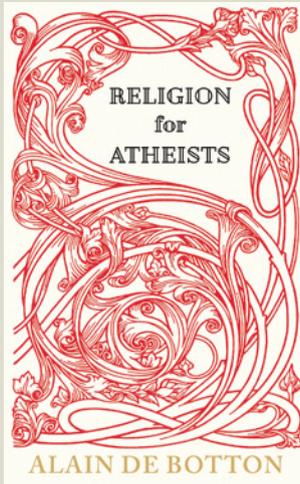


# Books

**Chris Green, Vice Principal of Oak Hill, has been reading two books recently, 'one almost unbearably trivial, the other deeply serious', which relate to faith in the modern world**



## **Religion for Atheists**

Alain de Botton  
Hamish Hamilton, 2012

## **In the Shadow of the Sword**

Tom Holland  
Little, Brown, 2012

Here are two wildly contrasting books. One is the most hilarious I have read in an extremely long while, and the fact that it is unintentionally so makes it even funnier. The other is one of the most significant books, and probably the bravest, I have come across since I first read Solzhenitsyn. I realise that you might think I am exaggerating, but I will explain why. Taken together they provide a fascinating window on 21st century Britain.

Take the funny one first. Alain de Botton is a prolific author whose field is pop-philosophy. He writes at a high cultural level (one previous book was called *How Proust Can Change Your Life*), but always with the aim of encouraging his readers to mine the depths of Western culture for themselves.

In *Religion for Atheists* he turns his eyes to the specifically religious elements of culture – mostly, but not completely, European. He is a secular, atheist Jew, but he is haunted by the

question that the great world religions have provided critical elements of human culture, which atheism is in danger of losing.

Religions are all false, of course, but they have provided sacred spaces, meanings, relationships, meals and art that have provided the necessary social

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cohesion to keep society functioning and its members content.

His problem is how to maintain those benefits when the carriers of those benefits are fading. So he suggests, with a nod to Auguste Comte, setting up a secular religion, a church for non-believers, equipped with all the benefits that religions provide but without the awkward God bit.

This is where it becomes unintentionally funny, because de Botton is so frightfully earnest. If you remember the *Just William* stories, you will be familiar with the serious, self-improving intellectuals and artists, often wearing tweed, that William encounters. They are hardly aware of William's mayhem, so caught up are they in their own Plans To Improve Humanity.

Alain de Botton would be right at home. His Agape restaurants with intense conversations, his concern for nurturing art and reminders of our finitude displayed in Piccadilly Circus are almost beyond parody – yet he is completely serious. If you doubt me, head for [theschooloflife.com](http://theschooloflife.com) and drink your fill.

Nevertheless, three proper thoughts emerged for me. First, fallen human beings long for the Creator God and all the good things he brings. God has put eternity in the heart of Alain de Botton, and so de Botton longs for the relationships, truth, love and guidance that a proper church should provide.

Repeatedly I thought that even if de Botton's programme delivered

everything he hopes for, it would be a pale imitation of what Christ brings. Our churches should be occasions where de Botton's dreams find their proper expression.

Second, I discovered that I am not very religious. At least, I sit quite lightly to many of the artefacts that de Botton thinks are central to faith. If you take a schools RE approach to religion and talk about 'holy places, holy seasons, holy people, holy meals' and so forth (which is pretty much de Botton's approach) then they are not particularly valuable spiritually to someone like me.

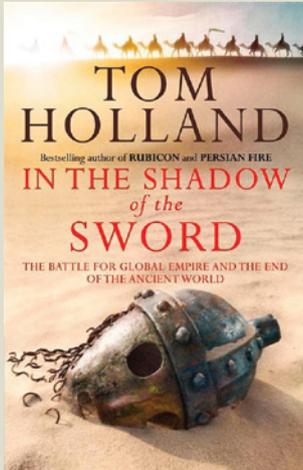
I love Mozart and Rembrandt, but they do not move me any closer to knowing God. Having discovered the reality of knowing God in Christ, even fabulous architecture is so much tinsel. By contrast, de Botton is in that familiar place where love of God's gifts blind one to God.

Third, and this is where I would start if I was reading this in a book group with non-Christians, de Botton has completely sold out to the values of materialism and marketing. His new religion, designed by Armani and sold by Procter and Gamble, is astonishingly compromised. He compares the sale of poetry books to the sale of Pringles, admires McDonalds and the Catholic Church for their passion for identical products around the world, and proposes a branded high-street chain of psychotherapists with a coherent retail identity.

**He compares the sale of poetry books to the sale of Pringles, admires McDonalds and the Catholic Church for their passion for identical products around the world, and proposes a branded high-street chain of psychotherapists with a coherent retail identity.**

At this point, I started to wonder if de Botton is really on our side after all, because I cannot think where else the hollowness of materialistic atheism has ever been so devastatingly displayed.

By contrast, meet Tom Holland. Holland is the successful author of several books of ancient history, two of which (*Persian Fire* and *Rubicon*) are ones I frequently recommend. *In the Shadow of the Sword* is his dauntingly vast account of the religious realities of the first 500 years of Christianity. If you dimly recall the feuds around the council of Nicea, this book will put flesh and blood on them, in gruesome and well-documented detail.



He gives the religious background to a variety of religious groupings, with a bewildering cast and endless battles, but never loses his sure footing in the detail. This is a quite brilliant piece of history writing, and deserves the highest recognition.

But that is not why it is significant or courageous. This is: buried in the back third, for the first time, an author has taken what scholars of the history of Islam have been quietly whispering and put it on public display for the rest of us.

The existence of Muhammad, the archaeology of Mecca, the textual history of the Qur'an, the credibility of the sources, the internal inconsistency of the data are all examined with a forensic eye and a judicious conclusion. Other scholars will now have to join

the debate in public. This is a hugely important book.

We are familiar with this debate for the Bible, of course, but we have had 150 years to think it through. It is commonplace for us to be confident that archaeology gives plausibility to the Bible, and that it speaks from and to its world. But mainstream critical scholarship is reaching far more radical conclusions for the historicity of Islamic claims than it ever reached for Christianity.

Holland deserves widespread support, because when the nature and content of this book becomes more widely known (which it will when it goes into paperback) he will face a firestorm of criticism, and some of it may come in an intimidating and unsafe way.

There have been other books which have done exposés of Mao, Stalin, Hitler or Pol Pot, and they have frequently been eye-opening. But my comparison of Holland with Solzhenitsyn holds, because of the physical courage that sometimes has to be displayed to make truth known.

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We Christians often wonder if the time will come when we will have to pay a price for speaking truly in public. Tom Holland, who I don't think is a Christian, has led the way.

What does placing these two books side by side, one almost unbearably trivial, the other deeply serious, have to tell us?

Tom Holland writes about the past, but he makes it clear that he is, in a coded way, writing about the present. There are, he concludes, billions of people on the planet today who believe passionately, but with massive differences, in One God. For them, for us, it is the central value of life which makes sense of others.

By contrast, de Botton's attempted raid on the tomb goods of religion looks arrogant, shallow and (even to a non-Christian) just plain wrong. To prove that, if you have Muslim friends take care as you introduce them to Holland. It will make some of our friends deeply troubled, but I suspect it may not be long before the book is put out of reach for many of them. This is not a secular age at all.