

New Models of Religious Understanding. Edited by FIONA ELLIS. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xi + 244. Price £55.00.)

In his 1966 *Principles of Christian Theology*, John Macquarrie described the contemporary state of philosophy of religion as ‘ruinous’. He was dissatisfied by the inability of the traditional rational arguments in favour of religious beliefs to establish their own conclusions convincingly—let alone engage productively with the foundational concepts underwriting the actual practice of the world’s religions. Yet, with Freud, Macquarrie also saw that ‘natural’ theology could never be replaced by its ‘revealed’ counterpart; rational supports will be necessary if religion and theology are to be protected, and indeed distinguished, from illusion and superstition. Macquarrie therefore called for a new style of philosophy of religion to take over the basic functions of old-style philosophy of religion without the attendant weaknesses.

As Macquarrie envisaged it, philosophy of religion ‘in the new style’ would owe to the phenomenological method, being descriptive rather than purely deductive, and would attend not only to the rational arguments that are provided in religion’s defence but also to the conviction that underlies and motivates them. It would take seriously the measure of participation involved in religious faith, which might enable it to be a far more effective apologetic tool than rational argument alone. And it would be existential rather than purely rational, taking the concrete, lived condition of human existence (which is not exhausted by its rational dimension) as its point of departure.

Despite valiant efforts by Macquarrie and others to develop philosophy of religion in this way, the import of his proposal has not yet been fully absorbed. *New Models of Religious Understanding* is an important step forward in this regard. Fiona Ellis describes the volume as exemplifying a different, more ‘humane’ way of doing philosophy of religion, which eschews the reductively analytic philosophical approaches that represent ‘a degenerating research programme’ (Timothy Williamson cited p. 3). The volume’s approach is synthetic as well as analytic, drawing from both sides of a number of entrenched divides: ‘analytic’ and ‘Continental’ philosophy (p. 2), theistic and atheistic religions (p. 4), and between religious belief and religious practice (p. 7). A major aim is to question the usefulness of the bald naturalism that has long dominated philosophy in general and philosophy of religion in particular.

A methodological touchstone is hermeneutics, pioneered by Heidegger and Gadamer. This approach to human *understanding* contrasts sharply with the baldly naturalistic philosophical approach that is more narrowly focussed on *cognition* and, for Cottingham, consists in the ‘specious *mimicry* of scientific procedures’ (cited p. 11). The more expansive approach taken here arises out of rational, argumentative methods but seeks to push these methods to their limits in its search after truth (p. 3). Renewed attention is paid to the experiential, affective, and practical dimensions of religious understanding, conceived as essential complements to the cognitive dimension, which old-style philosophy of religion has worn threadbare.

John Cottingham (Ch. 1), discusses humane models of religious understanding, which recognize that religion is not primarily about accepting hypotheses but ‘embrac[ing] a mystery’—grasping the world as a whole in a multi-layered way that is irreducible to ‘detached rational argument alone’ but also requires affective and ‘imaginative forms of involvement’ (pp. 26, 32, 40). For Cottingham, religious understanding requires practical engagement, which enables an ‘epistemology of receptivity’ that allows the relevant evidence to show up as such. He draws a parallel with psychoanalysis, whose object—the unconscious—he sees as similarly mysterious and whose explanatory power has also been questioned. Just as those who have undergone psychoanalysis ‘insist that their understanding of...mental life has been illuminated and indeed transformed’ (p. 38), so, *mutatis mutandis*, religious practice may effect analogous spiritual understanding and transformation.

Fiona Ellis (Ch. 2) rehabilitates the role of ‘theory’, correcting the false impression that ‘religious understanding has nothing to do with how things really are’ (p. 53). She argues that

such theory ought to consist in an ‘expansive naturalism’, that ‘exceeds the limits of scientific naturalism’ (p. 54), leaving room for religious understanding. Ellis agrees with Cottingham that the true aim of philosophy of religion is not to dissolve divine mystery but make the (theoretical) case that ‘this mystery is revealed and lived at the level of moral action and spiritual practice’ (p. 58). These opening chapters would have been improved by some definition of the central concept of ‘mystery’ and a clear account of how it can coherently be said to be ‘embraced’, ‘grasped’, ‘revealed’, or ‘lived’.

Edward Kanterian (Ch. 3) pays welcome attention to the concept of the hermeneutical circle, contrasted with scientific naturalism. Kanterian reiterates the suggestion that a mode of receptivity is ‘a prerequisite for grasping matters that would not otherwise come into view’ (p. 65), echoing Heidegger’s point that, since there is no escaping the hermeneutical circle, the key question is how to enter it in the right way. But he does not address the significance of the highly relevant fact that, in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer partly modelled his theory of understanding in general on religious understanding in particular.

Mark Wynn (Ch. 6) addresses religious understanding’s aesthetic dimension with particular reference to bodily demeanour and the appearance of the everyday world. On the latter, he cites William James’s description of religious conversion, where ‘A new heaven seems to shine upon a new earth.’ (cited p. 126). Wynn argues that the changes to patterns of salience wrought by religious experiences, at least sometimes, have an aesthetic character (pp. 129–30).

Kyle Scott (Ch. 7) distinguishes between understanding and knowledge, arguing that (religious) understanding is more epistemically valuable than (religious) knowledge because it includes a sense of how beliefs fit together, their contribution to the broader epistemic edifice, which can directly affect both our perception and behaviour (p. 136). Scott’s essay shows that it is to philosophy of religion’s detriment to focus exclusively on analysis at the expense of synthesis.

However, Silvia Jonas (Ch. 8), sets out an interpretation of theism ‘that treats God like the modal structuralists treat numbers’, preserving ‘objective truth-values for theistic statements while remaining neutral on the question of ontology’ (p. 152–3). This essay—‘philosophy of religion in its most analytic guise’ (p. 19)—demonstrates a continuing role for analysis in humane philosophy of religion by offering ‘an interpretation of theism that doesn’t preclude naturalism’ (p. 152).

Eleanor Stump (Ch. 9) contrasts philosophy (which addresses the abstract universal of wisdom) with theology (which engages with a person, God). Recalling Scott’s distinction between knowledge and understanding, Stump argues that knowledge of persons is irreducible to knowledge that something is the case and maintains that ‘knowledge of a person can be had without propositional knowledge that that person exists’ (p. 181). But in a religious context, this just amounts to the hubristic ‘Christians-before-Christ’ claim that atheists can have genuine knowledge of God without recognising it as such. The reader is left to speculate what Stump might mean by her undefended assertion that ‘God ... is somehow both being itself and also a being’ (p. 185).

This volume is a bold attempt at a more humane philosophy of religion that aims to broaden the discipline’s conceptual foundations. Many of the contributors engage with each other’s work and they do not always agree. Importantly, this allows the reader to eavesdrop on frank discussion of whether a broader philosophical focus on affect and religious practice might be used illegitimately to sidestep the more traditional ontological questions by just refusing to engage with them. *New Models of Religious Understanding* will be of particular interest to anyone who has read a work of philosophy of religion with John Macquarrie’s sense that there might be a better way. It will be essential reading for anyone working in the field.

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