

# Keeping the Baby: De Botton's Religion for Atheists

by Ian Kluge

Alain de Botton plans to throw out the bathwater – but keep the baby. The author of *Religion for Atheists: A Non-believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion* thinks humanity will be better off if we toss the metaphysical superstitions encumbering all religions but keep the many insights and practices that are still beneficial for human development. In his view, 'God' was just one answer to questions about value, meaning, community, identity and peace (to name just a few) that have always been and will always be with us.

They are part of the human condition. Thus, while:

God may be dead . . . the urgent issues which impelled us to invent him up still stir and demand resolutions which do not go away when we have been nudged to perceive some scientific inaccuracies in the take of the seven loaves and fishes.[1]

The supernaturalist answers are assuredly false, but the questions themselves are real – and won't go away despite our wrong answers in the past. In short: the bathwater goes – but the baby stays. In de Botton's view, atheism and especially the new atheism have missed this distinction and demanded that we abandon both God and existential issues to which God is one possible answer. He says, it is “not that secularism is wrong, but that we have too often secularized badly.”[2] This leads him to conclude that:

the error of modern atheism has been to overlook how many aspects of the faiths remain relevant even after their central tenets have been dismissed. Once we cease to feel that we must either prostrate ourselves before them or denigrate them, we are free to discover religions as repositories of a myriad ingenious concepts with which we can try to assuage a few of the most persistent and unattended ills of secular life.[3]

In short, he demands an objective view of religion, one that is motivated neither by excessive love or antipathy. As the Baha'i Writings say, a researcher “cleanse his heart that no remnant of either love or hate may linger therein, lest that love blindly incline him to error, or that hate repel him away from the truth.”[4] With this counsel in mind, de Botton makes a valiant effort to achieve objectivity in his reflections about certain religious insights and practices he thinks will be useful in the secular world.

Let us examine some particular examples. He starts with the universal problem of loneliness, of finding a meaningful place and identity in a community of kindred minds and spirits. The Catholic Mass, which he uses as an example, helps tone down our egocentric tendencies by voluntarily involving ourselves in something bigger than we could ever be alone. This lets us actually experience “unity in diversity” i.e. ourselves as individuals in a community. But, of course de Botton wants to replace the Mass with a secular equivalent, in his case the “Agape Restaurant” where everyone must sit and dine with strangers, and discuss deep human issues from “The Book of Agape,” a secular missal with quotations from various religions and philosophers. Topics include the imperfection “embedded in human nature”[5] and the difficulties of belonging to a community. But it’s not all work at the Agape Restaurant. One of its important ceremonies is carnival, a yearly “Feast of Fools” when almost all moral norms, especially sexual ones, are broken. For several days a year, drunken orgies provide release from the relentless restrictions of daily life in society.

Sacred architecture is another aspect of religion that de Botton finds necessary to retain. The secular world must build “Temple[s] to Reflection”[6] to provide an atmosphere that encourages contemplation by allowing isolation and respite from our often chaotic inner and outer lives. These are places in which we can re-center ourselves and find the balance we miss. In de Botton’s view, we should:

revive and continue the underlying aims of religious architecture, by expressing through these secular temples designed to promote important emotions and abstract themes, rather than through sacred shrines dedicated to embodied local deities.[7]

Anyone who has ever walked into the cathedrals at Notre Dame, Chartres, Cologne or Wilmette, will recognize how powerfully these buildings entice us to calmness and reflection, to inner order and peace. Some natural places have a similar power to stir up particular emotions. In de Botton’s view, there is some truth in the traditional idea that these locations have a special spirit. Grand Canyon is one such place; Carmel is another.

I admit that for my tastes, de Botton becomes too zealous when he prescribes that we should travel to local shrines to heal certain afflictions, as Catholics, for example, visit Lourdes for physical ailments or Bad Muenstereifel for excessive fear of lightning. I find it hard to imagine why excessive rationalism is better cured in Vladivostok than in Tuktoyaktuk. Notwithstanding this momentary lapse into new-age inanity, de Botton is certainly correct in asserting that architecture and some locations play an important role in fostering a deep and vibrant inner intellectual and emotional life in humans.

In a similar vein, de Botton hopes that “museums may be able to take over the aesthetic responsibilities for churches.”[8] The need for beauty in art seems to be innate in human beings:

We need art because we are so forgetful. We are creatures of the body as well as of the mind and so require art to stir our languid imaginations and motivate us in ways that mere philosophical expositions cannot.[9]

Art gives shape or form to our deepest emotions from the depths of despair and pain to the dizzying heights of joy. However, we must adapt art to fit into a secular world. Rather than another version of the Stations of the Cross “we might consider setting contemporary artists the task of depicting a Seven Sorrows of Parenthood, a Twelve Sorrows of Adolescence or a Twenty One Sorrows of Divorce.”[10] I’ll admit, I’d be thrilled to see what a Picasso or a Dali could do with these projects.

In my view, de Botton has done three good things that make this book worthwhile for both religious and non-religious readers. Most obviously, it successfully debunks the new atheist claim that religion has done nothing but cause wars and psycho-social difficulties. De Botton’s study underlines the fact that religion has survived in humankind’s three million year history precisely because it fulfills a positive evolutionary and historical function. His evidence highlights the near imbecilic crudity of the new atheists’ view of religion.

Second, as the Baha’i Writings say, “Light is good in whatsoever lamp it is burning!”[11] Though written by a convinced atheist, *Religion for Atheists* is valuable for believers because it presents succinct arguments explaining the existential – or if you prefer, spiritual – rationale behind many religious practices. My own favorites are his defense of religious art, and especially, religious architecture. The latter, he points out, cannot be reduced to mere monuments

to pride and ostentation, but also fulfill deep human needs.

We should revive and continue the underlying aims of religious architecture, by expressing these through secular temples designed to promote important emotions and abstract themes. . . [12]

Though he does not mention the neo-Platonists, de Botton revives their argument that the task of art is to make beautiful things that gradually refine and raise our feeling and thinking beyond the material world. As an atheist, de Botton cannot accept the metaphysical implications of the neo-Platonic view, but he can certainly accept the promotion of more profound feelings and thoughts.

The third strong-point of *Religion for Atheists* – at least for the religiously inclined – is that it provides excellent reasons for many religious practices. It rationally demonstrates how various practices and the insights on which they are based are not mere arbitrary impositions but have their basis in the needs of human nature. Of course, de Botton does not claim that his examples are the only ways of meeting these needs; his aim is to make us more aware of the underlying rationale so that we shall not be so quick to condemn these practices – as the new atheists have been. There may be more wisdom in such practices than a cursory glance can reveal. This is a salutary lesson not just for atheists but also for modern believers who may feel impatient with some aspects of religion.

*Religion for Atheists* has, in my view, one major problem: if religion arose in answer to our most “urgent issues” [13] and intuitions, then it seems unlikely that a “de-mythologized,” i.e. secularized version of these answers are likely to satisfy most people for long. The “urgent issues” impelled us to invent these religious answers precisely because there is something about the issues themselves that leads us in a ‘supernaturalist’ direction. For example, if we ask, “Is there any purpose to life beyond happily indulging in food, drink, sleep and sex?” there is obviously a suggestion that the purpose we seek must at least partly be more than physical. Consequently, we may conclude that our ancestors accepted these answers not because they were naïve, but because these kind of answers were deemed most adequate or appropriate to the issues they faced. Secularized, “de-mythologized” answers were simply “ersatz” – inadequate and inferior substitutes for the real thing – like drinking a mixture of roasted barely and acorns instead of Starbucks. This is why – the new atheist onslaught notwithstanding – the theistic answers persist and show no signs of disappearing even in our day. The outward form of these answers may change, but the core issues and intuitions remain. I suspect that many of the secularists who would follow de Botton’s ideas will find their way back to belief in the non-material aspects of reality and some kind of religious commitment.

There is a Baha’i prayer which says, “All are His [God’s] servants and all abide by His bidding.” In his effort to show the truth in many religious insights and practices, and at the same

time, to secularize these practices, de Botton has given an excellent explication of these practices and, at the same time, demonstrated the futility of seeking secularized substitutes for them.

## Footnotes

[1] Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists: A Non-believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion*, p. 12.

[2] De Botton, p. 17.

[3] De Botton, p. 13.

[4] Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 264.

[5] De Botton, p. 85.

[6] De Botton, p. 264.

[7] De Botton, p. 275.

[8] De Botton, p. 209.

[9] De Botton, p. 217.

[10] De Botton, 224.

[11] Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, p. 136.

[12] De Botton, p. 275.

[13] De Botton, p. 12.

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