

William Charlton
Being Reasonable About Religion
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This book is not about whether religion is reasonable or about the reasonableness of any particular religion. The author discusses how we can be reasonable in considering religion, and the problems that arise. He also shows how a scholarly approach may differ from a popular one and explores the implications of each. One example will give something of the book's flavour.

Charlton tells us that as the invention of printing sped literacy across Europe there came with it a literalist understanding of the printed word. This developed when telescopes and microscopes came into use after 1600.

By the use of lenses and mirrors the world around and the skies above could be explored and described accurately. This was new knowledge, invisible to the naked eye, and it was spread by printing. Gradually people began to expect that what they read in print was an accurate reflection of objects and processes.

This led some people to read religious texts, and here Charlton instances Genesis, as an accurate account not only of the history of the patriarchs, but of Creation too. So the six days of creation came to be regarded as knowledge on the same level as the orbits of planets and the structure of plants.

Many people in the ancient world, and Augustine is a well-known example, accepted the creation stories in the Bible (and similar stories in other religions) as depictions of God's work and of how the world related to the divine. Believers hardly noticed discrepancies in the stories themselves because they had not been led to expect literal or scientific accounts. Of course they knew the difference between truth and falsehood, but they saw the truth of religious texts and traditions quite differently from the way twenty-first century people trust news reports or scientific textbooks.

This is just one example of the reasonable approach to a religious problem. Charlton handles many others and some are more obviously academic. We chose this one because of the current pressures of 'creationism' in some of our schools.

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