

Can Atheists learn anything from Religion?

INTRODUCTION

In his book, 'Religion for Atheists', Alain de Botton argues that religion has a lot to teach atheists about how to live a good life. As an atheist he says he does not hate religion, and believes that 'many of the problems of the modern soul can be successfully addressed by solutions put forward by religions'. Ask the students for their first impressions of this view: can atheists learn anything from religion?

ACTIVITY

Show the first 5' 15" of the interview with Alain de Botton, found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQVjhCblI8o.

Divide the students up as far as possible into six groups. Give each group a card with one set of the following questions and ask them to discuss them for a good few minutes.

A. Community

1. *What can religions teach us about communities?*
2. *How do religions help people to meet strangers?*
3. *How does gathering for worship make people equal?*
4. *Do you think humans need to meet together?*
5. *Where do non-religious people gather in community without reference to wealth or status?*

B. Silence

1. *What is the importance of silence?*
2. *How do religions use silence?*
3. *How could an atheist learn from this?*
4. *What might the psychological benefits of silence be?*
5. *Are there dangers in practising regular periods of silence?*

C. Morals

1. *Why are morals important?*
2. *Do morals come from religion or can we have non-religious ethics?*
3. *Do we need an external reminder of goodness, such as 'God'?*
4. *Do atheists have any external reminders of goodness?*
5. *Does 'conscience' amount to the idea that 'someone' is watching our behaviour?*

D. Forgiveness

1. *What can religions teach us about forgiveness?*

2. *On the Day of Atonement, Jewish people set aside all their normal duties and review their year. They bring to mind all those people who they may have hurt or behaved unjustly towards. Why might this be a helpful activity?*
3. *What can atheists learn from this?*
4. *Is forgiveness too difficult for individuals?*
5. *How might (religious) communities help individuals to forgive?*

E. Pilgrimage

1. *What is a pilgrimage? Can you give some examples?*
2. *Why might going on pilgrimage be an important part of some, but not all, religions?*
3. *Why might embarking on a special (sacred) journey be a powerful opportunity to change?*
4. *Is there anything that could replace pilgrimage in helping people to get a new sense of purpose?*
5. *Would you ever go on a pilgrimage? Why / why not?*

F. Art

1. *Is it true that art is boring when it's in a gallery, but more emotionally charged when in a place of worship? Why / why not?*
2. *What might religion teach us about the purpose of art?*
3. *How could museums communicate more meaning in the way they display works of art?*
4. *When might a piece of art be called 'spiritual'?*
5. *Which forms of artistic expression do you prefer? Why?*

Get some feedback from each group and ask them to say whether they agree with Alain de Botton that it's OK to 'pick and mix' from the best ideas of religion.

CONCLUSION

Play some more of the interview with Alain de Botton if time allows and ask the students further questions such as:

- *What is the best way to understand a religion: as a social, psychological or spiritual phenomena?*
- *Does religion come from God?*