The publication of this anthology, edited by Paul Kurtz with the assistance of Barry Karr and Ranjit Sandhu, could hardly be more timely. Never have the relations between religion and science been of more political and social importance. Misunderstanding of both religion and science pervades our society. Sadly, this misunderstanding is as common among the most educated as it is among the least educated. The misunderstanding among the intelligentsia, while different from the confusion in the general public, is perhaps even more devastating in its social implications.

Kurtz begins the volume with “An Overview of the Issues” in which he previews the contents of the seven sections of the book: 1) Cosmology and God, 2) Intelligent Design: Creationism versus Science, 3) Religion and Science in Conflict, 4) Science and Ethics: Two Magisteria, 5) Scientific Explanations of Paranatural Claims, 6) Scientific Explanations of Religious Belief, and 7) Accommodating Science and Religion. Most of these short essays were earlier published in the *Skeptical Inquirer*, *Free Inquiry* and/or presented at a conference organized in 2001 by the Center for Inquiry on “Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?” A few essays by especially distinguished authors have been reprinted from elsewhere. The most celebrated authors include: Steven Weinberg, Daniel C. Dennett, Antony Flew, Arthur C. Clarke, Stephen Jay Gould, Richard Dawkins, Richard Feynman and Martin Gardner.

In his introductory remarks Kurtz also sketches some of his personal views. He urges, as he has in earlier publications, “the new skepticism.” “Skeptical inquiry,” he explains, is not skepticism “which emphasizes doubt and the impossibility of knowledge” but rather is skepticism “which focuses on inquiry and the genuine possibility of knowledge,” a form of skepticism
that “is essential in all fields of scientific research” (18). And he commends an ethics of belief that he deems appropriate to skeptical inquiry. “[W]e are justified in accepting only those beliefs that are based upon evidence and reason, and if there is no evidence either way or insufficient evidence, should we not suspend judgment? . . . If a person is entitled to choose to believe whatever he or she wishes, solely or largely because of personal feeling and taste, then ‘anything goes’” (19). Essentially the same as the ethics of belief famously associated with the nineteenth century mathematician-philosopher W. K. Clifford, “evidentialism” of this kind has been widely discussed in recent academic philosophy. In the current debate I am one of the philosophers who, though generally sympathetic with evidentialism, think that Clifford and Kurtz have overreached in their demand for evidence, but neither this anthology nor this book review is an appropriate place for a technical treatment of the ethics of belief.

I shall not attempt here to summarize the other 38 essays in the book. However, I should note that many readers will be pleasantly fascinated by the many disagreements among atheists and agnostics about how religion and science are related. In their editing Kurtz and his assistants have done a superb job of exhibiting those striking and healthy disagreements. I should also note that Kurtz has contributed three more essays to the volume: 1) “Examining Claims of the ‘Paranatural’: Life after Death,” 2) “Why Do People Believe or Disbelieve?” and 3) “Afterthoughts.” Each of these is a lucid and helpful presentation of crucial issues.

Near the close of the volume Kurtz departs from the scathing indictments of religion for which he is widely known and describes the positive role that religion can play in human life. Drawing on the thought of John Dewey, George Santayana, John Herman Randall, Jr., and other philosophers in the American tradition, he suggests that religion “presents moral poetry, aesthetic inspiration, performative ceremonial rituals, which act out and dramatize the human condition and human interests.’ In this interpretation of religion “as dramatic existentialist poetry, science and religion are not necessarily incompatible, for they address different human interests and needs” (357).

Readers will be disappointed if they expect to find original philosophical scholarship in this volume whose considerable value is of a different sort. The usefulness of the materials that Kurtz has assembled lies in their clear and engaging presentation of current debates of vital significance. The readability of the essays is so extraordinary that the book could be read with pleasure and profit by high school students as well as undergraduates and the general public. Let us hope that many high school teachers will have the dedication and courage to assign the book in their classes. If it is not already being done, I urge the publisher to launch a marketing campaign in secondary schools. Wonders would be wrought if millions of American teenagers were exposed to the book.

In closing let me suggest two ways in which the book could be made even more valuable. An essay might be added that explains—with vivid illustrations—the differences between “non-reductive naturalism” and
materialism, as it is commonly understood. When the contributors to this anthology proselytize for materialism, as they often do, I fear that many of the readers Kurtz would most like to reach will assume that a reductive materialism is being promoted. My second suggestion is more mundane—an index would be helpful.

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