

Gates, Brian (2017) Book review: Religion and atheism: beyond the divide.  
Journal of Beliefs and Values, 38 (2). pp. 226-227.

Downloaded from: <http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/2803/>

***Usage of any items from the University of Cumbria's institutional repository 'Insight' must conform to the following fair usage guidelines.***

Any item and its associated metadata held in the University of Cumbria's institutional repository Insight (unless stated otherwise on the metadata record) may be copied, displayed or performed, and stored in line with the JISC fair dealing guidelines (available [here](#)) for educational and not-for-profit activities

**provided that**

- the authors, title and full bibliographic details of the item are cited clearly when any part of the work is referred to verbally or in the written form
  - a hyperlink/URL to the original Insight record of that item is included in any citations of the work
- the content is not changed in any way
- all files required for usage of the item are kept together with the main item file.

**You may not**

- sell any part of an item
- refer to any part of an item without citation
- amend any item or contextualise it in a way that will impugn the creator's reputation
- remove or alter the copyright statement on an item.

The full policy can be found [here](#).

Alternatively contact the University of Cumbria Repository Editor by emailing [insight@cumbria.ac.uk](mailto:insight@cumbria.ac.uk).

**Religion and Atheism. Beyond the Divide**, Edited by Anthony Carroll and Richard Norman, Abingdon, Routledge, 2017, xviii + 260pp., £100, ISBN 13:978-1-138-89189-0 (hardback), £24.99 ISBN13: 978-1-138-89191-3 (paperback) and £17.59 ISBN13: 978-1-315-52149-7 (ebook).

This is a very significant publication. If it's dangerous falsely to concretise religion and religions, it's no less so non-religious and atheism. Similarly, it's arbitrary to exclude any engagement with atheisms from inter-religious dialogue or to characterise humanism as necessarily anti-religious. By contrast this book brings Religion and Atheism together into the same room in a common universe which is their shared home. They may be mutually challenging, but categorically, in their respective preoccupations with questions of human meaning, they show a degree of shared intimacy which is remarkable.

The book is edited by Anthony Carroll of Heythrop, in Jesuit guise, and Richard Norman from Kent, kitted as a Humanist philosopher. In its background shaping it also owes much to Brian Pearce, renowned as the enabler of the Inter Faith Network, and here in the Foreword identifying questions at the heart of both the book and ongoing challenge. The two editors are joined by 19 others in producing individual chapters. Their perspectives are diverse ranging across literature and poetry, continental European philosophy past and present, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam, medical and political sciences, Humanisms and secularity.

One of the delights of the book is that it is so highly readable and well ordered – a wondrous mix of so many individual contributions of duly measured length. None of them is indifferent to the views of the others, but there are many disagreements, even between those within the same notional camps. All of them reveal that there are different ways of being religious, as also of being atheistic.

This is immediately evident from the opening chapter on Science, stories and the self. It consists of a dialogue between Raymond Tallis and Rowan Williams in which they tease out false stereotyping regarding, eg, cosmology and post-mortem prospects found in both religious and atheist discourse. How it might be possible to move beyond simplistic understandings is then successively unpacked in three sections: Knowledge and language, Ethics and values, Diversity and dialogue.

The first of these examines the notions of atheism, irrationality, myth, naturalism and the compatibility of science and religion. Nick Spencer highlights the centrality of metaphor, rather than literalism, for both science and theology. Drawing on his *Guardian* blog, plus mini surveys Julian Baggini cautions against assuming that liberal versions of religion predominate. By contrast Stephen Law explores why religious believers and non-believers see one another as irrational. Following a speedy overview of Atheism from Hume to Hardy, Jonathan Rée regrets the tendency of his own inheritance to bin all religion as superstition – religionists and

their opponents of all ilks 'are in it together'. Fiona Ellis expounds the case for an 'expansive naturalism' against the apparently more popular scientific reductionism. She also invokes the Levinas claim that the only way to know God is by being moral – not an extra, but inherent to the very substance of our humanity. Finally, Fern Elsdon-Baker a 'life-long atheist' defends the compatibility of science and religion by appeal to the complex lived experience of both scientists and those who identify as religious.

The section on Ethics and values is no less rich. The two editors kick in. Anthony Carroll develops the notion of 'pantheistic humanism', with dialogical rather than oppositional approach of listening to each other's questions. Richard Norman prefers 'humanistic naturalism', cultivated by sharing in the human repertoire of stories as the means to finding common ground for moral values and action. Robin Gill his co-chair of a Centre for Applied Ethics, then continues their many years of Anglican-Atheist dialogue, by pointing to social anthropology as illuminating the religious dimensions of the human condition and to 'mimetic culture' as fundamental to human caring and sharing, within and without religious faith. John Cottingham identifies some commonalities of spiritual affirmation across theistic, non-theistic and secularist outlooks; though he rejects any notion of their convergence, he identifies the thread of compassion and respect as at least a shared start. Anna Strhan, drawing on field work with open evangelicals and 'non-religious' gatherings, illustrates the over-simplification of much religion v. atheism representation, especially with regard to birth and death. For 'God', read 'Life'! Finally, Michael McGhee, in Buddhist vein, appeals to Blake for compassionate solidarity that transcends religious labelling.

The Diversity and dialogue section is full of tantalising prospects. Lois Lee celebrates diversity not only within and between religious identities, but also within and between meanings of being non-religious. Dilwat Hussain finds positive relationships between Islam and humanism, freedom of religion and secularity. In an analytic overview of Indic religious traditions, Ankur Barua reveals a depth in non-theistic religions and agnosticism often overlooked by western discourse on what constitutes reality. And a final four: Simon Glendinning - the proper debate isn't about the death of God, but how to create a worthwhile life; Andrew Copson – to overcome hostilities, there's need for greater recognition of plurality within all self-identifications, plus clear purpose in dialogue; Ruth Abbey - refocussing on 'immanence' and a 'sense of fullness' in life will reveal religious and atheist as 'siblings under the skin'; Angie Hobbs - Plato modelled dialogue as a source of clarification and deepening through mutual challenge.

This is a book which deserves to be prescribed reading for all prospective teachers (not only 'religion' specialists), journalists, and community leaders. It's hugely informative and a treasure for repeated reflection.