

Atheism 2.0? Talking Back to a TED Talk

In 2011, atheist Alain de Botton gave a now-famous TED talk "Atheism 2.0." As part of a seminary class on apologetics, Probe intern T.S. Weaver was assigned to write a response to it, which we are honored to publish. First, here is a video of that TED talk:

Dear Mr. de Botton,

First, I want to say I admire your courage to share these ideas publicly and I do think you are a gifted orator. I am a Christian seminary student and have both many things I agree with and disagree with from your talk. I will try to touch on them in the order you bring them up in your talk.

To start with when you say, "Of course there's no God . . . now let's move on. That's not the end of the story. That's the very very beginning," I can respect that because I agree that

a truth claim regarding the existence of God is just the beginning. This truth claim informs our entire worldview and how we live. To me, knowing there is a God (the same conclusion to which avowed atheist [Sir Antony Flew](#) came) gives me meaning, purpose, knowledge of where we came from, where we are going, and how to live. I wonder from your perspective, though, how without a God, any of these key issues in life can be addressed. Without a God, where do we come from? What does life really mean? How do we differentiate between good and evil? What happens when we die?

Going further in your talk, I must say I too love Christmas carols, looking at churches, and turning the pages of the Old Testament. We have common ground here, so again, we do not disagree on everything.

However, evaluating your view again, I do not see how you can be attracted to the “moralistic side” of religion without the existence of God. You say you are “stealing from religion;” that I agree with as well. I wonder if you have thought, if you are truly an atheist, how can there even be such things as morals? How can you define good? In relation to what? Where does this come from? If there is some moral law, have you thought about where it comes from? Do you think that implies there must be some sort of law giver? In the atheistic worldview what is the moral law and who is the law giver?

You go on to say, “There’s nothing wrong with picking out the best sides of religion.” That sounds nice, but I disagree. You must either adopt it all or nothing, otherwise you do not have a worldview that makes sense. There will be self-contradictions all throughout your view. A perfect example as I touched on above is your idea of “Atheism 2.0.” It is impossible to adopt a moralistic side because without God there are no morals. There is no reason to have a moralistic side. This is a contradiction. Have you considered this?

As your talk goes on, you say some remarkably interesting

things I have not heard before, even from an atheist. Your claim the church in the early nineteenth century looked to culture to find morality, guidance, and sources of consolation is new to me. I would like to know how you came to this conclusion. Which denomination? Which church? What was your source of information? It is noticeably clear to me that the practice of the (Christian) church is to find all those things from Scripture and God. In fact, the Bible tells us in several places not to conform to culture. Here is one example from my favorite verse: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." (Romans 12:2) So, your claim is the exact opposite of what I as a Christian know presently and have learned about church history.

Furthermore, does not this refute how you opened your talk when you said, "We have done secularism bad"? You even say the church replacing Scripture with culture is "beautiful" and "true" and "an idea that we have forgotten." This is the very description of how atheists "have done secularism," is it not? From my understanding, atheism replaces Scripture with culture. Is this true, or am I missing something? If it is true, you have already done the reflection on how it is working and concluded it is "bad." Yet you want to "steal from religion." So, if your claim about church history is true, this is how it falls out: You think secularism has been done bad and want to instead steal morality from religion. And yet, religion (according to you) has gotten morality from culture (i.e., secularism). So, the very thing you would be stealing is what you yourself already called bad and would end up stuck with in the end anyway. Nothing has changed. Do you see how this is incoherent if it were true? Have you thought about this?

I do like your thoughts about the difference between a sermon (wanting to change your life) and a lecture (wanting to give you a bit of information). I also agree we need to get back to

“that sermon tradition,” and we are in need of morality, guidance, and consolation, because like you said, “We are barely holding it together.” And I do mean “we” to cover both the atheist and the Christian alike. This is exactly what Christianity is about. We cannot “hold it together” on our own. That is why we have a Savior, and we live dependently on God, the moral law giver. Now again, you cannot have morality without the moral law giver. Furthermore, if you get guidance from atheists preaching sermons are you not facing the same problem I wrote of in the earlier paragraph? Where is the guidance coming from? Culture? Have you considered this to be the blind leading the blind?

I also agree with your point about the value of repetition. I have so much information coming at me so fast that if I do not revisit it enough, almost none of it sticks. That is another reason I am repeating some of my points.

Now you mentioned one of the things you like about religion is when someone is preaching a rousing part of a sermon, we shout “Amen,” “Thank you Lord,” “Yes Lord,” “Thank you Jesus,” etc. Your idea of atheists doing this when fellow atheists are preaching passionate points is both clever and funny. However, as Rebecca McLaughlin (a Christian) pointed out in her book, *Confronting Christianity*, your examples of secular audiences saying, “Thank you Plato, thank you Shakespeare, thank you Jane Austen!” falls flat because of the examples you chose. McLaughlin writes, “One wonders how Shakespeare, whose world was fundamentally shaped by Christianity, would have felt about being cast as an atheist icon. But when it comes to Jane Austen, the answer is clear: a woman of deep, explicit, and abiding faith in Jesus, she would be utterly appalled.”

Your point on art is amazingly fascinating. You say if you were a museum curator, you would make a room for love and a room for generosity. While this sounds beautiful, there is a problem. This will sound repetitive (helping us both learn and remember), but it is just like the morality dilemma you have

presented earlier. If no God exists, what is love? What is generosity? How do you define it? Where does it come from? Why is it valuable? Why is anything valuable?

To beat the dead horse one more time (apologies) . . . In your closing statements you again you say all these things are "very good." Well, what is good? How do you define it? In relation to what? Where does it come from? How do you know that? As you earlier confessed, you are stealing from religion. These stolen values have no grounding if atheism is true.

I know some of the issues I raised were not necessarily the purpose of your talk, but in all, I wonder if you have considered how the facts and implications you presented correspond to reality. Do you think all the assertions you made cohere? Do you find your idea of Atheism 2.0 logically consistent and rational? If you could give a follow up talk, could you offer any way to verify your claims empirically? Could you supply answers to the questions of origin, meaning, morality, and destiny?

Sincerely,

A Christian – T.S. Weaver