

To the glory of God

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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*The most boring question you can ask of any religion is whether it is true.*

So says [Alain de Botton](#), philosopher, writer, and founder of an organization called [the School of Life](#), a kind of church for atheists. He started the school out of a conviction that religions have a few useful traditions, rituals, and practices that are worth borrowing and adapting in the ongoing project of becoming kind and fulfilled and generally decent human beings. The truth of the matter doesn't really matter. What *does* matter is whether there might be some useful things to salvage from these historical traditions as we continue the steady march of secular progress.

De Botton is something like the un-Richard Dawkins. Rather than excoriating religions as the source of all that is ignorant and contemptible in the world and delighting in his own luminous rationality, de Botton is sympathetic to religions, if in an anthropological and pragmatic sort of way. Look at all that religions have contributed to the world, he says. Look at the magnificent art, the majestic cathedrals, the frescoes, the spine-tingling music, and the penetrating literature that human beings have created to the glory of God!

And it's not just the artifacts de Botton appreciates, but the practices as well. He is an admirer of sermons (he "preaches" at the School of Life) and confession and forgiveness and absolution. He even thinks that doctrines like "original sin" express profound psychological insights into who we are and what we might yet become. None of it is true, of course, but it sure has proved awfully useful over time. And secularists are so pitifully bereft of communal contexts within which to receive moral encouragement and reflect on meaningful questions. Why not just borrow some of the forms and structures from religion?

It would be easy for a religious person to interpret the above as a little bit insulting and condescending, even if de Botton swears he intends it as flattery. It would be easy to say, "Well hang on a minute, my friend, you can't just separate the practices and traditions that you admire and consider to be socially and psychologically useful

from the ideas and convictions and experiences that they originated from, the soil from which they sprung, as it were. I'm glad that you think the Jewish Day of Atonement provides a nice object lesson for a secular 'say you're sorry day' or that Christian hymnody can provide wonderful experiences of transcendence even if you don't like the words, but there's actually quite a lot more than that going on with all of these things you're emulating, historically, theologically, existentially..."

But de Botton knows all this and has heard it before. And anyway, I'm more interested in that quote at the top. How on earth could anyone believe that the truth of the matter—any matter—is *boring*? Well, he doesn't, really. It's mostly just a clever turn of phrase. What he means is that we never really get anywhere talking about the truth of religion. We just keep circling round and round in the same old arguments, never convincing one another of anything. You can't argue an atheist into religion, he says. And, presumably, the opposite would also be true? He's not as clear about this. But he seems to give the impression that our conviction about God or gods or meaning is kind of like a personal disposition. Some people have it and some don't. The more important questions have to do with how we should live and how we might motivate people to do this.

Which, unless I'm mistaken, sort of presumes that there are true and false ways to live. I imagine de Botton thinks that he can assume a sort of shared consensus that we should all be nice, kind, and generous people who are compassionate and tolerant and the usual coterie of post-Christian liberal traits. But he doesn't argue for this. He probably doesn't think he needs to. But how would he respond, I wonder, if someone were to say, "Well to hell with all that! Given that there's no over-arching truth—metaphysical, ethical, aesthetic, whatever—I want to be part of a School of Life where we encourage one another to be selfish and acquisitive, where we sing anthems to power and lust and exploitation and destruction, where we ridicule weakness and refuse to say sorry!" I imagine he would probably want to say, "But, that's not the sort of people we ought to be trying to become! That not the sort of people we ought to *want* to be!" But could he do so coherently?

What if, in other words, we were to turn the phrase on de Botton and say, "The most boring thing you can ask of any *ethical project* is whether or not it's true." Would he be comfortable describing his School of Life with all of its admirable goals and intentions as just an expression of the peculiar disposition he happened to inherit, he knows not why? Or would he prefer to think that he embraced his vision for humanity for good reasons, that it represents the fruit of long years of thought and

reflection, that it in some sense expressed and corresponded with some of the deepest convictions and longings he found within himself. That it was, in fact, a worthy project not only for himself and those who happened to be wired to believe in the same things he does, but *foreveryone*?

I think truth matters to de Botton more than he lets on. Which is good. Because truth *should* matter to us all. We are truth-hungry, truth-seeking, truth-loving creatures because we were made to be so. Having beliefs that correspond with reality matters to us because it *should* matter to us. We are drawn to what is beautiful and good, what is transcendent and meaningful, what moves and inspires us because each one of these things are inextricably bound up with what is true about the world. Truth isn't just the tiny little thread of what happens to be empirically verifiable (or not) that we can extract from all the good and useful stuff that we would prefer to keep. That's not how truth works. That's not how *we* work.

I hope de Botton's School of Life goes well. I really do. Who could be against people coming together to try to become better people? But it seems to me that de Botton really ought to think more highly of truth and the role it's playing in his "secular church." At the very least, he ought to recognize that his whole project—the kinds of people he's trying to inspire and encourage and motivate in his secular church—has a great deal to do with all those religious beliefs he's happy to leave behind.

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