
Lent Without Religion?

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler,
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As Lent approaches, I was quite intrigued by the lengthy article, ["Religion for Everyone," by Alain de Botton](#), which appeared in *The Wall Street Journal* this past Saturday, February 18, 2012. Surely his book on the same subject expounds his argument; but clearly proposes that non-religious and secular people might learn something about "community" from the Christian tradition.

Indeed, the article seems to urge a non-religious religion! He says "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." Hence, a ["Religion for Everyone."](#)

I have two reactions. First, I certainly welcome the positive acknowledgements from De Botton: He says, *"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."

This is good and serious stuff. My second reaction, however, is to question whether the same sort of community that the Church has grown would be available to people who do not, or cannot, share participation in the specific Christian tradition. I remember a non-believing friend of mine, for instance, who spoke to me about church. "My church," he said, "is the folk dancing group I meet with every Friday evening. We are a close and committed group. We care for each other, and dancing is our common ritual each week." I think I knew what he meant, but I hope that the Christian Church is much sturdier than that.

Perhaps De Botton has the same sort of thing in mind when he proposes some sort of Agape Restaurant. He is right that eating together develops deep and ritual connection. But the Christian religion, in its history and complexity, contains much more than just dancing and eating. It is both those activities (well, we could use more dancing); and it is also story, and teaching, and service, and building, and prayer, and history, and pain, and wonder, and ... the Transcendent. I question whether we can truly find imminent community without a genuine acknowledgement of its opposite: Transcendence.

I am flattered, and a bit proud, that someone wants to appreciate, and even to emulate Christian community in our time. But I am skeptical that one feature of Christianity can be genuinely duplicated without including much of our other ancient tradition and practice.

What a surprise, then, to read on the very next day (Sunday, February 20, 2012), [a brief editorial in *The New York Times*](#)

that featured a similar argument to that of its "competitor," *The Wall Street Journal*! There, Verlyn Klinkenborg suggested that our culture might practice a kind of Lent without religion; ["the idea of Lent can be embraced by all of us, religious or otherwise."](#) Well! I had the same two reactions.

So, I leave it to Martin Marty to have a definitive reaction here. In [Sightings \(February 20, 2012\)](#), Marty accepts the favorable comments of De Botton, but Marty also proclaims the futility of an enterprise that tries to recreate religion without religion:

"Let me plug my [Martin Marty's] favorite analysis, George Santayana's words in [Reason in Religion](#). A religion for everyone? He writes:

"Any attempt to speak without speaking any particular language is [just as hopeless as] the attempt to have a religion that shall be no religion in particular. ... Thus every living and healthy religion has a marked idiosyncrasy. Its power consists in its special and surprising message and in the bias which that revelation gives to life." Its vistas and mysteries propound "another world to live in," and "another world to live in ... is what we mean by having a religion." ([Sightings, February 20, 2012](#))

I agree with George Santayana through Martin Marty! Yes, every healthy religion has its marked idiosyncrasies, and its weaknesses. But it is our religion, our language, our life. Churches, and synagogues, and mosques offer the world another world.

In that spirit, I invite you to enter this season of our Christian life, this season of Lent. Come to Church, where we will engage in holy community yet again. We will hear as full a presentation of the Christian story as we can, in forty holy days: pilgrimage, suffering, death, resurrection. Yes, we will eat together, too. We will be participating in a holy community that is both intimate and transcendent: the fullness of Christian Incarnation.

Sam Candler signature



The Very Reverend Sam Candler