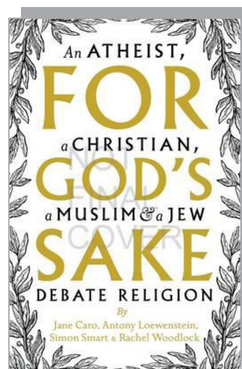
of Australia (RBA) deserves a lot of credit, but I do not think we can attribute Australia's relative economic outperformance to the conduct of monetary policy. Australia adopted inflation targeting along with the rest of the world. Australia's senior central bankers largely trained in North America and think much like Ben Bernanke. It cannot be said that Australia followed a different intellectual approach or that we know something foreign central bankers do not.

At the onset of the crisis, CPI inflation was running at an annual rate of 5%, nominal GDP at 11%, and inflation expectations were coming unhinged. In the absence of a global downturn, the RBA would probably have needed to engineer a severe domestic slowdown to bring inflation back to target. In that sense, the downturn in the world economy did the RBA a favour. Monetary policy is neutral in the long run, so I don't think we can give the central bank too much credit for a 23-year expansion.

Reviewed by Stephen Kirchner

For God's Sake



By Jane Caro, Antony Loewenstein, Simon Smart, and Rachel Woodlock
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$32.99, 308 pages
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Samuel Johnson did not think much of interfaith dialogue. This was not due to a lack of tolerance on the 18th-century sage's part but rather due to an abundance of tolerance. He believed it was best for a man to remain faithful to the religion into which he had been born, 'for that is the religion in which it may be said that Providence has placed you. If you live conscientiously in that religion, you may be safe.' Johnson himself was a committed Anglican, but he did not think it contradictory for a Christian to extend this tolerance to 'a disciple of Confucius' or 'a Mahometan,' since Providence had placed them in their own faiths just as surely.

The tolerance that pervades—suffuses and saturates even—the new book *For God's Sake* is quite a different sort. The driving force behind the book, author and TV personality Jane Caro, opens on the first page with the same hypothetical as Johnson: If you took the average Christian and gave him different parents in a different country with a different culture, would he still end up a Christian or would he simply adopt the faith of those around him? Caro, an atheist, assumes as Johnson does that upbringing is the decisive factor behind most people's religious beliefs.

Unlike Johnson, she does not believe that tolerance consists merely in leaving each man to the prayers his parents taught him. Her brand of tolerance places much more value on actively seeking common ground between faiths, and between faith and atheism. To that end, Caro gathered a Muslim, a Christian, and a (non-believing) Jew, and arranged for the four of them to have an extended e-mail dialogue on questions of religion—questions like 'What is a good life'; 'How do we know right from wrong'; and 'How do we account for evil?' The resulting book is not an academic study or a head-to-head comparison of the options on the world faith menu—it is not intended to be. It is simply the record of a friendly and wide-ranging conversation in which the participants are allowed to present their own personal stories of what religion (or its absence) means in their lives.

Caro herself presents the atheist case, and does her best to make unbelief sound natural, easygoing and commonsensical. 'I don't need the universe to have meaning or purpose, I'm happy for it just to be,' she says. Christianity may have inspired many of the works of art we still treasure, but 'beauty, art, music, literature … are really about

joy and pleasure, and I'm absolutely in favour of as much of both of those as possible.' For her, atheism allows the nonbeliever to have the best of both worlds. She takes the parts of religion that sound true to her—the golden rule and other such agreeable precepts—and leaves the rest.

But for all Caro's effort to make atheism sound perfectly splendid, she can't help striking the occasional discordant note that leaves the reader wondering whether her worldview is really so appealing. Midway through the book Caro relates the genuinely moving story of how, many years ago, her atheism helped her cope with her newborn daughter's health scare. It all turned out fine in the end, she concludes: 'Polly survived with no ill effects and is now a robust and productive 24-year-old.' Robust and productive? I suppose Caro would consider it condescending to have referred to Polly as 'lovely,' the word most commonly applied to daughters in previous generations. Perhaps it would have been, but at least it would not have made Polly sound like a factory farm or a sales team's record quarter. 'Robust and productive': families were not meant to be described in such utilitarian terms.

More damning is Caro's tendency to reveal, without really intending to, just how much her worldview relies on her having led an exceptionally easy life. I don't suppose many readers were impressed by her story of how, when she moved in with her boyfriend at age 18, 'my mother gave me—a full-time uni student with only a part-time job—an allowance, so I wouldn't be financially dependent on him.' Would her feminism have survived in its present cavalier form if her mother had not been in a financial position to subsidise her precocious cohabitation? Would her equanimity in the face of a godless universe survive if she did not live on a beautiful farm with a loving husband, making a pleasant living from such intellectually stimulating work?

Simon Smart, as the representative of Christianity, has the hardest job of any of the book's four contributors, given that his worldview is the least fashionable. He acquits himself well—unsurprisingly, since he is the director of the Centre for Public Christianity and has a master's degree in Christian Studies. His arguments are all clear and well reasoned, but even more important than *what* he says is *how* he says it. His warm and sympathetic tone is an eloquent refutation of many of the prejudices his interlocutors bring to the conversation—that Christianity is oppressive, misogynist, homophobic, absolutist. When Caro asserts that she has been 'unable to find any evidence at all of atheists (or anyone else) killing anyone in the name of atheism,' Smart is much more patient than I would have been in explaining that the death toll racked up by communists in the name of their atheistic creed in the course of the 20th century is so staggeringly colossal as to make the Salem witch trials look like a Sunday picnic.

It was canny of Caro to select religious studies scholar Rachel Woodlock as her Muslim representative, since Woodlock is a convert from the Baha'i faith to Sufism and, therefore, inclined to accentuate Islam's peaceful and mystical side. If anything, Woodlock's case for Islam is *too* enlightened and modern. She explains at one point how difficult situations can be to the human character 'like water to a clay pot, revealing where each otherwise unobservable crack is hidden.' She then lists some examples of the 'base behaviour' that can be revealed in this way: 'submission to authority, self-interest, and weakness to peer pressure.' It is odd that two of her three examples involve a person trusting himself too little, when I would guess that a far greater proportion of the sin in the world stems from people trusting themselves too much, inventing excuses to rationalise their own less than honourable wants and desires. Submission to authority is a good thing when the authority holds you to a higher or a better standard than you, in your self-indulgence, would willingly choose for yourself. If that weren't true, then organised religion would indeed be the blight on civilisation that Richard Dawkins believes it to be.

The less said about Antony Lowenstein, the better. Ostensibly the book's Jewish voice, he clearly has almost as much contempt for organised religion in all its forms as he has for the state of Israel, which he regards as the greatest evil afflicting the world. Here is one of his less vituperative statements:

> Any faith that attempts to explain why a young child dies … or says that marriage is the best outcome for couples and conflict can be soothed by prayer doesn't deserve to be taken entirely seriously.

So much for interfaith dialogue.

The painter Benjamin Haydon was a lesser light of the artistic circle that revolved around the Romantic poets Shelley and Keats, and, unusually for that clique, he was a sincere Christian. The flamboyant atheists of the group, Shelley especially, used to rib Haydon mercilessly about his faith, sometimes picking passages at random from the Bible and asking if he really believed them. Haydon got so fed up with these displays of arrogance that one day he decided to take his friends down a peg:

> We are prejudiced, you say, in favour of Christianity by education, and are not fair judges. You are prejudiced, I say, with the prejudiced fear of *having been* prejudiced by education, and therefore you are equally in the other direction.

If the authors of *For God's Sake* share a weakness, it is this prejudiced fear of *having been* prejudiced. The reader who subscribes to one of the faiths represented may therefore come away thinking that his or her champion's case came off sounding rather bloodless. But then, in the history of interreligious dialogue, bloodlessness surely ranks as a lesser evil.

Reviewed by Helen Andrews

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