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Religion for Everyone

The decline of religion in the West has brought a decline in community spirit. Could the secular world draw useful lessons from religious life? Alain de Botton offers new ways to find shared meaning.

By ALAIN DE BOTTON



One key thing lacking in much of modern society is the sense of community provided by churches and other religious institutions. In a discussion about his new book, "Religion for Atheists," Alain de Botton talks with WSJ's Gary Rosen about how our sense of kinship and belonging might be reattained in a more-secular age.

One of the losses that modern society feels most keenly is the loss of a sense of community. We tend to imagine that there once existed a degree of neighborliness that has been replaced by ruthless anonymity, by the pursuit of contact with one another primarily for individualistic ends: for financial gain, social advancement or romantic love.

In attempting to understand what has eroded our sense of community, historians have assigned an important role to the privatization of religious belief that occurred in Europe and the U.S. in the 19th century. They have suggested that we began to disregard our neighbors at around the same time that we ceased to honor our gods as a community.

Vote: How religious are you?

This raises two questions: How did religion once enhance the spirit of community? More practically, can secular society ever recover that spirit without returning to the theological principles that were entwined with it? I, for one, believe that it is possible to reclaim our sense of community—and that we can do so, moreover, without having to build upon a religious foundation.

Insofar as modern society ever promises us access to a community, it

How religious are you?

- Great faith, frequent participation
- Faith but no regular participation
- Faith but no participation
- No faith

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or nurturing orchards will be left in no doubt that they have run contrary to the dominant mores of the powerful, who will marginalize them accordingly.

Religion in Secular Life: A Proposal



Thomas Greenall & Jordan Hodgso

A university alive to its true responsibilities would teach students about things like the tensions of married life, with books like 'Anna Karenina' and 'Madame Bovary' on the syllabus.

with a setting. It marks off a piece of the earth, puts walls up around it and declares that within their confines there will reign values utterly unlike the ones that hold sway in the world beyond. A church gives us rare permission to lean over and say hello to a stranger without any danger of being thought predatory or insane.

The composition of the congregation also feels significant. Those in attendance tend not to be uniformly of the same age, race, profession or educational or income level; they are a random sampling of souls united only by their shared commitment to certain values. We are urged to overcome our provincialism and our tendency to be judgmental—and to make a sign of peace to whomever chance has placed on either side of us. The Church asks us to leave behind all references to earthly status. Here no one asks what anyone else "does." It no longer matters who is the bond dealer and who the cleaner.

The Church does more, however, than merely declare that worldly success doesn't matter. In a variety of ways, it enables us to imagine that we could be happy without it. Appreciating the reasons why we try to acquire status in the first place, it establishes conditions under which we can willingly surrender our attachment to it.

It is the genius of the Mass to confront these fears. The building in which it is performed is almost always sumptuous. Though it is technically devoted to celebrating the equality of man, it often surpasses palaces in its beauty. The company is also enticing. As the congregants start to sing "Gloria in Excelsis," we are likely to feel that the crowd is nothing like the one that we encounter at the shopping mall or the bus stop. We gaze up at the vaulted, star-studded ceiling and rehearse in unison the words "Lord, come, live in your people and strengthen them by your grace." We leave thinking that humanity may not be such a wretched thing after all.

is one centered on the worship of professional success. We sense that we are brushing up against its gates when the first question we are asked at a party is "What do you do?," our answer to which will determine whether we are warmly welcomed or conclusively abandoned.

In these competitive, pseudo-communal gatherings, only a few sides of us count as currency with which to buy the goodwill of strangers. What matters above all is what is on our business cards. Those who have opted to spend their lives looking after children, writing poetry

Given this level of discrimination, it is no surprise that many of us choose to throw ourselves with a vengeance into our careers. Focusing on work to the exclusion of almost everything else is a plausible strategy in a world that accepts workplace achievements as the main tokens for securing not just the financial means to survive physically but also the attention that we require to thrive psychologically.

Religions seem to know a great deal about our loneliness. Even if we believe very little of what they tell us about the afterlife or the supernatural origins of their doctrines, we can nevertheless admire their understanding of what separates us from strangers and their attempts to melt away one or two of the prejudices that normally prevent us from building connections with others.

Consider Catholicism, which starts to create a sense of community



Zackary Canepari/Panos;

We all stand to learn something from the ways in which religion promotes morality, inspires travel, trains minds and encourages gratitude at the beauty of life.

of modern so-called "community centers," insultingly designed structures whose appearance paradoxically serves to confirm the inadvisability of joining anything communal.

The Mass also contains a lesson about the importance of rules for directing people in their interactions with one another. The liturgical complexity of a Missal—the way in which this book of instructions for celebrating a Mass compels the congregants to look up, stand, kneel, sing, pray, drink and eat at given points—speaks to an essential aspect of human nature. To foster a sense of communal intimacy and to ensure that profound and dignified personal bonds can be forged, a tightly choreographed agenda of activities may be more effective than simply leaving a group to mingle aimlessly on its own.

A final lesson from the Mass is closely connected with its history. Before it was a service, before the congregants sat in seats facing an altar behind which a priest held up a wafer and a cup of wine, the Mass was a meal. What we now know as the Eucharist began as an occasion when early Christians put aside their work and domestic obligations and gathered around a table (usually laden with wine, lamb and loaves of unleavened bread) in order to commemorate the Last Supper. They talked, prayed and renewed their commitments to Christ and to one another. Like Jews at the Sabbath meal, Christians understood that it is when we satiate our bodily hunger that we are often readiest to direct our minds to the needs of others.



Kyoko Hamada/Gallery Stock

The contemporary world is not lacking in places where we can dine well in company, but what's significant is that there are almost no venues that can help us to transform strangers into friends.

As a result, we may start to feel that we could work a little less feverishly, because we see that the respect and security we hope to gain through our careers is already available to us in a warm and impressive community that imposes no worldly requirements on us for its welcome.

If the Mass has done its job and we are awake to its lessons, it should succeed by its close in shifting us at least fractionally off our accustomed egocentric axes. It should also have given us a few ideas for mending some of the more dispiriting aspects of our fractured modern world.

One of these ideas relates to the benefits of taking people into a distinct space where they can be isolated from the usual ideology of the mercantile world. The venue itself ought to be attractive enough to evoke enthusiasm for the notion of a group. It should inspire visitors to suspend their customary frightened egoism in favor of a joyful immersion in a collective spirit—an unlikely scenario in the majority

In honor of the most important Christian virtue, these gatherings became known as agape (love, in Greek) feasts and were regularly held by Christian communities in the period between Jesus's death and the Council of Laodicea in A.D. 364. Complaints about the excessive exuberance of some of these meals eventually led the early Church to the regrettable decision to ban agape feasts and to suggest that the faithful eat at home with their families instead—and only afterward gather for the spiritual banquet that we now know as the Eucharist.

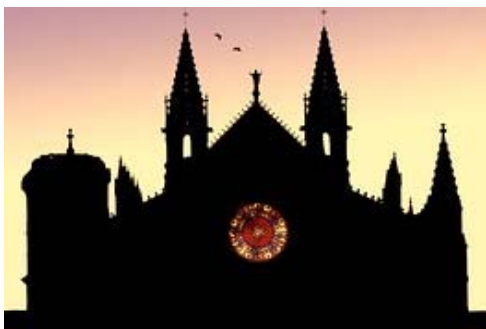
But the Mass is hardly alone as an instructive example, and community is certainly not our only unmet need in the modern world. My premise is that even those who aren't religious can find religion sporadically useful, interesting and consoling and should consider

how we might import certain religious ideas and practices into the secular realm.

Everyone stands to learn something from the ways in which religion delivers sermons, promotes morality, engenders a spirit of community, inspires travel, trains minds and encourages gratitude at the beauty of life. In a world beset by fundamentalists of both the believing and the secular variety, it must be possible to balance a rejection of religious faith with a selective reverence for religious rituals and concepts.

Religion serves two central needs that secular society has not been able to meet with any particular skill: first, the need to live together in harmonious communities, despite our deeply-rooted selfish and violent impulses; second, the need to cope with the pain that arises from professional failure, troubled relationships, the death of loved ones and our own decay and demise.

Religions are a repository of occasionally ingenious concepts for trying to assuage some of the most persistent and unattended ills of secular life. They merit our attention for their sheer conceptual ambition and for changing the world in a way that few secular institutions ever have. They have managed to combine theories about ethics and metaphysics with practical involvement in education, fashion, politics, travel, hostelry, initiation ceremonies, publishing, art and architecture—a range of interests whose scope puts to shame the achievements of even the greatest secular movements and innovators.



Masterfile
Cathedral La Seu in evening light, Palma de Majorca, Spain

It feels especially relevant to talk of meals, because our modern lack of a proper sense of community is importantly reflected in the way we eat. The contemporary world is not, of course, lacking in places where we can dine well in company—cities typically pride themselves on the sheer number and quality of their restaurants—but what's significant is that there are almost no venues that can help us to transform strangers into friends.

The large number of people who patronize restaurants suggests that they are refuges from anonymity and coldness, but in fact they have no systematic mechanism for introducing patrons to one another, to dispel their mutual suspicions, to break up the clans into which they segregate themselves or to get them to open up their hearts and share

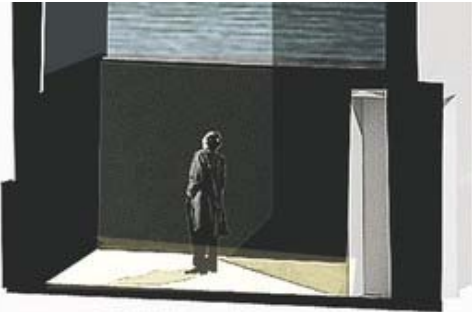
their vulnerabilities with others. At a modern restaurant, the focus is on the food and the décor, never on opportunities for extending and deepening affections.

Patrons tend to leave restaurants much as they entered them, the experience having merely reaffirmed existing tribal divisions. Like so many institutions in the modern city (libraries, nightclubs, coffee shops), restaurants know full well how to bring people into the same space, but they lack any means of encouraging them to make meaningful contact with one another once they are there.

With the benefits of the Mass and the drawbacks of contemporary dining in mind, we can imagine an ideal restaurant of the future, an Agape Restaurant. Such a restaurant would have an open door, a modest entrance fee and an attractively designed interior. In its seating arrangement, the groups and ethnicities into which we commonly segregate ourselves would be broken up; family members and couples would be spaced apart. Everyone would be safe to approach and address, without fear of rebuff or reproach. By simple virtue of being in the space, guests would be signaling—as in a church—their allegiance to a spirit of community and friendship.

Though there wouldn't be religious imagery on the walls, some kind of art that displayed examples of human vulnerability, whether in relation to physical suffering, poverty, anxiety or romantic discord, would bring more of who we actually are into the public realm, lending to our connections with others a new and candid tenor.

Religions are aware that the moments around the ingestion of food are propitious to moral education. It is as if the imminent prospect of something to eat seduces our normally resistant selves into showing some of the same generosity to others as the table has shown to us. Religions also know enough about our sensory, nonintellectual dimensions to be aware that we cannot be kept on a virtuous track simply through the medium of words. They know that their captive audience is likely to accept a trade-off between ideas and nourishment—and so they turn meals into disguised ethical lessons.



Thomas Greenall & Jordan Hodgson

Temple to perspective: This structure would represent the age of the Earth, with each centimeter of height equating to 1 million years. A tiny band of gold a mere millimeter thick at the bottom of the roughly 150-foot structure would stand for mankind's time on Earth.

Before our first sip of wine, religious communities offer us a thought that can be swallowed with the liquid like a tablet. They make us listen to a homily in the gratified interval between two courses. And they use specific types of food and drink to represent abstract concepts, telling Christians, for example, that bread stands for the sacred body of Christ, informing Jews that the Passover dish of crushed apples and nuts is the mortar that was used by their enslaved ancestors to build the warehouses of Egypt and teaching Zen Buddhists that their cups of slowly brewing tea are tokens of the transitory nature of happiness in a floating world.

Taking their seats at an Agape Restaurant, guests would find in front of them guidebooks reminiscent of the Haggadah (the text followed at a Passover Seder) or the Missal, laying out the rules for how to behave at the meal. No one would be left alone to find their way to an

interesting conversation with another, any more than it would be expected of participants at a Passover meal or in the Eucharist that they might manage independently to alight on the salient aspects of the history of the tribes of Israel or achieve a sense of communion with God.

The Book of Agape would direct diners to speak to one another for prescribed lengths of time on predefined topics. Like the famous questions that the youngest child at the table is assigned by the Haggadah to ask during the Passover ceremony ("Why is this night different from all other nights?" "Why do we eat unleavened bread and bitter herbs?" and so on), these talking points would be carefully crafted for a specific purpose, to coax guests away from customary expressions of pride ("What do you do?" "Where do your children go to school?") and toward a more sincere revelation of themselves ("What do you regret?" "Whom can you not forgive?" "What do you fear?").

The liturgy would inspire charity in the deepest sense, a capacity to respond with complexity and compassion to the existence of our fellow creatures. One would be privy to accounts of fear, guilt, rage, melancholy, unrequited love and infidelity that would generate an impression of our collective insanity and endearing fragility.

Thanks to the Agape Restaurant, our fear of strangers would recede. The poor would eat with the rich, the black with the white, the orthodox with the secular, workers with managers, scientists with artists. The claustrophobic pressure to derive all of our satisfactions from our existing relationships would ease, as would our desire to climb ever higher in social status.

The notion that we could mend some of the tatters in the modern social fabric through an initiative as modest as a communal meal may seem offensive to those who trust in the power of legislative and political solutions to cure society's ills. But these restaurants would not be an alternative to traditional political methods. They would be a prior step, taken to humanize one another in our imaginations.

Christianity, Judaism and Buddhism have made significant contributions to political life, but their relevance to the problems of community are arguably never greater than when they depart from the modern political script and remind us that there is also value to be had in standing in a big hall singing a hymn or in ceremoniously washing a stranger's

feet or in sitting at a table with neighbors and partaking of lamb stew and conversation. These rituals, as much as the deliberations inside parliaments and law courts, are what help to hold our fractious and fragile societies together.

—From "Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believers Guide to the Uses of Religion" by Alain de Botton, to be published March 6 by Pantheon. Copyright by Alain de Botton.

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