



Atheism, Skepticism & Humanism

Dictionary of Atheism, Skepticism & Humanism

Bill Cooke

Prometheus Books, 2006.

Most dictionaries of this kind are compiled by an editor, who having decided on the entries to be included then parcels them out to a team of experts to write the articles.

Bill Cooke has carried through this immense task by himself, writing all but one entry. Since it runs to 606 pages and there are two to three entries to a page there must be about 1,500 entries in all. One can only marvel at the industry behind this production; not surprisingly it results from 'thirty years of eclectic reading'.

Bill says the dictionary is not intended to convert readers to atheism or humanism but to show how freethinkers of every persuasion have valuable things to say about a whole host of issues. To this end he offers 'a quick thumbnail sketch on many phrases, ideas, topics or persons'. The reader is alerted to useful cross-references by words in bold type and entries often end with titles of books for further reading. The dictionary concludes with an interesting calendar of important dates.

How well has Bill achieved his project? I have sampled many entries with great interest. What to select and what to ignore is, of course, always a problem with a dictionary of this kind. I wondered, for example, why he included entries on 'Mathematics', 'Arms Trade', Hitler, and Michael Savage, and did not include articles on Roger Bacon, Francis Bacon, John Toland, and Matthew Tindal. Why is there a full entry on Maurice Gee? But only a brief reference in it to his grandfather, James Chapple (immortalised as Plumb), when for this dictionary the emphasis could well have been reversed. Perhaps more serious is the omission of Auguste Comte, whose positivist philosophy is often said to be 'Catholicism minus Christianity'.

Most that I read (and I chose those I know something about) were clear and informative. But, in spite of not intending to convert readers to scepticism, Bill nevertheless makes quite clear, from time to time, what his own views are. For example, in the entry on 'reincarnation' Bill not only describes what the word means but goes on to explain why the belief is faulty. He is understandably critical of the New Age Movement but is overcritical in asserting that the Gaia hypothesis of the scientist James Lovelock has 'quickly degenerated into a New Age hodgepodge'.

But it is also easy for a reviewer to be too critical and not appreciate what an enormous task Bill set himself. So, in spite of what I have said, I believe Bill's Dictionary fills a real gap and I shall value it as a useful companion to the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church and my other dictionaries on religion.

Lloyd Geering