SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW

Without Gods
Alain de Botton’s ‘Religion for Atheists’

By DAVID BROOKS   MARCH 16, 2012

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, religion lost influence, but the religious impulse lingered on. Some people sought salvation in the secular religions of politics — in Communism, fascism and various utopian experiments. Others saw artists, musicians and writers as Holy Men, who could provide transcendence and meaning, revealing timeless truths on how to live.

In 1913, the innovations of the Armory Show in New York and Diaghilev’s production of “The Rite of Spring” had a seismic impact because audiences believed the shape of the culture determined the shape of their souls. In 1922, George Gordon, the Merton professor of literature at Oxford University, could write, “England is sick, and . . . English literature must save it.”

These days politics and culture have more modest aims. As the writer and freelance philosopher Alain de Botton argues in “Religion for Atheists,” cultural and intellectual institutions are no longer about the salvation of souls:

“The methodologies which universities today employ in disseminating culture are fundamentally at odds with the intense, neo-religious ambitions once harbored by lapsed or skeptical Christians. . . . While universities have achieved
unparalleled expertise in imparting factual information about culture, they
remain wholly uninterested in training students to use it as a repertoire of
wisdom."

De Botton looks around and sees a secular society denuded of high spiritual
aspiration and practical moral guidance. Centuries ago, religions gave people
advice on how to live with others, how to tolerate other people’s faults, how to
assuage anger, endure pain and deal with the petty corruptions of a commercial
world. These days, he argues, teachers, artists and philosophers no longer even
try to offer such practical wisdom.

“We are fatefully in love with ambiguity, uncritical of the Modernist doctrine that
great art should have no moral content or desire to change its audience,” he
writes.

Museums were once temples for the contemplation of the profound. Today,
he says, they offer pallid cultural smorgasbords: “While exposing us to objects of
genuine importance, they nevertheless seem incapable of adequately linking
these to the needs of our souls.” Visitors “appear to want to be transformed by
art,” de Botton observes, “but the lightning bolts they are waiting for seem never
to strike. They resemble the disappointed participants in a failed séance.”

It wasn’t a loss of faith that brought us to this sorry pass, de Botton argues;
it was a loss in understanding about how to transmit wisdom. The religious
authorities had a low but realistic view of human nature. We are fragile, sinful
and vulnerable — unable to create moral universes on our own. We therefore
need self-confident institutions that will unabashedly transmit God’s guidance
and love.

Today’s secular institutions, by contrast, have an absurdly high and
unrealistic view of human nature. We are each charged with the task of coming
up with our own philosophy and moral laws. We are supposed to have the ability,
on our own, to remember the key things we learn and to put these ideas into
practice. The key thing is that we are given enough freedom and autonomy to
complete the task.

De Botton is not calling for a religious revival. He finds it impossible to take faith in God seriously. He assumes that none of his educated readers could possibly believe in spoky ghosts in the sky.

Instead, he is calling on secular institutions to adopt religion’s pedagogy, to mimic the rituals, habits and teaching techniques that churches, mosques and synagogues perfected over centuries. For example, religious people were smart enough to combine spirituality and eating, aware that while dining in a group, people tend to be in a convivial, welcoming mood. De Botton believes that secular people should create communal restaurants that mimic the Passover Seder. Atheists would sit at big, communal tables. They would find guidebooks in front of them, reminiscent of the Jewish Haggadah or the Catholic missal. The rituals of the meal would direct diners to speak with one another, asking questions of their neighbors like “Whom can you not forgive?” or “What do you fear?”

Among de Botton’s proposals, I particularly like the idea of a museum organized by theme instead of by historical epoch. He suggests there could be a Gallery of Compassion, a Gallery of Fear and so on. And colleges should definitely teach courses on such practical issues as how to pick a marriage partner, bringing together the resources of literature, psychology and neuroscience on such questions.

However, many of his ideas seem silly. I’m a little skeptical that college lectures should be like Southern Baptist church services, with students shouting out responses after each sentence of a philosophy lecture. It seems highly unlikely that people will behave much better if there are “Forgiveness” billboards plastered all over town. I’m not sure an atheist society could really pull off a quarterly “Day of Atonement” when everybody pauses to confess sins to no one in particular.

De Botton’s book is provocative when it comes to diagnosing the current
cultural ills. But it makes atheism seem kind of boring, a spiritual handicap, the opiate of the shallow masses.

Let’s say you were a young person looking to have a rich inner life. You could pull off the shelves the story of a believer’s spiritual education, like C. S. Lewis’s “Surprised by Joy” or Augustine’s “Confessions.” In these books you’d find complex adventure stories, describing people whose early lives were riven by turmoil, pride and self-love. You’d find a dramatic education process involving intricate, unexpected stages of resistance, surrender, loathing God, loving God, leaps of faith and the most rigorous intellectual scrutiny.

These writers don’t coolly shop for personal growth experiences like someone at the spiritual mall. They find themselves enmeshed in paradoxes of a richness unimaginable before they became entangled in them — that understanding comes after love, that one achieves fullness by surrendering self, that as you approach wisdom you are swept by a sensation that you have been suppressing all along, and all you need do is release. Augustine’s great biographer Peter Brown writes, “The healing process by which love and knowledge are reintegrated is made possible by an inseparable connection between growing self-determination and dependence on a source of life that always escapes self-determination.”

Lewis describes the joy of religious contact, but discovers he can’t achieve joy by seeking it: “I smuggled in the assumption that what I wanted was a ‘thrill,’ a state of my own mind. And there lies the deadly error. Only when your whole attention and desire are fixed on something else — whether a distant mountain, or the past, or the gods of Asgard — does the ‘thrill’ arise. It is a byproduct. Its very existence presupposes that you desire not it but something other and outer.”

There’s something at stake in these accounts, a person’s whole destiny and soul. The process de Botton is recommending is more like going on one of those self-improving vacations. If all his advice were faithfully followed, we’d be a collection of autonomous individuals seeking a string of vaguely uplifting
experiences that might perhaps leave a sediment of some sort of spiritual improvement.

Many of us would rather live frustrated in the company of the believers than fulfilled in this flatland of the atheists. The atheists know what they don’t believe in, but they don’t seem to know what they don’t feel. This is a gap that has existed for centuries, and de Botton doesn’t fill it.

RELIGION FOR ATHEISTS

A Non-Believer’s Guide to the Uses of Religion

By Alain de Botton


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