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Religion for Atheists

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

Written by Alain de Botton

Published by Hamish Hamilton

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Religion for Atheists
*A non-believer's guide
to the uses of religion*

Alain de Botton



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For Bertha von Büren

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I

Wisdom without Doctrine



Probably just a very nice person: St Agnes of Montepulciano.

1.

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.

2.

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.

3.

I was brought up in a committedly atheistic household, as the son of two secular Jews who placed religious belief somewhere on a par with an attachment to Santa Claus. I recall my father reducing my sister to tears in an attempt to dislodge her modestly held notion that a reclusive god might dwell somewhere in the universe. She was eight years old at the time. If any members of their social circle were discovered to harbour clandestine religious sentiments, my parents would start to regard them with the sort of pity more commonly reserved for those diagnosed with a degenerative disease and could from then on never be persuaded to take them seriously again.

Though I was powerfully swayed by my parents' attitudes, in my mid-twenties I underwent a crisis of faithlessness. My feelings of doubt had their origins in listening to Bach's cantatas, were further developed in the presence of certain Bellini Madonnas and became overwhelming with an introduction to Zen architecture. However, it was not until my father had been dead for several years – and buried under a Hebrew headstone in a Jewish cemetery in Willesden, north-west London, because he had, intriguingly, omitted to make more secular arrangements – that I began to face up to the full scale of my

ambivalence regarding the doctrinaire principles with which I had been inculcated in childhood.

I never wavered in my certainty that God did not exist. I was simply liberated by the thought that there might be a way to engage with religion without having to subscribe to its supernatural content – a way, to put it in more abstract terms, to think about Fathers without upsetting my respectful memory of my own father. I recognized that my continuing resistance to theories of an afterlife or of heavenly residents was no justification for giving up on the music, buildings, prayers, rituals, feasts, shrines, pilgrimages, communal meals and illuminated manuscripts of the faiths.

Secular society has been unfairly impoverished by the loss of an array of practices and themes which atheists typically find it impossible to live with because they seem too closely associated with, to quote Nietzsche's useful phrase, 'the bad odours of religion'. We have grown frightened of the word *morality*. We bridle at the thought of hearing a sermon. We flee from the idea that art should be uplifting or have an ethical mission. We don't go on pilgrimages. We can't build temples. We have no mechanisms for expressing gratitude. The notion of reading a self-help book has become absurd to the high-minded. We resist mental exercises. Strangers rarely sing together. We are presented with an unpleasant choice between either committing to peculiar concepts about immaterial deities or letting go entirely of a host of consoling, subtle or just charming rituals for which we struggle to find equivalents in secular society.

In giving up on so much, we have allowed religion to claim as its exclusive dominion areas of experience which should rightly belong to all mankind – and which we should feel unembarrassed about reappropriating for the secular realm. Early Christianity was itself highly adept at appropriating the good ideas of others, aggressively subsuming countless pagan practices which modern atheists now tend to avoid in the mistaken belief that they are indelibly Christian. The new faith took over celebrations of midwinter and repackaged them as Christmas. It absorbed the Epicurean ideal of living together in a philosophical community and turned it into what we now know as monasticism. And in the ruined cities of the old Roman Empire, it blithely inserted itself into the empty shells of temples once devoted to pagan heroes and themes.

The challenge facing atheists is how to reverse the process of religious colonization: how to separate ideas and rituals from the religious institutions which have laid claim to them but don't truly own them. For instance, much of what is best about Christmas is entirely unrelated to the story of the birth of Christ. It revolves around themes of community, festivity and renewal which pre-date the context in which they were cast over the centuries by Christianity. 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.

What follows is an attempt to read the faiths, primarily Christianity and to a lesser extent Judaism and Buddhism, in



Religions have a habit of squatting on things which did not originally belong to them, as seen here in the Church of San Lorenzo in Miranda, Rome, built in the seventeenth century within the remains of the Roman temple of Antoninus and Faustina.

the hope of gleaning insights which might be of use within secular life, particularly in relation to the challenges of community and of mental and bodily suffering. The underlying thesis is not that secularism is wrong, but that we have too often secularized badly – inasmuch as, in the course of ridding ourselves of unfeasible ideas, we have unnecessarily surrendered some of the most useful and attractive parts of the faiths.

4.

The strategy outlined in this book will, of course, annoy partisans on both sides of the debate. The religious will take offence at a seemingly brusque, selective and unsystematic consideration of their creeds. Religions are not buffets, they will protest, from which choice elements can be selected on a whim. However, the downfall of many a faith has been its unreasonable insistence that adherents must eat everything on the plate. Why should it not be possible to appreciate the depiction of modesty in Giotto's frescoes and yet bypass the doctrine of the annunciation, or to admire the Buddhist emphasis on compassion and yet shun its theories of the afterlife? For someone devoid of religious belief, it may be no more of a crime to borrow from a number of faiths than it is for a lover of literature to single out a handful of favourite writers from across the canon. If mention is made here of only three of the world's twenty-one largest religions, it is no sign of favouritism or impatience, just a consequence of the way that the emphasis of this book lies on comparing religion in general with the secular realm, rather than on comparing an array of religions with one another.

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.

5.

To conclude, this book does not endeavour to do justice to particular religions; they have their own apologists. It tries, instead, to examine aspects of religious life which contain concepts that could fruitfully be applied to the problems of secular society. It attempts to burn off religions' more dogmatic aspects in order to distil a few aspects of them that could prove timely and consoling to sceptical contemporary minds facing the crises and griefs of finite existence on a troubled planet. It hopes to rescue some of what is beautiful, touching and wise from all that no longer seems true.

II

Community



i. Meeting Strangers

1.

One of the losses modern society feels most keenly is that of a sense of community. We tend to imagine that there once existed a degree of neighbourliness which has been replaced by ruthless anonymity, a state where people pursue contact with one another primarily for restricted, individualistic ends: for financial gain, social advancement or romantic love.

Some of our nostalgia centres around our reluctance to give charitably to others in distress, but we are as likely to be concerned with pettier symptoms of social separation, our failure to say hello to one another in the street, for instance, or to help elderly neighbours with the shopping. Living in gargantuan cities, we tend to be imprisoned within tribal ghettos based on education, class and profession and may come to view the rest of humanity as an enemy rather than as a sympathetic collective we would aspire to join. It can be extraordinary and odd to start an impromptu conversation with an unknown person in a public space. Once we are past the age of thirty, it is even somewhat surprising to make a new friend.

In attempting to understand what could have eroded our sense of community, an important role has traditionally been accorded to the privatization of religious belief that occurred in Europe and the United States in the nineteenth century. Historians have suggested that we began to disregard our neighbours at around the same time as we ceased communally to honour our gods. This begs the question of what religions



might have done, prior to that time, to enhance the spirit of community, and, more practically, whether secular society could ever recover this spirit without relying on the theological superstructure with which it was once entwined. Could it be possible to reclaim a sense of community without having to base it on religious foundations?

2.

If we examine the causes of modern alienation in more detail, some of our sense of loneliness comes down to sheer numbers. The billions of people who live on the planet make the idea of talking to a stranger more threatening than it was in sparser days, because sociability seems to bear an inverse relationship to the density of population. We generally talk gladly to people only once we also have the option of avoiding them altogether. Whereas the Bedouin whose tent surveys a hundred kilometres of desolate sand has the psychological wherewithal to offer each stranger a warm welcome, his urban contemporaries, though at heart no less well meaning or generous, must – in order to preserve a modicum of inner serenity – give no sign of even noticing the millions of humans who are eating, sleeping, arguing, copulating and dying only centimetres away from them on all sides.

Then, too, there is the matter of how we are introduced. The public spaces in which we typically encounter others – the commuter trains, the jostling pavements, the airport concourses – conspire to project a demeaning picture of our identities, which undermines our capacity to hold on to the

idea that every person is necessarily the centre of a complex and precious individuality. It can be hard to stay hopeful about human nature after a walk down Oxford Street or a transfer at O'Hare.

We used to feel more connected to our neighbours in part because they were also often our colleagues. Home was not always an anonymous dormitory to be reached late and left early. Neighbours became well acquainted not so much because they were adept conversationalists, but because they had to bring in the hay or put up the school roof together, such projects naturally and surreptitiously helping to foster connections. However, capitalism has little patience for local production and cottage industry. It may even prefer it if we have no contact with our neighbours at all, lest they detain us on our way to the office or discourage us from completing an online acquisition.

In the past, we got to know others because we had no option but to ask them for help – and were ourselves asked for help in turn. Charity was an integral part of premodern life. It was impossible to avoid moments when we would have to request money from a near-stranger or to hand it out to a vagabond beggar in a world without a health-care system, unemployment insurance, public housing or consumer banking. The approach on the street of a sick, frail, confused or homeless person did not immediately inspire passers-by to look away and assume that a government agency would take care of the problem.

We are from a purely financial point of view greatly more generous than our ancestors ever were, surrendering up to half of our income for the communal good. But we do this almost

without realizing it, through the anonymous agency of the taxation system; and if we think about it at all, it is likely to be with resentment that our money is being used to support unnecessary bureaucracies or to buy missiles. We seldom feel a connection to those less fortunate members of the polity for whom our taxes also buy clean sheets, soup, shelter or a daily dose of insulin. Neither recipient nor donor feels the need to say 'Please' or 'Thank you'. Our donations are never framed – as they were in the Christian era – as the lifeblood of an intricate tangle of mutually interdependent relationships, with practical benefits for the recipient and spiritual ones for the donor.

Locked away in our private cocoons, our chief way of imagining what other people are like has become the media, and as a consequence, we naturally expect that all strangers will be murderers, swindlers or paedophiles – which reinforces our impulse to trust only those few individuals who have been vetted for us by pre-existing family and class networks. On those rare occasions when circumstances (snowstorms, lightning strikes) succeed in rupturing our hermetic bubbles and throw us in with people we don't know, we tend to marvel that our fellow citizens have shown surprisingly little interest in slicing us in half or molesting our children and may even be surprisingly good-natured and ready to help.

Solitary though we may have become, we haven't of course given up all hope of forming relationships. In the lonely canyons of the modern city, there is no more honoured emotion than love. However, this is not the love of which religions speak, not the expansive, universal brotherhood of mankind, it is a more



Dreams of meeting one person who will spare us any need for other people.

jealous, restricted and ultimately meaner variety. It is a romantic love which sends us on a maniacal quest for a single person with whom we hope to achieve a life-long and complete communion, one person in particular who will spare us any need for people in general.

In so far as modern society ever promises us access to a community, it is one centred around the worship of professional success. We sense that we are brushing up against its gates when the first question we are asked at a party is 'What do you do?', our answer to which will determine whether we are warmly welcomed or conclusively abandoned by the peanuts. In these competitive, pseudo-communal gatherings, only a few of our attributes count as currency with which to buy the goodwill of strangers. What matters above all is what is on our business cards, and those who have opted to spend their lives looking after children, writing poetry or nurturing orchards will be left in no doubt that they have run contrary to the dominant mores of the powerful and deserve to be marginalized accordingly.

Given this level of discrimination, it is no surprise that many of us choose to throw ourselves with a vengeance into our careers. Focusing on work to the exclusion of almost everything else is a plausible enough strategy in a world which accepts workplace achievements as the main tokens with which we can secure not just the financial means to survive physically, but also the attention that we require to thrive psychologically.