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October 17, 2017: A Communal Spiritual Wasteland

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Title: A Communal Spiritual Wasteland

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10/17/2017—I am in danger of making Gregg Epstein my bete noire instead of the late Justice Scalia. Epstein is the author of *Good Without God*. I should not have negative thoughts about him because in a way, we are involved in same project—attempting to bring to birth a vibrant and flourishing non-religious civilization. Since a non-religious civilization is coming one way or the other, this is a crucial project. But Epstein symbolizes for me the mistakes one makes in going about this effort. *Good Without God*, as if the major difficulty in doing without God is to keep from killing each other. A far more relevant title would be *Trying to Understand Good Without God*, because that is the issue. What does it mean to be a good person? Mostly, Epstein just gives us conventionality—but that bakes basic theistic premises in without acknowledging them. The Peanuts comic strip on Sunday, 10/8/2017, presumably from sometime in the 1960's or 1970's, illustrates my point. The setting is the familiar fall scene of Lucy grabbing the football at the last second when Charlie Brown tries to kick it. At the beginning, Charlie Brown cries out, "How Long, O Lord?" Lucy responds that this quote is from the Sixth Chapter of Isaiah and she proceeds to quote the rest of the line. Then, Lucy gives a theological critique of the section, noting the "note of protest" from the prophet who "was unwilling to accept the finality of the Lord's judgment." OK, not every Peanuts episode was like this, but quite a number were. Remember, Peanuts was popular culture. Charles Schulz assumed that he was speaking to regular people. Not scholars. But that meant that the Bible at that time was a kind of common spiritual inheritance in the culture. This means a kind of common spiritual vocabulary. How can a society be anything but a wasteland without such a common vocabulary? There is more to living a satisfying life than just not committing murder. Without a way of talking about spiritual life, how can anything beautiful happen in the culture? Large emotional movements will still occur—witness the populist explosion in the 2016 election--but they will be without reflection. Who can now speak deeply to a united America as a Martin Luther King Jr. could—even those who disliked him understood him. This is no lament for the common Bible. But Gregg Epstein has not yet seen the problem. Maybe we need to educate each other in all the great spiritual traditions of humanity to create a new and even broader vocabulary of spiritual life. Have you seen any progress on that front?