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Review of Alain de Botton's "Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion"

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Alain de BOTTON. *Religion for Atheists: a Non-Believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion*. New York: Vintage Books, 2012. ISBN 978-0-307-47682-1. Pp. 320. Reviewed by [Jason Paul BOURGEOIS](#), Marian Library/IMRI, University of Dayton, Dayton OH 45469

With *Religion for Atheists*, de Botton continues his tradition of offering philosophical reflections on unusual topics, using ordinary language and humorous illustrations, found in his other books such as *Status Anxiety* and *How Proust Can Change Your Life*. Here de Botton suggests that atheists and secular humanists can benefit themselves and society by appropriating some of the insights, values, and achievements of religious traditions, particularly Christianity but also Judaism and Buddhism. Such insights can be detached from their supernatural belief systems and transformed into a humanist "religion," somewhat in the manner that August Comte attempted (albeit unsuccessfully) to do. He divides the book into nine categories: community, kindness, education, tenderness, pessimism, perspective, art, architecture, and institution. Because there are overlapping insights in these various categories, I will highlight some of the positive values of religion and recurring themes in the book.

Among the positive values that de Botton sees in religious traditions are the ability to gather people of diverse backgrounds together to recognize their underlying commonality as human beings. The rubrics of a liturgical celebration can provide a sense of identity and define proper etiquette, and a liturgical calendar in its seasons and feasts can provide opportunities to remember important aspects of human existence. Religion fosters values such as forgiveness, acknowledging our perpetual need for conversion, and being unafraid to acknowledge the negative aspects of our life (such as sin, suffering, and death). It also fosters kindness towards others, particularly through the Marian image of maternal tenderness which has universal human appeal, and it encourages times of meditation and quiet solitude to recognize our lowly place in the universe. Religious institutions recognize the need for education of the whole person, using repetition and an appeal to the senses and emotions as well as the intellect, and they reinforce their teaching through the use of art, architecture, and institutional "branding" (common vestments, rituals, laws, and teachings). The most effective religious institutions have transformed the very culture in which they reside.

One of the recurring themes in de Botton's book is a critique of romantic individualism and its values of spontaneity and originality. By contrast, religions offer a stable sense of tradition and identity, and are able to spread their ideas more effectively because of the strength and resources of the institutional community which adheres to its values.

In each chapter, de Botton suggests secular adaptations of the values that he sees in religious traditions. For example, he suggests that secular universities and art museums should organize their subjects along the lines of areas of human existence, rather than by chronology or departmental discipline. There would be a "Department of Relationships" or a "Gallery of Compassion" (123, 245). He also suggests a ritually-structured restaurant experience in which strangers gather together and converse on predetermined topics such as "whom can you not forgive?" (46). Perhaps most bizarrely, he suggests an annual day of licentiousness (illustrated by a sexually explicit photo, 67) to release tension and to offer a temporary subversion of our highest values.

In offering these secular adaptations of religious values and rituals, it would seem that de Botton has not learned the historical lessons from previous attempts to replace Christianity with a religion of reason, such as during the aftermath of the French Revolution, and that he has overlooked the sense of transcendence which guards and integrates the positive religious values that he identifies. A religious tradition derives its appeal to the whole person precisely because of its integral worldview, and choosing and adapting parts of it cannot be a compelling substitute.

Because of its informal style, the book is appropriate for a general audience of adults of various educational backgrounds. It might profitably be used as a component of an introduction to religious studies course, particularly by professors who wish to take an unconventional and interdisciplinary approach to the topic. In any case, it could certainly serve as stimulating background reading for any college professor of religion or philosophy.