

# A Short Review of 'Religion For Atheists'

Jeremy Biles

The School of the Art Institute of Chicago

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**RELIGION FOR ATHEISTS: A NON-BELIEVER'S GUIDE TO THE USES OF RELIGION.** By Alain de Botton. New York: Pantheon Books, 2012. Pp. 320. \$26.95.

With this book, de Botton continues his endeavor to make philosophy part of a practice of everyday life and not merely an academic specialty. But whereas his 2001 *The Consolations of Philosophy* was often admirable for its accessibility and practicality (it was “popular” in the right ways), *Religion for Atheists*, though explicitly geared toward real-life application, seems almost willfully blind to certain aspects of the realities it seeks to address. The goal of de Botton’s book is to recuperate/maintain the wisdom of religions while doing away with all the supernatural stuff that remains a turn-off to atheists (like de Botton himself). The author argues that “it must be possible to remain a committed atheist and nevertheless find religions sporadically useful, interesting, and consoling—and to be curious as to the possibilities of importing certain of their ideas and practices into the secular realm.” In chapters treating community, kindness, education, art, architecture, institutions, and other matters, de Botton imagines ways in which the spiritual needs of secular society may be addressed by “burn[ing] off religions’ more dogmatic aspects.” De Botton predicts that his book will “annoy” both religionists who do not want to see religious traditions treated as part of a secular–spiritual smorgasbord, as well as atheists who want to reject anything tainted by religion. But the real problem lies in de Botton’s tendency to generalize about “religion” and the various traditions he treats, as well as in his failure to address in any meaningful manner the ways in which politics and power are implicated in the forms and structures of religion he wants to preserve. In other words, evacuating the dogmatic and divine from religious structures is probably much more problematic than he allows himself to imagine here. In this way, the healthy pessimism that de Botton advocates for in Chapter 6 seems in tension with the naive optimism of the book’s central project. The white washing of religion undercuts the aim of the book, which thus comes off more as hopeful fantasy than practical, if visionary, philosophy. Students of religion interested in the dialectics of religious and secular cultural forms will want to read this book for its far-reaching aspirations, but should do so with caution and as an invitation to further critical investigation.

*Jeremy Biles*  
*The School of the Art Institute of Chicago*

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