'Conversations on Religion' is a thought-provoking book. The format is an interview form, and in the different chapters we read of various people being engaged by the authors. The book began as research for a proposed theatre project. I am not sure if there was a theatre event created from these interviews, but the resulting book honours religion and spirituality. The interviewees are, among others, Christians of several denominations, Jews, Muslims, and atheists. All get asked basically the same questions so one can begin to compare the different attitudes towards religion (from friendly to hostile), understandings about the nature of God, the role of faith and belief in the individual's life. The conversations all include lively details about the person's life and faith journey (or journey away from faith in the case of some of them). Obviously, there are profound disagreements among them! Yet there is also a strong sense of intellectual give and take that can be very enlivening.

What the book is trying to do, I think, is to make people think seriously and personally about religion. I was able to maintain intellectual detachment until I read of a woman who left the Anglican Church and became a Roman Catholic. Everything she said antagonized me. That was when I finally entered the conversation myself. As I struggled with my thoughts and recognized my attitudes I realized that whatever else the book may accomplish, the clarification of attitudes and thinking is probably its greatest strength. I bet there is at least one person in the book with whom readers want to argue. Personally I did not have any problem with Richard Dawkins, he seemed completely off the chart to me. I loved Rowan Williams and Jonathan Sacks, and identified with many of the things Karen Armstrong said. But Ann Widdecombe knocked me off my horse. I hope everybody who reads this book gets knocked off their horse because then the questions become much more visceral: "Do you have a working definition of religion?" "How do you define faith?"

There is drama in the material, and yet the trajectory of the interviews is hopeful. The authors give Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth the last word: "The Bible is telling us that eventually there is peace between brothers, but it takes time."

Clark Berge SSF