Religion For Atheists - Alain de Botton

Religion For Atheists
by Alain de Botton
Reviewed by Graham Mann

From the mouth of a donkey

It is a commonly referenced story, where God speaks to his prophet through a donkey. Truth be told what God said, who that prophet was and why He used a donkey is not as easily remembered as the headline that a donkey spoke.

Alain de Botton is not really a donkey, nor do I want to build aspersions as to his character. However, he is a writer who we would probably not normally read or celebrate. He is a staunch atheist, renown for statements like “Let us bluntly state that of course no religions are true in any God-given sense”. His book Religion for Atheists attempts to articulate a pathway beyond “laying bare the idiocy of believers”. That said, and with trepidation that some may want to burn me at the stake, I believe this book provides some fascinating insights that the church would do well to embrace. If nothing else, it articulates from one of our ardent critics, many things that the church has done and continues to do well.

De Botton identifies, that even though he fully rejects all religions (though the material has a distinct focus on Judean/Christian religion), some aspects of their practice are “useful, interesting and consoling” and even to propose that these aspects be imported into the secular realm. [This is fascinating given the sometimes harsh criticism of Christianity for importing pagan festivals into the church’s practice!]

Community has eroded in our society and De Botton recognises that it is a part of human nature to require community. and yet to behave in ways that break community at times too. The Jewish Day of Atonement is proposed as a model that a secular world could adopt its own version not just annually, but as it is such a great thing to build community it should be done four times a year. Secular society holds education as a supreme virtue. Yet a primary difference is seen in that while secular education seeks to impart knowledge, Christian education seeks to evoke change (the essential difference between a lecture and a sermon). Further, the church recognises that learning is not something done for a few youthful years but is a continual lifelong process. The church’s use of Art and Architecture is described as enabling us to view “fearsome familiar yet critical ideas”, particularly around virtuous behaviour. De Botton suggest museums should become our new churches, not just displaying beautiful objects but to do so in such a way as they “make us good and wise”.

Other areas that he sees as prominent are: Kindness, Tenderness, Pessimism & Perspective, Art & Architecture, Institution.

It’s not difficult to read and there are lots of pictures. There will be parts with which you will disagree strongly. There will be parts you won’t like, though still find yourself agreeing with.

For a vehement critic of religion generally, and the church particularly, the church does a whole lot of things pretty good! This work gives us good reason to be proud about much of what we do. Further, it gives us an insight into what our society may well value about the church, perhaps without fully realising it.

Review by Graham Mann, Senior Pastor at Howrah Church of Christ.