

A TEMPLE OF BELONGING AND FREEDOM

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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I hope you've been following the latest kerfuffle in the world of atheism. The writer Alain de Botton, author of best-selling books like *How Proust Can Change Your Life* and *The Architecture of Happiness*, has a new book out in the UK titled *Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion*. It will be published next month here in the US.

In his book, Botton insists that the claims of religion are entirely false, yet he readily agrees that religions have important things to teach the secular world. He's not intent on mocking religions like many of his fellow agnostics and atheists. Instead, Botton advises stealing—his word—from religions. They're packed with good ideas on how to live our lives and arrange our societies, he says. Religions can teach us how to build a sense of community, make our relationships last, get more out of art, overcome feelings of envy and inadequacy.

Botton's goal is to use these religious insights in non-religious ways. He says, "We need institutions to foster and protect those emotions to which we are sincerely inclined but which, without a supporting structure and a system of active reminders, we will be too undisciplined to make time for."

For example, he says art galleries should present paintings not according to period or style, but according to the passions they are likely to evoke. Universities should have departments designed to instill wisdom in students and teach them how to live. Botton also suggests a chain of secular confessionals, which he dubs "talkingcure." And he imagines electronic versions of the Wailing Wall that would anonymously broadcast our inner woes and thereby, he says, "give us all a clearer sense of what is involved in being alive." He also wants a chain of agape restaurants to spring up, where we would eat not with friends but with strangers—the opposite of Facebook. Social media tends to group people by interests, he says, but "religion puts you with people who have nothing in common except that you're human."

Oh, yes—and one other thing. Botton wants to build temples for atheists. Why should religions have all the good architecture, he asks? Besides, he adds, the kind of atheism espoused by Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens has become a destructive force. A series of temples dedicated to positive virtues—love, friendship, or calm—would demonstrate a kinder, gentler atheism. His first monument will be the "Temple to Perspective," a stone tower he hopes to build in the City of London. Its height corresponds to the age of the Earth—one centimeter per million years, with

humanity's time on Earth represented by a gold band around the base one millimeter thick.

Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*, thinks the idea of a temple of atheism is a contradiction in terms and a waste of money. "Atheists don't need temples," he says. "If you are going to spend money on atheism you could improve secular education and build non-religious schools which teach rational, skeptical critical thinking." Thus the kerfuffle has begun.

On the one hand, I agree with almost everything Botton says. On his terms, I'm an atheist too: I don't believe in the God he doesn't believe in either. And I agree that religious practice has practical benefits. People who are religiously active live longer, healthier, and happier lives than people who aren't.

On the other hand, I couldn't disagree with Botton more strongly. He stands in a long line of cynics—Voltaire, Machiavelli, Edward Gibbon and Jurgen Habermas, among others—who condemn the commitments of religion but embrace, either derisively or wistfully, its effects. Voltaire thought religion was a good way to terrorize the masses into submission.

For his part, Botton is more wistful than most: his face is pressed up against the stained glass window where faith lives and religion gets practiced. He understands the value of religion and sees its benefit. He just doesn't know where to find a temple for the practice of religion that doesn't require him to check his mind at the door.

I have good news for Botton and all such wistful seekers: welcome to All Souls. This is a temple where the kind of religion gets practiced that even Botton can believe in.

Like many people today, Botton finds himself fixated on one particular view of God and religion. The religions of the West—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—are based on the belief that God exists above and beyond the realm of nature. They believe God commands and controls the forces of nature at will. These religions also maintain that God made rules and handed them down to humanity in the form of divine scripture, which directs believers to obey God's commandments. With this view of God, religion is mainly obedience dressed up in fancy clothes.

We've discovered, however, that the universe isn't set up the way our ancestors originally thought. Half a millennium ago, Nicholas Copernicus looked into the night sky and discovered that the Sun, and not the Earth, occupies the center of our solar system. In more recent times, scientists have made another discovery of similar magnitude: the fundamental laws of nature have existed from the very beginning; they apply everywhere, at all times; and they do not change. The idea of a supernatural God, like the idea of an Earth-centered universe, must be left behind.

This doesn't mean that God doesn't exist or that we don't need to participate in a religious community. In fact, our need for God and religion is made greater by these discoveries. If God is not supernatural, then religion has a critical role to play. Religion is the process of taking everything we know into account as we forge a life of meaning

and purpose. In order to play this role, religion must adapt; and our understanding of God must adapt as well.

To his credit, Botton is trying to respond to this challenge. He knowingly cherry-picks elements of practice from various religions and suggests alternate ways they can be used for individual edification and social benefit. What he hasn't yet discovered is that the pieces must somehow be put together.

As I often say, faith is a leap of the moral imagination that connects the world as it is to the world as it might become. Faith imagines how the world might be transformed—how we might be better people and our world might be a better place. Religion is a way of life practiced by a community of people in order to sustain faith and spark transformation. It's the collection of elements we use—songs, symbols, stories, rituals, obligations, sacred spaces—to maintain and renew our faith.

When Botton looks at the various elements of religious practice and asks which ones might be useful, he's headed in the right direction but stops short of the goal. Imagine taking Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and trying to make use of its various elements. The text of the fourth movement—the Ode to Joy—might make a good topic for discussion in a reading group. You could sit alone in the concert hall and marvel at the gold leaf on the ceiling, or listen to a clarinetist in the subway play his part of the second movement. You could visit the store where the conductor bought her baton or examine various ways of arranging the instruments on stage. You could study the score or listen to a baritone warm up. You could even hum the Ode to Joy yourself.

All of these elements are crucial to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. But until they all come together in one place, at one time, in the right way, they don't add up to Beethoven's Ninth. By the same token, religion includes good art and great architecture and stirring music and instructive stories and comforting rituals and prophetic challenges. But until they all fit together in a way that unites spiritual need and moral imagination, they don't add up to transformed lives and a changed world. Religion is an all-or-nothing experience, like Beethoven's Ninth. Religion happens—and transformation comes—when a community of people practices their faith together.

When Alain de Botton—our designated seeker—walks into All Souls for the first time, what will he discover? I mentioned several weeks ago my recent trip to Israel and visit with Natan Sharansky, the Russian mathematician and chess champion who became a human rights activist after the Soviets refused his application to emigrate to Israel. You may recall the image of Sharansky in 1986 walking across the bridge in Berlin after nine years in a Siberian prison.

Now 63 and still a vital force in Israeli politics, Sharansky told us that the most profound realization of his life came to him in prison; and all of his experience since has substantiated this insight. People want two things, he said: they want to be free and they want to belong. These are the two human passions: freedom and identity. The discovery of your identity, he said, gives you the strength to fight both for your own freedom and

the freedom of others. He insisted that identity comes first: until you know who you are and where you belong, you can never be free.

This is a counter-intuitive claim. Most of the time, we think of freedom in terms of absence: no obligations, no constraints, and no commitments. We think of the open road and the solitary traveler, Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau. We think of Janice Joplin singing Kris Kristofferson's haunting refrain, "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose."

In that spirit, I say to each of you: you are now free to come to the chancel, one at a time, and perform Beethoven's Ninth Symphony for the rest of us. Nothing is holding you back. You are free to perform Beethoven's Ninth.

But wait, you quickly say, I need a cello and a decade of lessons, along with a hundred other instrumentalists and fifty singers, not to mention a conductor and lots of rehearsal time. Until I'm part of a symphony orchestra, I'm not free to perform Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

Precisely: until you find a place to belong, you can never be free. By the way, this same principle applies to football. You aren't free to play in the Super Bowl unless you belong to one of the teams. It also applies to politics. The collection of shared intentions and actions we call government is the prerequisite of our freedom as Americans, not the obstacle to it. Discovering where you belong is the first step toward being set free.

On these terms, All Souls is a temple of belonging and freedom. We practice religion here. Our faith—our collective leap of moral imagination—imagines a better character within each of us and a better world for all of us. This faith is buoyed by a God we can believe in—a God of possibility and promise—and it is sustained by our presence together in worship, where we practice our religion. This is a temple where you can find yourself and be set free.

I spend time every week with members and friends of this congregation who entered these doors in bondage—captive to a lonely spirit or a worried mind, a pernicious addiction or a destructive relationship, a lost sense of meaning or a vanished sense of purpose. Again and again, you tell me that the sense of identity and belonging you discovered at All Souls has given you the freedom to make a change for the better. Freedom is another word for everything yet to gain.

All Souls is a temple where we discover who we are and thus find ourselves free to make the difference only we can make. Welcome home.