

Dymocks Q&A with

Alain De Botton author of *Religion for Atheists*

You've worked on such fascinating and varied projects. What's next?

First is a trip to Australia this month (February) to talk about my new book. Then I'll be setting to work on an exciting new project: setting up The School of Life - an educational organisation I founded in London - in Australia. Something for the middle of 2012.

We've loved watching your tv series. Will there be one to accompany Religion for Atheists?

I'm trying to persuade some Australian broadcasters. I'd love there to be! But my first love is of course always books.

Was there a personal search for solace behind writing Religion for Atheists?

My books are always 100% personal. Writing is a kind of therapy for me. I started writing the book for the sort of reader (me) who thinks, 'I really can't believe in anything supernatural, the supernatural side of religion is impossible for me BUT I love so much here: the ritual, the architecture, the music, the connection with the past...' Why should we be forced to make such a brutal choice? Why is it 'either you have to believe in all kinds of implausible things, but then you get some great architecture etc.' OR, you believe in nothing supernatural, and you are then cast out into a world dominated by IKEA and CNN... The choice doesn't have to be so brutal.

Did your own view of religion change during the course of writing this book?

I grew more and more fascinated by the educational sides of religion. Religions are fascinating because they are giant machines for making ideas vivid and real in people's lives: ideas about goodness, about death, family, community etc. Nowadays, we tend to believe that the people who make ideas vivid are artists and cultural figures, but this is such a small, individual response to a massive set of problems. So I am deeply interested in the way that religions are in the end institutions directed to managing our inner life. There is nothing like this in the secular world, and this seems a huge pity.

What to you is the most attractive part of faith?

In my book, I argue that faith in God is, for me as for many others, simply not possible. At the same time, I want to suggest that if you remove this faith, there are particular dangers that open up - we don't need to fall into these dangers, but they are there and we should be aware of them. For a start, there is the danger of individualism: of placing the human being at the center stage of everything. Secondly, there is the danger of technological perfectionism; of believing that science and technology can overcome all human problems, that it is just a matter of time before scientists have cured us of the human condition. Thirdly, without God, it is easier to lose perspective: to see our own times as everything, to forget the brevity of the present moment and to cease to appreciate (in a good way) the miniscule nature of our own achievements. And lastly, without God, there can be a danger that the need for empathy and ethical behaviour can be overlooked.

Now, it is important to stress that it is quite possible to believe in nothing and remember all these vital lessons (just as one can be a deep believer and a monster). I am simply wanting to draw attention to some of the gaps, some of what is missing, when we

dismiss God too brusquely. By all means, we can dismiss him, but with great sympathy, nostalgia, care and thought...

Do you think the growing numbers of people going on pilgrimages like Santiago di Compostela is explained by something more than a fad?

What the secular world is struggling for is ritual. Ritual is a fascinating part of religion: think of the services, the meals, the trips.

The secular world believes that if we have good ideas, we will be reminded of them just when it matters. Religions don't agree. They are all about structure; they want to build calendars for us, that will make sure that we regularly encounter reminders of significant concepts. That is what rituals are: they are attempts to make vivid to us things we already know, but are likely to have forgotten. Religions are also keen to see us as more than just rational minds, we are emotional and physical creatures, and therefore, we need to be seduced via our bodies and our senses too: this was always the great genius of Catholicism. If you want to change someone's ideas, don't only concentrate on their ideas, concentrate on their whole selves. Send them on a journey, make them sing, give them a meal...

Religion is an issue that evokes passionate responses in people. Did you have any qualms about tackling such a fraught issue?

I am an atheist, but a gentle one. I don't feel the need to mock anyone who believes. I really disagree with the hard tone of some atheists who approach religion like a silly fairy tale. I am deeply respectful of religion, but I believe none of its supernatural aspects. So my position is perhaps unusual: I am at once very respectful and completely impious.