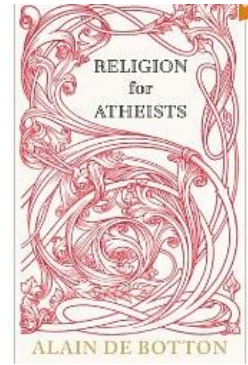


Alain de Botton: Religion for Atheists

a non-believer's guide to the uses of religion

Hamish Hamilton 2012

Notes by [Alison Morgan](#) March 2012



I enjoyed it. I like his writing style and the breadth of his knowledge, and I like his unique insight into our culture – he is what contemporary philosophy should be, a reflective commentary on the passing values of a particular age. But this time he intrigues me – he commends the insights of religion into human nature and human need, laments the tendency of militant atheism to throw the bathwater out with the baby, and talks about how we might press the packaging into service once we have liberated it from the inconvenient demands of the product. But at no stage does this contemporary philosopher seem to ask himself the basic question ‘Might it be true?’. He simply rests upon the unquestioned assumption that it is not; that the bathwater and the packaging are only coincidentally connected with the baby and the product, and that religions have arrived at so many helpful insights without reference to any underlying truth or connection with reality. It’s surprising. So here are some of my favourite passages in praise of the non-essential aspects of religion.

1. Wisdom without Doctrine

‘The most boring and unproductive question one can ask of any religion is whether or not it is true - in terms of being handed down from heaven to the sound of trumpets and supernaturally governed by prophets and celestial beings. To save time, and at the risk of losing readers painfully early on in this project, let us bluntly state that of course no religions are true in any God-given sense. This is a book for people who are unable to believe in miracles, spirits or tales of burning shrubbery, and have no deep interest in the exploits of unusual men and women like the thirteenth-century saint Agnes of Montepulciano, who was said to be able to levitate two feet off the ground while praying and to bring children back from the dead - and who, at the end of her life (supposedly), ascended to heaven from southern Tuscany on the back of an angel.

Attempting to prove the non-existence of God can be an entertaining activity for atheists. Tough-minded critics of religion have found much pleasure in laying bare the idiocy of believers in remorseless detail, finishing only when they felt they had shown up their enemies as thorough-going simpletons or maniacs. Though this exercise has its satisfactions, the real issue is not whether God exists or not, but where to take the argument once one decides that he evidently doesn't. The premise of this book is that it must be possible to remain a committed atheist and nevertheless find religions sporadically useful, interesting and consoling - and be curious as to the possibilities of importing certain of their ideas and practices into the secular realm. One can be left cold by the doctrines of the Christian Trinity and the Buddhist Eightfold Path and yet at the same time be interested in the ways in which religions deliver sermons, promote morality, engender a spirit of community, make use of art and architecture, inspire travels, train minds and encourage gratitude at the beauty of spring. In a world beset by fundamentalists of both believing and secular varieties, it must be possible to balance a rejection of religious faith with a selective reverence for religious rituals and concepts.

It is when we stop believing that religions have been handed down from above or else that they are entirely daft that matters become more interesting. We can then recognize that we invented religions to serve two central needs which continue to this day and which secular society has not been able to solve with any particular skill: first, the need to live together in communities in harmony, despite our deeply rooted selfish and violent impulses. And second, the need to cope with terrifying degrees of pain which arise from our vulnerability to professional failure, to troubled relationships, to the death of loved ones and to our decay and demise. God may be dead, but the urgent issues which impelled us to make him up still stir and demand resolutions which do not go away when we have been nudged to perceive some scientific inaccuracies in the tale of the seven loaves and fishes.

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.’ p11-13

‘Our soul-related needs are ready to be freed of the particular tint given to them by religions – even if it is, paradoxically, the study of religions which often holds the key to their rediscovery and rearticulation.’ p15

'In the course of ridding ourselves of unfeasible ideas, we have unnecessarily surrendered some of the most useful and attractive parts of the faiths.' p17.

'Atheists of the militant kind may also feel outraged, in their case by a book that treats religion as though it deserves to be a continuing touchstone for our yearnings. They will point to the furious institutional intolerance of many religions, and to the equally rich, though less illogical and illiberal, stores of consolation and insight available through art and science. They may additionally ask why anyone who professes himself unwilling to accept so many facets of religion - who feels unable to speak up in the name of virgin births, say, or to nod at the claims reverently made in the Jataka tales about the Buddha's identity as a reincarnated rabbit - should still wish to associate himself with a subject as compromised as faith.

To this the answer is that religions merit our attention for their sheer conceptual ambition; for changing the world in a way that few secular institutions ever have. They have managed to combine theories about ethics and metaphysics with a practical involvement in education, fashion, politics, travel, hospitality, initiation ceremonies, publishing, art and architecture - a range of interests which puts to shame the scope of the achievements of even the greatest and most influential secular movements and individuals in history. For those interested in the spread and impact of ideas, it is hard not to be mesmerized by examples of the most successful educational and intellectual movements the planet has ever witnessed.' p18

2. Community

One of the losses modern society feels most keenly is that of a sense of community. It's often linked with the privatization of religious belief- historians have suggested that we began to disregard our neighbours at around the same time as we ceased communally to honour our gods. But some of it is just sheer numbers – there are too many of us, and too many of our engagements are impersonal. We no longer need to rely on other people for help, we are frightened by what the media tell us about the violence and depravity of others, and we are encouraged to embark on a maniacal quest for a single person with whom we hope to achieve a lifelong, complete and sufficient communion. Many of us throw ourselves into our careers instead, and hope to get our needs met there.

The Church knows about loneliness, it creates community, it invites us to be happy without having to be successful, it deals with our fears and offers us the respect and security we crave through a warm and impressive community which imposes no worldly requirements on us for its welcome. NB it was not until AD 364 that the Church banned agape feasts (they'd become excessive and rowdy) in favour of eating at home and then coming to a ritualised meal which we know as the Eucharist (p39). It's odd we have so few public venues which help us turn strangers into friends – we need to adapt the Mass into an all-comers Agape Restaurant, where people can meet one another through dining together.

It's not just how to form community that religions are good at, it's how to handle things when they go wrong. Judaism in particular is good at anger – an annual Day of Atonement on which people are supposed to seek forgiveness from all they may have hurt over the last year.

Religions also offer rituals to build and maintain community in the face of difficulty – funerals, Bar Mitzvahs, the medieval Feast of Fools.

3. Kindness

We are seldom encouraged officially to be nice to one another. It offends our libertarian beliefs and risks paternalism. JS Mill said the only grounds for state interference in people's lives is to prevent them harming others – not for their own good. Religions however have never held back. Libertarians doubt we can know what virtue is, or how to instil it in others – they have no moral bedrock. The only exception is childrearing, where parents do favour intervention over neutrality in their desire to bring up their children. And yet the results are not good – freedom does not always bring only good things; 'our deepest wish may be that someone would come along and save us from ourselves.'

Religions however do offer guidance on how to live. They know that to sustain goodness we need an audience – it helps to know someone is watching (most marriages would work better if we thought that!). Clergy may tend to speak as if they alone were in possession of maturity and moral authority – but Christianity acknowledges that we are actually all infantile, incomplete and unfinished – and calls it Original Sin. It creates

a moral atmosphere in which people point out their flaws to one another and look for improvement in their behaviour. Fresco painters put up virtues and vices as models and warnings – eg Scrovegni Chapel. What would it be like if we had similar images on advertising hoardings – eg advocating Forgiveness?

Atheists tend to pity the inhabitants of religiously dominated societies for the extent of the propaganda they have to endure, but this is to overlook secular societies' equally powerful and continuous calls to prayer. A libertarian state truly worthy of the name would try to redress the balance of messages that reach its citizens away from the merely commercial and towards a holistic conception of flourishing. True to the ambitions of Giotto's frescoes, these new messages would render vivid to us the many noble ways of behaving that we currently admire so much and so blithely ignore... We don't only need reminders of the advantages of savoury snacks. p88

Religions also offer role models in saints

While paying attention to the messages in its public spaces, Christianity also wisely recognizes the extent to which our concepts of good and bad are shaped by the people we spend time with. It knows that we are dangerously permeable with regard to our social circle, all too apt to internalize and mimic others' attitudes and behaviour. Simultaneously, it accepts that the particular company we keep is largely a result of haphazard forces, a peculiar cast of characters drawn from our childhood, schooling, community and work. Among the few hundred people we regularly encounter, not very many are likely to be the sorts of exceptional individuals who exhaust our imagination with their good qualities, who strengthen our soul and whose voices we want consciously to adopt to bolster our best impulses.

The paucity of paragons helps to explain why Catholicism sets before its believers some two and a half thousand of the greatest, most virtuous human beings who, it feels, have ever lived. These saints are each in their different ways exemplars of qualities we should hope to nurture in ourselves. St Joseph, for instance, may teach us how to cope calmly with the pressures of a young family and how to face the trials of the workplace with a modest and complaining temper. There are moments when we may want to break down and sob in the company of St Jude, patron saint of lost causes, whose gentle manner can grant us comfort without any need to find immediate solutions or even hope... 92-93

And it offers an equivalent of teddies in the form of little statues and icons of saints. 'A well functioning secular society would think with similar care about its role models. It would not only provide us with film stars and singers' – we still need 'patron saints' who model courage, friendship, fidelity etc – how about Lincoln, Churchill, Paul Smith?

4. Education

Secular society believes fervently in education – but about odd things, like the professor who has spent 20 years researching the cause of declining crop yields between 1742 and 1798; or the students examining the use of natural imagery in Horace and Petronius. University academics are intensely committed to their tasks – and yet the modern university appears to have little interest in teaching emotional or ethical life skills, much less how to love their neighbours and leave the world happier than they found it. Scripture used to do this; and since the C19th the hope has been that culture could replace scripture in helping people find meaning, understand themselves, behave morally, forgive others and confront their own mortality. So we could turn to Marcus Aurelius, Boccaccio, Wagner and Turner instead. It's an odd proposition – but maybe not so much absurd as unfamiliar. Novels do impart moral instruction; paintings do make suggestions about happiness; literature can change our lives, philosophy can offer consolations. But while universities have achieved unparalleled expertise in imparting factual info about culture, they remain uninterested in training students to use it as a repertoire of wisdom. 'So opposed have many atheists been to the content of religious belief that they have omitted to appreciate its inspiring and still valid overall object: to provide us with well-structured advice on how to lead our lives.' 111.

Christianity meanwhile looks at the purpose of education from another angle, because it has an entirely different concept of human nature. It has no patience with theories that dwell on our independence or our maturity. It instead believes us to be at heart desperate, fragile, vulnerable, sinful creatures, a good deal less wise than we are knowledgeable, always on the verge of anxiety, tortured by our relationships, terrified of death - and most of all in need of God.

What sort of education might benefit such forlorn wretches? While the capacity for abstract thought is considered by Christianity to be in no way dishonourable, and indeed even a potential sign of divine grace, it is held to be of secondary importance to a more practical ability to bring consoling and nurturing ideas to bear on our disturbed and irresolute selves.

We are familiar enough with the major categories of the humanities as they are taught in secular universities – history and anthropology, literature and philosophy - as well as with the sorts of examination questions they produce: Who were the Carolingians? Where did phenomenology originate? What did Emerson want? We know too that this scheme leaves the emotional aspects of our characters to develop spontaneously, or at the very least in private, perhaps when we are with our families or out on solitary walks in the countryside.

In contrast, Christianity concerns itself from the outset with the inner confused side of us, declaring that we are none of us born knowing how to live; we are by nature fragile and capricious, unempathetic and beset by fantasies of omnipotence, worlds away from being able to command even a modicum of the good sense and calm that secular education takes as the starting point for its own pedagogy.

Christianity is focused on helping a part of us that secular language struggles even to name, which is not precisely intelligence or emotion, not character or personality, but another, even more abstract entity loosely connected with all of those and yet differentiated from them by an additional ethical and transcendent dimension - and to which we may as well refer, following Christian terminology, as the *soul*. It has been the essential task of the Christian pedagogic machine to nurture, reassure, comfort and guide our souls. p112-13

Wesley used to preach on being kind, staying obedient to parents, visiting the sick, caution against bigotry. He said 'I design plain truth for plain people: therefore... I abstain from all nice and philosophical speculations; from all perplexed and intricate reasonings; and as far as possible, from even the show of learning. My design is... to forget all that ever I have read in my life.' 120. 'We on the other hand have constructed an intellectual world whose most celebrated institutions rarely consent to ask, let alone answer, the most serious questions of the soul.' 121 Maybe we need a new kind of university, one which had a dept for relationships, an institute of dying and a centre for self knowledge.

Then there's the method – impassioned preaching makes a difference to the engagement and impact. 'Secular education will never succeed in reaching its potential until humanities lecturers are sent to be trained by African-American Pentecostal preachers.' 131.

Ideas need not just to be presented, but also repeated. The Christian calendar does this, as does the set daily liturgy. Secular society leaves us free, presenting us with a constant stream of new information, and prompting us to forget the lot. It expects us to spontaneously find our way to the ideas that matter to us, and gives us weekends off for consumption and recreation. It's the 'news' which occupies the position of authority in the secular sphere which the liturgical calendar has in the religious one. Matins has become the breakfast bulletin, vespers the evening report. Its prestige is founded on the assumptions that our lives are poised on the verge of transformation due to the 2 driving forces of modern history: politics and technology. Religious texts, by contrast, are written on stone, books are few and thoroughly absorbed.

The importance of body posture is also something religions take seriously, and secular education does not.

Summary: Religions teach wisdom; secular societies offer information.

5. Tenderness

A man in a church, praying to Mary, going out feeling better. We long to be held and comforted; prayer does that.

By contrast with religion, atheism is prone to seem coldly impatient with our neediness. The longing for comfort which lies at the heart of the Marian cult seems perilously regressive and at odds with the rational engagement with existence on which atheists pride themselves. Mary and her cohorts have been framed as symptoms of urges which adults ought quickly to outgrow.

At its most withering and intellectually pugnacious, atheism has attacked religion for blinding itself to its own motives, for being unwilling to acknowledge that it is, at base, nothing more than a glorified response to childhood longings which have been dressed up, recast in new forms and projected into the heavens.

This charge may well be correct. The problem is that those who level it are themselves often involved in a denial, a denial of the needs of childhood. In their zeal to attack believers whose frailties have led them to embrace the supernatural, atheists may neglect the frailty that is an inevitable feature of all our lives. They may label as childish particular needs which should really be honoured as more generally human, for there is in truth no maturity without an adequate negotiation with the infantile and no such thing as a grown-up who does not regularly yearn to be comforted like a child.

6. Pessimism

We should honour Pascal, and the long line of Christian pessimists to which he belongs, for doing us the incalculably great favour of publicly and elegantly rehearsing the facts of our sinful and pitiful state. 181

Despite occasional moments of panic, most often connected to market crises, wars or pandemics, the secular age maintains an all but irrational devotion to a narrative of improvement, based on a messianic faith in the three great drivers of change: science, technology and commerce. Material improvements since the mid-eighteenth century have been so remarkable, have so exponentially increased our comfort, safety, wealth; power, as to deal an almost fatal blow to our capacity to remain pessimistic - and therefore, crucially, to our ability to stay sane and content. It has been impossible to hold on to a balanced assessment of what life is likely to provide for us when we have witnessed the cracking of the genetic code, the invention of the mobile phone, the opening of Western-style supermarkets in remote corners of China and the launch of the Hubble telescope.

Yet while it is undeniable that the scientific and economic trajectories of mankind have been pointed firmly in an up direction for several centuries, we do not comprise mankind: none of us individuals can dwell exclusively amidst the ground-breaking developments in genetics or telecommunications that lend our age its distinctive and buoyant prejudices. We may derive some benefit from the availability of hot baths and computer chips, but our lives are no less subject to accident, frustrated ambition, heartbreak, jealousy, anxiety or death than were those of our medieval forebears. But at least our ancestors had the advantage of living in a religious era which never made the mistake of promising its population that happiness could ever make a permanent home for itself on this earth. 182-83

The secular are at this moment in history a great deal more than the religious - something of an irony, given the frequency with which the latter have been derided by the former for their apparent naivety and credulousness. It is the secular whose longing for perfection has grown so intense as to lead them to imagine that paradise might be realized on this just a few more years of financial growth and medical research. With no evident awareness of the contradiction they may, in the same breath, gruffly dismiss a belief in angels while sincerely trusting that the combined powers of the IMF, the medical research establishment, Silicon Valley and democratic politics could together cure the ills of mankind. 183 & 85

It is the most ambitious and driven among us who are the most sorely in need of having our reckless hopes dampened through immersive dousings in the darkness which religions have explored. This is a particular priority for secular Americans, perhaps the most anxious and disappointed people on earth, for their nation infuses them with the most extreme hopes about what they may be able to achieve in their working lives and relationships. We should cease to view the pessimism of religions as belonging to them alone, or as indelibly dependent on hopes for salvation. We should strive to adopt the acute perspective of those who believe in paradise, even as we live out our own lives abiding by the fundamental atheistic precept that this is the one world we will ever know. 185

A pessimistic worldview does not have to entail a life stripped of joy. Pessimists can have a far greater capacity for appreciation than their opposite numbers, for they never expect things to turn out well and so may be amazed by the modest successes which occasionally break across their darkened horizons. Modern secular optimists, on the other hand, with their well-developed sense of entitlement, generally fail to savour any epiphanies of everyday life as they busy themselves with the construction of earthly paradise. Accepting that existence is inherently frustrating, that we are forever hemmed in by atrocious realities, can give us the impetus to say 'Thank you' a little more often. It is telling that the secular world is not well versed in the art of gratitude: we no longer offer up thanks for harvests, meals, bees or clement weather. On a superficial level, we might suppose that this is because there is no one to say 'Thank you' to. But at base it seems more a matter of ambition and expectation. Many of those blessings for which our pious and pessimistic ancestors offered thanks, we now pride ourselves on having worked hard enough to take for granted. Is there really any need, we wonder, to carve out a moment of gratitude in honour of a sunset or an apricot? Are there not loftier goals towards which we might be aiming? 188

7. Perspective

'Religion is above all a symbol of what exceeds us and an education in the advantages of recognizing our paltriness... Being put in our place by something larger, older, greater than ourselves is not a humiliation; it should be accepted as a relief from our insanely hopeful ambitions for our lives' 200.

Reminders of transcendence are helpful in providing perspective – maybe we should have public images of galaxies set up to remind us how small we are.

8. Art

Some atheists find it hard to give up the beauty and emotion of ecclesiastical art – and strive to find alternatives. Museums of art have become our new churches; like universities, they promise to fill the gaps left by the ebbing of faith; they give us meaning without superstition. Secular books can replace the gospels; and so museums may be able to take over the aesthetic responsibilities of churches.

Why should art matter? It's a forbidden question. Museums display it in hushed galleries, but do not encourage us to ask any religious questions about it – even religious art is stripped of its theological content. We are encouraged to respond to art by becoming knowledgeable about it, not by reacting to it. We are supposed to understand it, not be transformed by it. Christianity has never left any doubt what art is for – to

remind us about what matters. Hegel defined art as 'the sensuous presentation of ideas'; ideas, particularly, which matter to the proper functioning of our souls. Eg the focus in Christian art on suffering helps us to bear it, to know we are not alone in it; art gives shape to pain, and thus attenuates the worst of our feelings of isolation. Perhaps art galleries should offer secular images as a modern equivalent of the 14 stations of the cross – a depressed girl, a disabled man. Art shows us that 'other people are just altered versions of ourselves: fellow fragile, uncertain, flawed beings likewise craving love and in urgent need of forgiveness' – 227. Christian art has a mission; to offer virtues and vices and remind us of what is important but easily forgotten. NB it never left its artists to decide what art should be about – theologians did that. No one assumed that talent was compatible with the ability to work out the meaning of life. Titian was not expected to be a great philosopher. The Romantic belief that greatness must involve constant originality at a thematic level has brought great harm.

How about a Tate Modern with galleries devoted to suffering, compassion, fear, love, self knowledge? Thus a museum really could be our new church, rather than just a place for displaying beautiful objects.

9. Architecture

Religious architecture mitigates our egoism by showing us our own insignificance. So could secular buildings. 'It is one of the unexpected disasters of the modern age that our new unparalleled access to information has come at the price of our capacity to concentrate on anything much' – 264. We are never far from a machine that guarantees a mesmerising escape from reality. We need places where that's not happening – with views, sounds, simplicity. We need modern temples to reflection, places where we can find the solitude we need to think about things, capture 'those rare insights upon which the successful course of our life depends, but which normally run across our distracted minds only occasionally and skittishly like shy deer.' 267

Religions, both Roman and Christian, allow for sacred places with curative powers. We suffer from a lack of shrines. We travel, but our travelling lacks any therapeutic purpose.

10. Institutions

Secular intellectuals suffer from a suspicion of institutions, rooted in the Romantic world view – but isolated they can't disseminate their ideas effectively, and are doomed to achieve very little. We need to create secular entities that can meet the needs of the inner self with the skill that corporations currently apply to satisfying the needs of the outer.

Brands promote consistency and create a shared visual vocabulary – both religions and commercial organisations do this. How about a brand of psychotherapists called Talking Cure?

Auguste Comte recognised that secular society needs its own institutions, ones that could take the place of religions by addressing human needs which fall outside the existing remit of politics, the family, culture and the workplace. He said good ideas would not be able to flourish if left inside books; they have to be supported by institutions. It never got off the ground – but maybe it should.

Note – small print (10pt) is direct quotes.

11pt is summary unless given in inverted commas.

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