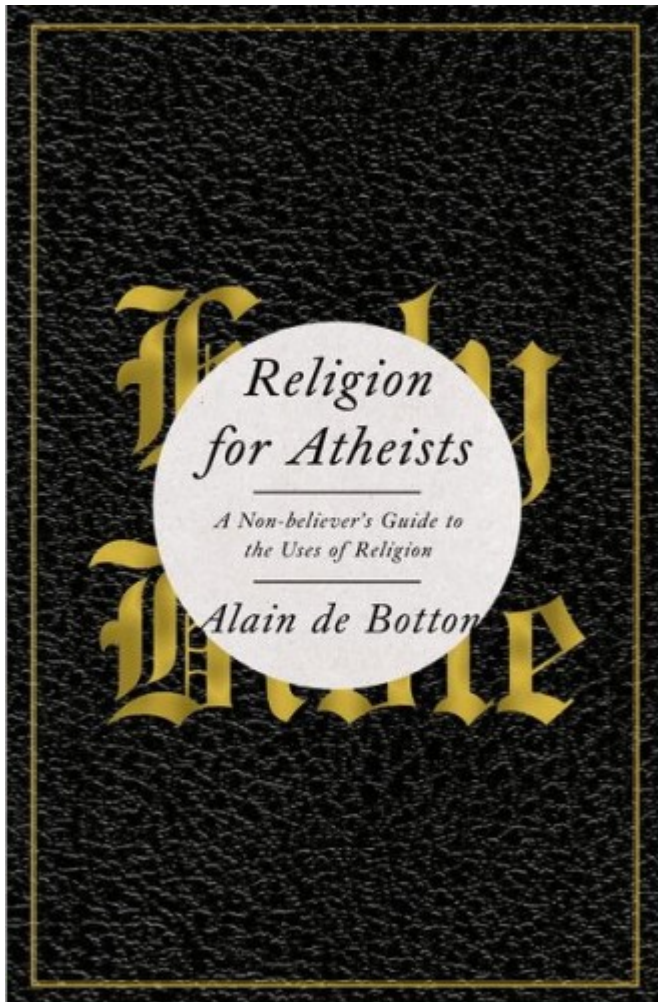


Devout atheist

by [David Heim](#) in the [June 13, 2012](#) issue

In Review



Religion for Atheists

By Alain de Botton
Pantheon

Modernity can be defined as the effort to retain the benefits of religion—moral purpose, social cohesion and aesthetic power—without the hazards of religious belief. Participants in this project may exhibit sunny enthusiasm, confident that life

without God is uncomplicatedly liberating, or wistful regret, aware of the many riches that are left behind. Or, as in the case of essayist Alain de Botton, they may be deeply ambivalent.

De Botton is officially enthusiastic, but his book is wistful. He insists that unbelief has been liberating for him, but he describes with undisguised envy the wisdom of religious practices. He asserts that there is no reason atheists cannot draw on the “most useful and attractive parts” of religion to enrich their lives, yet he offers only a few whimsical examples of how to do this. His nonbeliever’s guide is so sympathetic to religion that it reads at times like a work of apologetics. Atheists who pick it up may find themselves undergoing a crisis of faithlessness.

De Botton begins with an appreciative, atheistic account of the Catholic mass, which he presents as a robust alternative to the sterile individualism of modern life. (Catholic Christianity is his primary reference point, though he occasionally alludes to forms of Protestantism, Judaism and Buddhism.) He sees how the beauty of the worship space, the words of the liturgy and the interactions of the worshipers inspire a sense of common humanity. He admires how the mass gathers people of different ages, races, professions and social status around a moral vision. He notes that the mass inculcates compassion by acknowledging sins and honoring a suffering man who was “nothing like the usual heroes of antiquity.” The church shrewdly centers all this activity in a shared meal, evoking profound feelings of community.

“If we have managed to stay awake to (and for) the lessons of the mass,” he writes, “it should by its close have succeeded in shifting us at least fractionally off our accustomed egocentric axes. It should also have given us a few ideas which we could use to mend some of the endemic fractures of the modern world.” The quip about staying awake cannot disguise the fact that de Botton has been paying close attention. Why, he wonders, don’t atheists have communal experiences that are as rich psychologically, socially and morally as that offered in the mass?

The longest chapter of the book describes the effectiveness of religious moral education, which de Botton contrasts with the paltry efforts of atheists in this field. He makes a familiar critique of contemporary academia, noting that while the secular university can convey a vast amount of information, it refuses even to try to impart wisdom. Books and works of art may be studied as historically significant, but the moral knowledge they offer is rarely examined. When it comes to questions about how to live one’s life, students are left to their own devices.

By contrast, de Botton points out, Christianity recognizes that humans need constant reminders if they are to avoid a life of disintegration and distraction. The church takes every opportunity to pass on its wisdom, and it is willing to use low culture as well as high to do so. It fashions sermons, rituals, retreats, devotional booklets, daily exercises, buildings, art works and songs to try to shape souls. De Botton counsels atheists not to sneer:

Differ though we might with Christianity's view of what precisely our souls need, it is hard to discredit the underlying thesis, which seems no less relevant in the secular realm than in the religious one—that we have within us a precious, childlike, vulnerable core which we should nourish and nurture on its turbulent journey through life.

De Botton insists that there is “as much wisdom in the stories of Anton Chekhov as in the Gospels.” Nevertheless, followers of Chekhov are at a disadvantage, for his stories

are not bound with calendars reminding readers to schedule a regular review of their insights. . . . At best, we haphazardly underline a few of the sentences that we most admire in them and which we may once in a while chance upon in an idle moment.

So what might atheists learn from religious practice to help them revitalize atheistic practice? Create “Daily Readings from Chekhov” calendars?

That turns out to be pretty much what de Botton has in mind. He thinks that the insights of the great nonreligious thinkers, from Freud to Marx to Saul Bellow, can be devotionally and liturgically arranged so as to “instruct us in the art of living.” Lectures on Keats or Adam Smith (his examples) could be turned into sermons, using perhaps the call-and-response pattern of African-American preaching so as to transform listeners, not just inform them.

He applies this idea to institutions as well. Universities should be reconfigured to address practical problems of living. Instead of organizing itself according to academic disciplines like history or biology, a university should have a Department of Relationships, an Institute for Dying and a Center for Self-Knowledge. Museums need to do more than display beautiful objects; “they should be places that use beautiful objects in order to make us good and wise.” Rather than arrange galleries according to academic categories (“Northern Italian Painting of the Early

Renaissance”), museums could be laid out didactically, featuring a Gallery of Suffering, a Gallery of Compassion, a Gallery of Love.

De Botton also has an idea for replicating the power of the Catholic mass. He proposes that atheists establish a series of “Agape Restaurants” at which diners agree to be seated with strangers, thereby offering the experience of an egalitarian meal. Diners would be encouraged to go beyond mere chitchat by following the promptings of a “Book of Agape” located at each table, which would organize the discussion around searching questions: “What do you regret? Whom can you forgive? What do you fear?” This secular liturgy would inspire people to express “sincere revelations of themselves,” and it would generate warm feelings of human sympathy.

A moment’s reflection on these suggestions will generate a host of reasons why they are unlikely to be tried or, if tried, unlikely to be sustained for any length of time. Begin with the fact that absent some greater shared commitment, few people are inclined to eat with strangers, much less pay money to hear a stranger pour out his or her life story. Or consider that what it means to be “good and wise” is widely contested in our culture and is not something that the supporters of museums or universities are organized to address.

De Botton is curiously uninterested in countering possible objections to his ideas. Nor does he acknowledge that in one form or other his ideas have been tried over the past two centuries. The idea that “the best that has been thought and said” can function as a surrogate religion has a long pedigree. And it’s not as if the works of Marx and Freud, for example, have not been reverently treated as guides to the good life. The results of these past efforts are open for evaluation. Addressing such objections does not fit de Botton’s style. He is content to be a genial essayist with charmingly quixotic ideas.

Oddly, de Botton thinks that atheists have been inhibited from adopting liturgical and devotional practices mainly because of their reflexive unease with religion. The history of the post-Christian West suggests, to the contrary, that atheists have often been eager to adapt religious models and, in any case, have not been able to avoid doing so whenever they were serious about forming communities or asserting a particular moral vision. If a “Daily Readings from Chekhov” calendar has not been produced, it’s not because Chekhov fans worry that it might seem too religious.

Martin Luther is reputed to have said on behalf of the church, “Why should the devil have all the good tunes?” De Botton pretends to do nothing more than turn that question around: “Why should religion have all the good tunes?” But the two questions are only apparently similar. Luther’s question was rhetorical: he knew that the church could easily absorb secular forms. Furthermore, he believed that God is the source of all good music anyway.

De Botton’s question is more than rhetorical, even though he seems to treat it that way. It is a real and poignant question. As de Botton’s own book reveals, the question is not just about borrowing tunes or imitating religious forms. The question is why religions should have the best insights into how to build community, shape human character and confront the frailty of life. In other words, why should religions contain all the wisdom? Why indeed?

De Botton is willing to grant that religions possess what he calls wisdom, but he refuses to consider that they might possess some degree of truth. As a result, he ends up treating religious practices as if they were not much more than catchy tunes, easily filled with atheistic content. That’s not how religious practices function, however. Religious practices attempt to order lives according to a particular understanding of what is good, true and beautiful, and they can be replicated only to the extent that the vision of the good, true and beautiful can be replicated. Inadvertently, de Botton’s book confirms that there’s no religious way without religious truth.