at SAB are mostly young professionals with a smattering of college age people and older people. There is not much family programming, though this is getting

to be more common at Sunday Assemblies in other cities. The balance between men and women is good, though it is just as predominately white as the other communities we've discussed.

The Sunday Assembly (SA)¹⁰ parent organization was started in London, UK in January, 2013 by two London comedians, Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans, and quickly developed a worldwide franchise model. Now there are thirty established SAs in the US and another thirty-six in other countries. The Sunday Assembly motto is, "Live better. Help often. Wonder more." It is fun, informal, and, "100% celebration of life." Though the organization aims for high production values and is excellent at branding and messaging, there is a strong push-back against developing any type of "clergy," even to the extent of requiring the role of emcee to be rotated frequently. As assemblies begin to become larger and better established, it will be interesting to see whether they start to acquire professional staff and what kind of common resources the parent organization develops.

Greater Boston Oasis, The Oasis Network

The newest irreligious community group that is getting started in the Boston area is Greater Boston Oasis.¹¹ This group is still in start-up mode, having just completed its partially successful crowdfunding campaign, and hasn't yet begun having weekly meetings, nor decided where its home base will be. The executive director of the group is J. Michael Spencer. Spence, as he is called, is a young professional who studied theater arts in college and works as a quantitative analyst.

Spence was motivated to start Greater Boston Oasis after learning about the other two Oasis communities in Houston and Kansas City. The Houston Oasis was founded in 2012 by Mike Aus, a former Lutheran pastor, who lost his religious faith but not his desire to lead an ethical community. The Kansas City Oasis was started by Helen Stringer, a professional organizer and life coach, who has degrees in pastoral studies and human services, with a graduate certificate in professional counseling. Stringer started the Kansas City Oasis after being inspired by news reports about Houston Oasis, and was especially motivated to find community because of the two young children in her family. Stringer and Aus co-founded the Oasis Network¹² to support others who want to start their own Oases.

There are a few differences between the Oasis and Sunday Assembly models. The Oasis founders feel it is important to meet weekly in order to foster a true sense of community among the members. The music they favor is a variety of local bands and musicians with little to no sing-along and, unlike SA, they don't ask people to stand. The talks tend to be more in depth and less of a production than SA. Though they usually feature outside speakers, Oasis encourages strong local executive director leadership, first as volunteers, but ideally as paid staff once the community can support them. In feel, at least from the impression of their YouTube videos, the Oasis gatherings are more like the Humanist Hub gatherings than SA. Children's education and childcare also seem to be more of a priority with Oasis.

As we have seen, there are many options for humanist community in the Boston area, perhaps too many for them all to thrive given the limited size of the nonreligious population. In this survey, I have focused on the “congregation-style” communities and not even mentioned the many other atheist and secular groups that you can find if you visit the Boston Coalition of Reason website. What these six groups, the UU congregations, Boston Ethical Community, Kahal B’raira, the Humanist Community at Harvard, Sunday Assembly Boston, and Greater Boston Oasis, have in common is “radical inclusion” and the shared value that “people are more important than beliefs” (as the Oasis Network puts it). They are not anti-religious, just irreligious (with the exception of some of the UU communities), with the shared goal of taking the best of what religious communities offer and making it available to the nonreligious. I expect many cities in the US will soon be home to many options, including some new ones, though it’s unlikely others will join Boston’s “one of each” status. The variety is a sign of healthy demand and of a true need for more and richer communities beyond belief.

Notes

1. Unitarian Universalist Association, <http://uua.org>
2. UUA Find a Congregation, congregations within 25 miles of Boston:
http://www.uua.org/directory/congregations/results?location=boston%2C+ma&location_radius=25&op=+Go%21+&form_build_id=form-erExH4k48vUGpE0Cmj7WcqYSF_s5Op4-baINMFtTAHk&form_id=uua_org_congregations_find_cong
3. Boston Ethical Community: <http://bostonethical.org>
4. American Ethical Union: <http://aeu.org>
5. Kahal B’raira: <http://www.kahalbraira.org/>
6. Society for Humanistic Judaism: <http://www.shj.org/>
7. Ibid. “About Us: Mission Statement.”
8. Humanist Community at Harvard / Humanist Hub: <http://harvardhumanist.org>
9. Sunday Assembly Boston: <http://boston.sundayassembly.com/>
10. Sunday Assembly: <http://sundayassembly.com>
11. Greater Boston Oasis: <http://www.bostonoasis.org/>
12. Oasis Network: <http://www.usoasis.org/>