

The Evangelical Scion Who Stopped Believing

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/29/magazine/the-evangelical-scion-who-stopped-believing.html>

The son of a famous pastor, Bart Campolo is now a rising star of atheism — using the skills he learned in the world he left behind.

By Mark Oppenheimer 12/29/16

One morning in the summer of 2011 Bart Campolo left his house in Cincinnati for a long bicycle ride. Goateed and bald, but still trim and fit at 48, Campolo was the envy of his generation of evangelical pastors. That morning, Campolo was, as usual, a little self-conscious about his attire. “I feel ridiculous in my spandex,” he says. Years of pickup basketball had wrecked his ankles, leaving regular bicycle treks as his only form of exercise. But he was excited to do 30 or 40 miles through the rolling southern Ohio hills.

Normally his bike rides were his time to think — about his family, his ministry and his increasingly complex relationship with his Christian faith. But he has no memory of his thoughts that day. He left the house, and the next thing he remembers is waking up in the hospital. “And I don’t remember anything else,” he says.

He was later able to piece together bits of what happened. There were skid marks on the hill where he was found, and these suggested he had crossed a lane of traffic. The speedometer he was wearing recorded his velocity at that moment: 40 miles per hour. His helmet was cracked in four spots, and his bicycle had been left, undamaged, on the side of the road. It seems he hit a patch of soft dirt and flew headfirst into a tree. A fellow cyclist found him wandering in the middle of the road. When he got to the University of Cincinnati Medical Center, a doctor asked him who was president. He said George Bush — meaning the father, not the son.

For most of his life, Campolo had gone from success to success. His father, Tony, was one of the most important evangelical Christian preachers of the last 50 years, a prolific author and an erstwhile spiritual adviser to Bill Clinton. The younger Campolo had developed a reputation of his own, running successful inner-city missions in Philadelphia and Ohio and traveling widely as a guest preacher. An extreme extrovert, he was brilliant before a crowd and also at ease in private conversations, connecting with everyone from country-club suburbanites to the destitute souls he often fed in his own house. He was a role model for younger Christians looking to move beyond the culture wars over abortion or homosexuality and get back to Jesus’ original teachings. Now, lying in a hospital bed, he wasn’t sure what he believed any more.

For weeks, he cried constantly. He had lost whole patches of memory. When he finally healed, after about a month, he had a thought about life — or, rather, the afterlife. The thought was: There is no afterlife. “After the bike crash,” Campolo says, “I was like, ‘A, this is it, and B, you don’t know how much of it you’ve got.’ ”

Though Marty, his wife, had long entertained doubts about Christianity, Campolo had always done his job and, in his words, “brought her back.” But the truth was, he had been breaking up with God for a long time. “When I took off on the bicycle that day,” Campolo says, “the supernaturalism in my faith was dialed so far down you could barely notice it.” It had been years since he made God or Jesus or the resurrection the centerpiece of the frequent fellowship dinners he and Marty hosted. Talk instead was always about love and friendship. In 2004, he performed a wedding for two close lesbian friends, and in 2006, he began teaching that everybody could be saved, that nobody would go to hell. To evangelicals, he already sounded more like a Unitarian Universalist than like any of them.

Now, after his near-death experience, his wife told him — more bluntly than she ever had — what she thought was going on. “You know,” Marty said, “I think you ought to stop being a professional Christian, since you don’t believe in God, and you don’t believe in heaven, and you don’t believe Jesus rose from the dead three

days after dying — and neither do I.” He knew that she was right, and he began telling friends that he was a “post-Christian.” They treated him like an obviously gay man coming out of the closet. “People were like, ‘Yeah, we’ve known this a long time,’ ” he says. “ ‘Why did it take you so long to figure it out?’ ”

For Campolo, admitting that he had totally lost his faith was oddly comforting — he could stop living a lie — but also confusing. He loved talking to people, caring for them, helping them. He loved everything about Christian ministry except the Christianity. Now that he had crossed the bridge to apostasy, he needed a new vocation.

But as he took stock of the rest of his life, Campolo decided that there was no reason an atheist couldn’t still be a minister too. Instead of comforting people with the good news of Jesus, he’d preach secular humanism, a kinder cousin of atheism. He’d help them accept that we’re all going to die, that this life is all there is and that therefore we have to make the most of our brief, glorious time on earth. And he would spread this message using the best evangelical techniques — the same ones he had mastered as a Christian.

Atheists and agnostics have long tried to rebottle religion: to get the community and the good works without the supernatural stuff. It has worked about as well as nonalcoholic beer. As with O’Doul’s, converts are few, and rarely do they end up having a very good time. In post-Revolution France, with its Enlightenment antipathy toward the church, the philosopher Auguste Comte created the Religion of Humanity, which had three pillars (altruism, order and progress), nine sacraments (including marriage, retirement and “separation,” a sort of secular Last Rites) and a priesthood. Comte had admirers, including George Eliot, but almost no practitioners. In 1876, nearly 20 years after Comte’s death, Felix Adler founded the New York Society of Ethical Culture, which taught Judaism as one of the many guides to secular ethics. Today there are 22 Ethical Culture societies in the United States, ten of them in or around New York City.

In the United States, since World War II, atheist activism has been located mainly in local skeptics’ clubs, whose members also gravitated toward science fiction and other walks of geek life. The clubs developed a culture of conferences: hotel-ballroom events with lots of men attending mostly-male panels, followed by book signings.

Over the last 30 years or so, these conferences have grown in tandem with the rise of the Christian right and megachurch evangelicalism, as atheists sought comfort in a parallel world. Best-selling authors like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens drew huge crowds at these “cons.” In their books, lectures and television appearances, these atheists preach an uncompromising scientism, exalt Darwin and barely conceal a sentiment that believers deserve mockery or, if one is feeling generous, pity.

To this day, atheist gatherings remain overwhelmingly male, and public perception of the movement has been tainted by a steady drip of misogynistic episodes: harassment of female attendees at the conventions; online trolling of those who have spoken out against the sexism; and the notorious tweets of Dawkins, the British biologist whose 2006 book, “The God Delusion,” has become the bible of many young atheists. (One example, [from 2014](#): “Date rape is bad. Stranger rape at knife point is worse. If you think that’s an endorsement of date rape, go away and learn how to think.”)

But quite recently, as young people have drifted from religious observance — according to a 2015 Pew survey, 36 percent of those born between 1990 and 1996 are religiously unaffiliated — both the Christian right and what we might call “big atheism” have lost influence. The energy now is not with the controversial author-celebrities but with start-up groups, many on college campuses, that have more gender balance and less strident rhetoric and are eager to do better than thumb their noses at believers. Crucially, these nonbelievers identify as humanist rather than atheist. That is, they’ve sided with a more welcoming version of nonbelief, focused on the joy and potential inherent in being human rather than on gainsaying others’ convictions. Their project is to talk about leading a good life without God.

This was the world that the Campolos began to explore after Bart's accident. They visited meetings, in Chicago and Los Angeles, of a group called Sunday Assembly, which was founded in London by two comedians and now has roughly 70 branches. Despite the name, Sunday Assembly gathers monthly in informal meetings centered on lectures and singalongs of popular songs. Campolo was impressed by the message, but the meetings themselves left him cold. The singalongs didn't really work, because radio hits aren't written to be sung by groups. "And they meet once a month — once a month, if you're trying to build a community!"

Campolo eventually came across a book called "Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Believe," by Greg M. Epstein, the head of one of the most influential humanist groups in the country, Humanist Hub. The group began at Harvard and now has anywhere from 300 to 350 people at its weekly meetings, only a third of them students. Epstein, 39, its leader since 2005, has become a godfather to the movement, the anti-Dawkins. He doesn't want to lecture people or talk them out of anything; he sits with them in circles, sips water from coffee mugs and listens. There are about a dozen humanist chaplaincies in the country, and of those, the chaplains at Yale, Stanford and Tufts all trained with Epstein. In July 2014 Campolo flew to Boston to talk with Epstein for three days about the future of humanism.

"I was sitting with Bart going over all of this, thinking about what the future needed to look like," Epstein told me. "I told him if I wasn't at Harvard, L.A. would be where I wanted to be."

Campolo liked the idea of being on a campus. He was, in a sense, not unlike a college student himself: away from the only home he ever knew, ripped from his comforting traditions, trying to figure out who he was, now that he could be anything. He could relate to students. And while church attendance is collapsing among young people — only 27 percent of millennials attend religious services weekly — campuses have relatively vibrant religious scenes. Chaplains' offices have resources and geographically circumscribed target audiences. Many religious-outreach groups, from evangelical Christians to the Chabad sect of Judaism, plant houses near campuses to minister to students, a potentially receptive audience. They may want to try on Christianity, or Buddhism, or whatever — even Wiccans at the United States Air Force Academy have an area set aside for worship.

Epstein told Campolo about Varun Soni, the dean of religious life at U.S.C., and in 2014 Campolo began talking with Soni on the phone. After a few conversations, Campolo had been offered an office, an email account and a title: humanist chaplain at the University of Southern California. No salary, but it was a start.

Campolo has fallen out of touch with many of his old evangelical comrades. You'd think the apostasy of such a major figure would be big news to other Christians, but whether from horror or out of sympathy for Campolo's father, evangelicals seem to have barely noticed. In one of the few articles about Campolo's change of heart, the Tennessee pastor Ed Stetzer, who now teaches at Wheaton College in Illinois, seemed to insinuate that Campolo's parents may have been to blame, at least a little. "As parents, we need to work to ensure our children have a relationship with Jesus, not just a desire to be part of a loving community doing good," Stetzer wrote, rather cattily, [in Christianity Today](#).

Bart's father, Tony Campolo, never forced his son to become a believer. That reticence was fitting for the gentler sort of evangelical he was. Tony didn't have a TV network like Pat Robertson or a university like Jerry Falwell; he achieved his renown as an itinerant preacher and a founder of the "red-letter Christians" movement, an effort to refocus evangelicals away from politics and back to the teachings (about poverty, love, charity) of Jesus, whose words are printed in red in many Bibles.

The younger Campolo found his way to religion in high school, when he fell in with some guys who were active in a Christian youth group. For a while, he was always with them but wasn't yet one of them. Then one day, a member of the group took Bart out to breakfast at a McDonald's in Wayne, Pa. "He said, 'You've been hanging around us a long time, Bart,'" Campolo recalls. "And he said: 'I don't think you've ever really

accepted Jesus as your personal lord and savior. So what about it?’ ” Sitting in a booth, Campolo bowed his head and recited a prayer accepting Jesus into his heart.

His faith had already begun to falter by the next summer, while he was working at a camp for poor children in Camden, N.J. Some of his campers had been sexually abused, yet his religion told him that a benevolent God controlled every last thing that happens on earth. He had a hard time squaring these two thoughts. Later, as a freshman at Haverford College, he had two gay roommates. At the time, even liberal evangelicals like his dad treated homosexual behavior as a sin, but Campolo couldn't bring himself to think ill of his roommates. He instead adjusted his theology to make room for them. Campolo finished college at Brown and eventually moved to West Philadelphia, where he started a ministry.

At first, even as he began doing Christian field work, Campolo resisted his father's vocation of big-time preaching. But when he had to raise money for his mission program, the best way he knew was to hit the Christian conference circuit. After all, as a boy, he'd watched his dad. He knew how it was done. And he did it nearly as well, with his own distinct style. Where Tony had a grounded, authoritative stillness in the pulpit, Bart was a more hyperactive speaker, caffeinated by Christ. He was funny, alive, hard to ignore. He connected, and soon he was touring the country preaching the Gospel. Campolo ran his mission, raised money on the road and, after his father had a stroke in 2002, spent one day a week helping him run his ministry.

The abstract, bureaucratic nature of the work wore him down, and in 2005 the family decided together to move to Cincinnati, where some friends had already settled. Campolo, his wife and his two children moved into a ramshackle house with no real appliances, just a space heater and a hot plate. By day, Campolo was still traveling and working for his father remotely. In the evenings, he and Marty began hosting dinners for people they met in the neighborhood. Their informal fellowship soon included junkies, ex-cons, welfare moms and other neighborhood folk. These new friends helped him realize that the work of a minister is often not to save people, as so many evangelicals try to do, or even to change them, but just to love them unconditionally. He remembers one guy in particular, a toothless addict who had been in and out of jail his whole life. “You're not going to fix him,” Campolo says. But by giving the man a community, Campolo told me, you can give his life some meaning. And maybe that's enough.

At U.S.C., Campolo's Secular Student Fellowship now comprises between 75 and 100 students, although not all come to every meeting. Last year I attended one of their dinners, in a nondescript meeting room in the chaplain's building: folding tables, metal chairs, industrial carpet, the whole institutional works. Roughly 25 students were there, most of them pleasantly nerdy and inquisitive. Several told me they were lapsed Christians who were afraid to come out to their parents. After they had all filled their plates with the chili that Campolo and his wife cooked, Campolo began to talk. He did his best to stay seated on his stackable metal chair, but when he made a particularly emphatic point, he bounced to his feet, like the preacher he used to be.

The topic was friendship, and Campolo's text was “The Friendship Factor,” Alan Loy McGinnis's 1979 megaselling self-help book. There was a reason he turned to it. When Campolo arrived on the U.S.C. campus, in the fall of 2014, he quickly discovered that the fundamental problem of many students was loneliness. He hypothesizes that their focus as high-school students on résumé-building and test-taking, so crucial to getting into college now, has left many of them socially adrift once they arrive. “Kids who show up at college on the other end of that rat race are very good at networking,” he says. “But they are not always very good at deeper connections.” The grown-ups in their lives are also primarily focused on achievement and rarely steer them toward the important questions.

Campolo told me that when students come to talk about a job they've been offered, he asks questions like: “What's the culture like at that place? The guy who interviewed you — would you want to end up like him, with the kind of marriage he has and the kind of friendships he has?” Campolo went on: “And they say, ‘Huh, I never thought about that.’ And you want to say: ‘Where are your parents? Or your pastor? What is your Uncle Joe doing? Why is nobody asking value-oriented questions about your life?’ ”

“The Friendship Factor” is “the hokiest book you will ever read,” Campolo told his flock. But, he said, it brings a hopeful message: that friendship, like eating well or getting fit, isn’t a matter of luck. Expecting fulfilling relationships to materialize magically was, he said, “its own form of supernatural woo-woo.” The book’s message was a distillation of his larger project: Happiness, connection and community, which many people attend church to find, can be achieved through human agency. It’s a modest claim but profoundly empowering, in a way that ancient stories may not be, especially when they come from traditions that few young people take literally.

Besides, while Campolo believes that life can be meaningful with or without a god, his work these days is less about grandiose metaphysical claims than about simple acts of hand-holding. To 100 or so students, Campolo is a confidant, a stand-in parent, but one who doesn’t expect anything of them. “Over the last two weeks,” Campolo says, “I got an email from a young woman saying, ‘A friend told me I should talk to you because I am a senior, graduating, and have no idea what to do with my life.’ Another student comes to me, ‘I got sexually assaulted and don’t know what to do now.’” Perhaps these young adults are looking for a humanist community, but surely many of them just need a grown-up who isn’t grading them, isn’t interviewing them and wants to listen. “I don’t know these kids well,” he says. “This is just what happens when you are available.”

His role became particularly clear to him after the presidential election. At U.S.C., many students were distraught. Some of them probably marched; others prayed. U.S.C. is huge, one of the five largest private schools in the country, and some of its most popular concentrations include finance, accounting, management and marketing — which is to say, the undergraduates, when faced with questions about what kind of world they want to build and what their role could be, might not think of their professors, if they even knew them, as having much guidance to offer. So Campolo suspected that some students would want to talk to him. He emailed his list, offering office hours at a picnic table on campus. Over the next week, about 15 students sought him out. “A lot of people went running to their pastors,” Campolo says. “And my kids did the same.”