

## **Atheists are standing up for religion**

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Quite a few atheists are standing up for religion these days. And why not? After all, atheism is the thesis that God does not exist, and that thesis doesn't by itself imply that we should cast religion aside.

The most prominent thinker in the first wave of religion-friendly atheists was Alain de Botton, the Swiss-British author of *Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion* (2012).

De Botton worried that as fewer and fewer of us went to church, temple, mosque, or reading room, we would come to lose our sense of being members of a community with responsibilities to one another. We atheists, he wrote, have much to learn from religion about care, compassion, forgiveness, and duty. We belittle the inter-personal or social accomplishments of religion at our peril.

Coming after Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and the other so-called New Atheists, who thought, as Hitchens put it, that religion poisons everything, de Botton impressed many of the moderate godless as a calm and thoughtful person of discrimination, able to distinguish the baby from the bathwater.

Religious people, though, weren't impressed. De Botton simply took the non-existence of God for granted and then praised religion for its art, architecture, and music, and for the fellowship it has inspired and the insights into group psychology its leaders have employed so effectively. All bathwater, no baby.

The new wave of religion-friendly atheists is very different. Members of this group value deeply what they take to be central to religion as religion, unlike de Botton, who valued only what he took to be religion's effects. Many of the new wave, indeed, consider themselves religious, despite their lack of belief in God.

Now if you ask someone at the shopping mall what is the essence of religion, you might very well first hear about God, if not also worship, heaven, and angels. But only a moment's thought is enough to realize that that cannot be right, for Buddhism is certainly a religion, and many if not most Buddhists lack any belief in God. Jainism, for its part, seems fundamentally atheistic.

If you point out to the person at the shopping mall that not all religions are monotheistic or even theistic, you'll probably then hear something about goodness and spirituality. That's also what religious atheists would say religion is all about.

In *Religion without God*, Ronald Dworkin, the late American philosopher of law and politics, says that religion comes down simply to the sense that the world is intrinsically

meaningful and valuable. Some things are more important than others, some things are beautiful, and some things are right and others wrong—and none of that has anything to do with what you yourself happen to like or desire.

Important things aren't important because you think they are. Rather, their own importance calls on you to find them important. Helping the weak is not the right thing to do because it feels good; it's right because it's right, and its being right imposes an obligation on you. If helping the weak happens to feel good, that's because you are attuned to its rightness.

If you believe this, says Dworkin, then you are religious.

Religion, then, doesn't require God or worship or ritual. It simply requires an attunement to the fundamental reality of meaning and value.

The great divide, it turns out, isn't between the atheists and the theists. It's between the religious and those for whom the natural world is all the world there is.

The religious deny that nature is all there is, for the value in the natural world cannot itself be just another feature of that world. That is, the beauty of a mountain is not another natural fact about the mountain, alongside its elevation or shape. The goodness of charity is not a part of the physiology or psychology of charitable action. In addition to the world is the value of the world.

One thing that Dworkin is certainly right about, at least in my view, is that certain emotions, emotions prized by the religious, are not available to those who deny that the world is enchanted. For instance, we non-religious atheists cannot feel wonder or awe in the face of the vastness or intricacy of the universe. We do not find the fact of existence sublime or impenetrably mysterious.

Dworkin maintains, as his argument requires he does, that sometimes the religious experience wonder or awe precisely because they are present to that which is wondrous or awesome. We non-religious folk think the religious in their ecstasy are hallucinating.

Who is right? Dworkin agrees that only one side has the truth, but he also says that knowledge about such basic matters is inextricable from faith. Naturalism is as much a faith as religion, he contends, and the religious have within their faith access to all the evidence in favour of religion that they need.

We non-religious atheists might respond by noting that our lack of belief in a non-natural realm of meaning and value hardly prevents us from living fulfilling, happy lives. Since we don't seem to be knotted up by theoretical or practical problems, it's difficult to see how our denial of transcendence is just another faith.