

RELIGION FOR ATHEISTS

A Response

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ALAIN DE BOTTON'S argument in his book *Religion for Atheists* is that we have secularised badly. It is not that he is against secularism. He remains a staunch atheist throughout the book. It is just that atheism has been carelessly negligent. It has not catered for the 'the needs of the soul, which are to learn, to love and inwardly grow' (p291)¹

One can mostly agree. But de Botton underestimates the extent to which society has moved to meet these needs with something that is nearly a religion, and for a small but significant section of society, with something that actually is part of religion

It is common for religious people to have a crisis of faith. Did de Botton ever have a crisis of faithlessness? Did he ever teeter on the edge of theism? He did. His feelings of doubt had their origin in listening to Bach's *cantatas*, were developed by certain Bellini Madonnas and became 'overwhelming'² when he was introduced to Zen architecture. De Botton resisted this onslaught and remained an atheist.

What de Botton was experiencing was not new. As the church has long known, art may function as an ante-chamber of religion. That is especially so of music. Listening to music is a metaphysical experience. The awareness of harmony in the notes is not something done by the ears, nor is the response to the harmony done by the brain. The attention to the harmony and the attendant feeling are the work of the spirit. It is the spirit that is transported by music. Which is why it lends itself so readily to religion.

The prolific biographer AN Wilson, previously a theist but now an atheist, remarked that, notwithstanding his atheism, whenever he heard Beethoven's music, he would always think of God. No one expresses the power and tenderness of God better than Beethoven.

Many millions of people play great music

on their electronic equipment. Without knowing it, they are engaged in a metaphysical experience on the threshold of religion, so it is not difficult for the greatest composers, Bach, Beethoven and Mozart, to carry them over. De Botton uses the word 'sublime' only once in his book, and experiences of the sublime are not uncommon in listening to music. It is impossible to say whether some parts of the choral movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony are religious or not. The same is true of Mozart's slow *concerti*. The sublime is of a higher order of experience, partly in heaven.

Now for the part of real religion that has been absorbed by a section of society. These are the arguments to the existence of God from nature. The basic insight is that we can learn something from a work about its maker—we learn something of a book about its author, and from the book of nature we learn something about the Author of Nature. We learn that He is responsible for the orderliness of the world, or that He is necessary, whereas the world is contingent, or that there is a First Cause of the world, which we call God.

Some of these arguments are as old as Aristotle, but it is the Church which has carried and fostered them throughout history, so much so, that they came to be regarded as Catholic intellectual property, just as the Talmud is Jewish intellectual property. Well into the 1960's, you could be sure that if anyone was advancing an argument for the existence of God, it was a Catholic.

But over the past fifty years, that has changed. The arguments for the existence of God are now part of mainstream Anglo-American philosophy, and there they live independently, debated by the most able philosophers in the world. That is a major achievement, largely unrecognised. Natural theology has become part

of the subject matter of Anglo-Saxon philosophy, and probably, world philosophy.

There was no campaign to bring that about. Catholic philosophers like Maritain, Gilson and Frederick Copleston in the 1950's and early 1960's believed that they had a reasonable case for belief in God, and kept on advancing it. The next generation, though less well known, did likewise, and soon, the profession as a whole took up the case for reasonable belief as an issue worth investigating, and now it is firmly established on the agenda.

That was a major achievement, comparable, though perhaps less momentous, to the Russian Church making the idea of the suffering servant part of Russian culture, and comparable, if Newman is correct, to the British Church making the idea of Providence part of the national psyche, though he made that claim in 1870.

The international philosophical community is, of course, a fragment of the whole, but potential fallout is immense. Witness Dawkins' impact in Britain, the United States and Australia. He represents the atheist faction of international philosophy. But he has plenty of able, though less well known, adversaries who deserve more publicity.

There is a prospect of spirituality being made part of the broader community. To some extent, that is already happening with yoga. Yoga is bringing meditation into the whole world, even into serious mental health care, and it looks like it's here to stay, to the benefit of everyone. Spirituality extends well beyond meditation, and most importantly, it is complemented by prayer. We should remember St Bernard's claim in his controversy with Abelard: 'We search in a worthier manner, we discover with greater facility through prayer than through disputation.'³

The contemporary world is interested in



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results. We must make it clear what the discoveries are. There are many, of course, but one which recommends itself to a busy world, is St Teresa's Fourth Mansion, in which we are united to God inwardly while engaged in our day to day tasks, whatever they may be. St Teresa writes that though she is experiencing physical turmoil, 'the tranquility and love in my soul are quite unaffected.'⁴ Elsewhere she writes that we may be 'wholly united with Him in the Mansions very near His presence while thought remains in the outskirts of the Castle'.⁵ Hence it is something that may be aspired to by a mother looking after her children, a bus driver driving a bus, a magistrate on the bench, or a chef preparing a meal—indeed by anyone engaged in work. How we get there from here is the next question, and there is no shortage of practical advice, as this journal attests.

So secular society contains something, music which can be so close to religion that it occasionally passes into it, and it has appropriated natural theology and is assimilating meditation. It is capable of absorbing spirituality as well.

Dostoyevsky was accused of trying to turn Russia into a gigantic monastery. That, of course, is going too far. But there is everything to be said for making secular society less secular.

REFERENCES

1. Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists*. Penguin Books. 80 Strand. London WC2R ORL England. p.291.
2. *Ibid* p.13.
3. Jean Leclercq, OSB, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*. Fordham University Press. New York. 1977. p.244.
4. St Teresa of Avila. *Interior Castle*. Trans. E. Allison Peers. Image Books. Garden City New York. 1961. p.78.
5. *Ibid*. p77.