



Media Release AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

## Religious scholars seriously interested in atheism

Atheists have always turned their gaze on religion but traditionally scholars of religion have had little interest in atheism.

That has changed with a new book that aims to go beyond that “us and them” conflict between religion and atheism to examine the complexities of the way different kinds of atheists experience belief or its absence.

*The Experience of Atheism: Phenomenology, Metaphysics and Religion* is a volume of essays edited by renowned French philosopher Associate Professor Claude Romano, a professorial fellow at Australian Catholic University, and Associate Professor Robyn Horner, researcher in religion and theology at Australian Catholic University.

The book is radical because it demands that theist and atheist take each other seriously and consider concepts such as atheistic faith, the “death of God”, and anarchic faith.

*The Experience of Atheism* is grounded in phenomenology, a philosophical approach which focuses on the ways things appear in experience. Associate Professor Romano is a world leader in this field of study, having won the *Grand Prix* from the Academie Française in 2020 for the whole collection of his philosophical works.

The book argues that the fact that religious faith has become not only optional but also, in many contexts, strangely alienated from society, changes the way people experience both religion and the lack of religion.

“Atheism developed as a response to religion at a time when religious faith was taken for granted. But in our contemporary secular society, being religious is the more unusual position. It can be more viable not to believe.”

Associate Professor Horner said being religious or being an atheist was often far more about how people experience the world than about an intellectual process which was amenable to persuasion through argument.

“Focusing on experience rather than belief means we don’t get tied up in the question of whose account of existence is undeniably true. We recognise that there are different

ways of experiencing the world. Some people have an experience of the world that includes God, some don't, and there are many places in between."

Associate Professor Horner said the book revealed the commonalities between the experience of belief and the experience of non-belief. "There is literal atheism just as there are fundamentalists in religion. These people experience certainty. They have a very clear unbelief just as some religious people have an absolute, literal belief.

"But there are other people who, for example, don't feel the presence of God. It's not an intellectual thing. It's not that they believe or don't believe. God is just not evident to them."

Others experience religion in terms of the impossibility of knowing or truly experiencing something which is, by definition, not knowable in the usual sense. Some of those people define themselves as religious and are concerned with open-ended faith. Others define themselves as atheists.

"For these people, their relationship to religion is about recognising that transcendence is in many ways unthinkable and having the sense that we can't ever really know," said Associate Professor Horner.

**Associate Professor Horner is available for interview.**

Media contact: Deborah Stone [Deborah.stone@acu.edu.au](mailto:Deborah.stone@acu.edu.au) or 0414 946 489

This email was sent to [news@cathnews.com](mailto:news@cathnews.com)  
Australian Catholic University, 2/21 Berry St, North Sydney, NSW 2060, Australia  
[Unsubscribe](#)