Updating my religion

By Ryan Dueck
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The secular world is full of holes. We have secularized badly.

These words come near the beginning of Alain de Botton's recent TED Talk called Atheism 2.0,
and preface what could, I suppose, be categorized as an atheist's best attempt to affirm the positives of religion and attempt to incorporate these positives into a more well-rounded and satisfying secular worldview. For de Botton, while it is transparently obvious that supernatural beliefs are false, it is equally obvious that religion confers many benefits upon its adherents—benefits which are inaccessible, or at least less easily attainable, to those who reject religion.

When a friend sent this lecture to me
yesterday, I was expecting to find the usual "religion is useful because it gives people a sense of meaning and purpose," or " it provides some measure of social control," etc. I had come across a few reviews of de Botton's book, *Religion for Atheists*,
and based on what I had read, I didn't think his talk would have much that was interesting to offer. Yet, while these familiar, more general ideas may have been whirring around in the background of de Botton's talk, they did not constitute the bulk of what de Botton found praiseworthy about religion.

Instead, he talked about how religion
provides "guidance, morality, and consolation"—advice about how to live well, and assistance in times of distress. He lamented how once it had been the task of education to teach people how and why to live in a certain way, but now universities are houses of cold rationalism, strictly in the business of transmitting information in the training up of more cold rationalists. He talked about how we are creatures who

need repetition and order to learn and grow and develop, and how the liturgies of religion and their ordering of time do this for us. He talked about how we are not just brains but whole people. Not bad, all around.

And yet, despite its irenic tone, the talk left a rather unpleasant taste in my mouth. I'm not the first to notice this, of course (Terry Eagleton makes the point well, here), but de Botton's is a rather patronizing and condescending project as whole. There is something breathtakingly arrogant about saying, in effect, "you know, in the past people believed all kinds of weird and crazy stuff about an unseen world and it seemed to have some rather interesting and useful effects upon how they ordered their lives, the virtues they promoted, etc, and it seemed to address some rather significant existential concerns, but we, of course, know that this is all silly nonsense, but, hey, we can still raid the cupboards of their clunky old worldviews for the few useful bits that remain—self-help techniques, personal consolation, organizational strategies, and community-building ideas, etc." And boy, their cathedrals and artwork sure are nice.

I think there is something remarkably shortsighted (not to mention historically, philosophically, and psychologically naive) about failing to ask deep enough questions about the possible relationship between the methods and practices of religion and the content that informs them. Is it really as simple as just extracting insights about liturgy, rhythm, and how human formation takes place from the theological convictions—convictions about the nature of God and evil and human beings—that produced them? Can tourism coordinators really "tap into" the psychology of religious pilgrimage without the deep, theological understanding of time and place and the nature of God's work in the world that motivates pilgrims in the first place? Can we really embrace religion's ability to provide consolation and assistance without bothering to ask the big and difficult existential questions about why it is that we might need to be consoled?

There is also something remarkably shortsighted, naive, etc, about failing to ask deep enough questions

about the quote at the top of this post. Is there a connection to our "secularizing badly" and the cognitive content that has informed this process? Does our inability to live with the implications of a cold materialism have anything to say to us? Does secular dissatisfaction and the numerous attempts in popular discourse to clumsily sacralize a world without God world point to anything about what it means to be human? About the nature of our world? If so, what might this be? We need to ask these questions, and others no doubt, about the connection between the things we believe and the effects they have "out there" in the world.

Beliefs and practices are not
free-floating entities that can be simply plucked out of the sky and redeployed in whatever configuration we might prefer. There is a profound historical, psychological, and existential connection between the two—a connection that we would do well to pay more careful attention to as we are updating our religions and our irreligions.

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