

*New Models of Religious Understanding*, edited by Fiona Ellis. Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xi + 244. \$74 (hardcover).

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The title of this volume suggests that multiple models are presented each of which is a departure from older perspectives on religious epistemology. That is not quite accurate. The book is the culmination of a sub-grant of Stephen Grimm's larger Templeton project on the philosophy of understanding. The contributors to this volume consist largely of the persons involved in that sub-grant, and they together have been developing a single model of religious understanding, a model not without precedent. In fact, for the purposes of a short review, one can treat the volume as a large co-written paper developing certain existential, phenomenological aspects of figures like Dostoevsky, Levinas, Pascal, and William James each of whom appear in multiple essays in the book. I will proceed, then, with the useful fiction that the book presents one model to which each successive essay adds a layer. (I will, with apologies, not address the essays by Kyle Scott and Silvia Jonas.)

The core of the volume is John Cottingham's essay on "Transcending Science" and his prior work advocating for a "humane" approach to the philosophy of religion, which is referred to consistently throughout the book. Cottingham opens his essay very tellingly by connecting the decline in religious belief in the West to a rejection of classical theism and then segueing into a presentation of Swinburne's contention that theism is an "explanatory hypothesis" akin to a scientific hypothesis. The oddity of the connections here is worth poking at because it orients us to the project. On the one hand, there are many factors that can be invoked to explain changes in religious belief and practice in the West, and the scale of the phenomenon isn't a great match for the average person's attitudes on, say, divine aseity. On the other hand, Swinburne's use of confirmation theory and Bayesian models of probability in testing theism as a hypothesis isn't a part of his body of work especially reminiscent of the classical tradition.

For Cottingham, classical theism and Swinburne's work are united in being quintessential "left-brain" approaches to religious understanding (30). He seems to think that a dis-engaged rational stance is so misguided that, at least in this context, differences amongst options on that side of the ledger are moot. The advance of science has cast them all in a negative light. Moreover, he seems to think that an attitude towards religion that puts it into conflict with science already consists in a betrayal of religion's true nature however that conflict turns out.



The proposed theistic explanation for why we are here, when set against the intricately worked out heavy lifting achieved by . . . scientific theories . . . seems to many a modern ear radically impoverished. Worse, so far from doing what explanations are normally supposed to do, namely reduce our puzzlement, it seems if anything to increase it. (25)

[T]o invoke God is not to clear up a puzzle, but to draw attention to a mystery. . . . To be religious, in my view, is in a certain way to embrace that mystery, with hope and perhaps with joy, but certainly not to regard it as dissolved by an ingenious explanatory hypothesis called theism. (25–26)

Just as Cottingham finds the Swinburnes of the world misguided, so too with “scientific naturalism.” He finds fault with the scientific insistence that abstract theorizing as regimented and policed by the sciences is our only way of discovering important truths. Instead, Cottingham advocates a “right-brain” approach to religion which is praxis-based rather than creedal and that requires the development of moral and spiritual sensibilities. Rather than debating metaphysics on the basis of public evidence, the idea is that a way of life structured via religious practices develops one’s ability to tune in that part of the human experience associated with religion. Religious understanding of the sort that Cottingham is interested in is analogous to the understanding that aesthetic experience can foster, and, indeed, the experience of beauty is one of the important sources of religious understanding for him.

If we take Cottingham’s praxis based account as the core of the model, Fiona Ellis in her introduction and in her contributed essay seeks to draw out the dialogical utility of Cottingham’s humane approach. One might think of a praxis-based approach that focuses on human experience as a retreat. After all, even the New Atheists would be willing to acknowledge that there is such a thing as religious experience, that religious practices can foster these experiences, and that these experiences and practices can be valuable to some people. Ellis doesn’t think of it as a retreat. She introduces the idea of “expansive naturalism,” which takes the world as “scientific naturalism” describes it but then adds to that picture the claim that “the world itself is value-involving” (53). If we insist that value is real and not to be explained away but grant that the world of our experience is otherwise as the naturalist describes it, then the thought seems to be that the theist and the atheist have been provided substantive common ground. The theist comes to realize that the values experienced and embodied in a religious life are primary to religion and the philosophy of it; the atheist grants that the experiences and values in question are real. Based on this common starting point, we can make progress together, and for Ellis and in an apparent departure from Cottingham, there is hope that this progress will in part come in the form of advances in theory.

Edward Kanterian tempers Cottingham’s focus on our experiences of value, drawing our attention to the existential and phenomenological importance of our experiences of dis-value and self-deception. One of the things that comes into focus when we widen our phenomenological

aperture so as to let negative experiences in is that we realize that growing into the moral and religious sensibilities that Cottingham champions is also an un-learning of “the self-alienation with which each of us is burdened” (76–77). Likewise, David MacPherson highlights the way that the engaged religious stance we are juxtaposing to dis-engaged reason cuts against many of our natural coping strategies. The “disengaged stance is . . . natural to human beings” especially “in the face of experiences that are jarring, disconcerting, bewildering, or otherwise problematic” (81). On the other hand, “transfiguring love is an achievement” (86). Drawing on Dostoevsky’s character Father Zosima for inspiration, MacPherson emphasizes that the religiously engaged stance is actually a matter of walking “a path of re-engagement.”

To this now expanded core, Clare Carlisle adds the idea that growing into an engaged form of religious understanding requires the building up of habits in a roughly Aristotelian sense. Unlearning our self-alienation and opening our lives to the experience of love and value requires, in turn, the gradual re-training of desire. The re-training of desire in this case needn’t be opposed to grace, but rather can take the form of a progressive opening of the self to grace with the help of communal religious practices. “[P]ractice enacts, embodies, gives form to what Catholic tradition calls cooperative grace” (113). Mark Wynn’s contribution can be seen as complementary to this idea of the re-training of desire. He emphasizes the need for a religious person to have a transformed relationship with the aesthetic realm. Just as, in Aquinas, grace transforms the moral virtues that relate one to other earthly creatures, so it is that an integrated religious perspective should shape what one finds to be beautiful and thereby open one up to different experiences of aesthetic value than would otherwise be available. Highlighting the role that aesthetic goods play in the fulfilled religious life, for Wynn, helps us to make sense of the bodily character of spiritual practice because our experience of aesthetic value lies in both the perceptual and the embodied.

To this point the model threatens to be overly insular, a prioritization of 1st person experience and a rejection of the third-personal. In Eleonore Stump’s contribution to the volume, she applies her prior work to themes of common concern in the volume to emphasize the importance of the 2nd personal perspective. Her essay is in certain respects very different from the others in the volume. She shows no sign, for instance, of any worry that metaphysical naturalism has taken the explanatory high ground from the theist. If one thinks, however, in terms of the “left-brain” versus “right-brain” heuristic that Cottingham uses, the connection with Stump’s work should be obvious. It is not only private, existential experiences of value that can be negated by an over-reliance on dis-engaged reason but also relationship, as indeed, was already implicit in MacPherson’s essay on love. The need for a second-personal dimension to the model is only heightened if one thinks of God as a person or community of persons.

Of course, not all religions do think of the divine in personal terms, and thus, for all the irenic promise of a shift towards human experience in the philosophy of religion, Stump's essay helps bring into focus the fact that substantive and potentially divisive decisions have to be made in filling out the model as to how we characterize the nature of religious experiences. In his contribution, Keith Ward turns to the question of how one should think of religious diversity in terms of the model on offer and in so doing illustrates this issue. For Stump, God is a personal being with whom we can have interpersonal relations. Religious perspectives that do not think of the divine in personal terms may have a *de re* awareness of this personal entity and this *de re* awareness may be sufficient for many religious purposes. Impersonal conceptions of the divine, however, are in an important sense inferior to personal ones and the clearest and most accurate understanding of the divine is fostered through a history of divine self-revelation much as in our own intimate relationships. For Ward, by contrast, the problem of religious diversity is only really severe for religions that claim to be the beneficiary of "some active communication of information from the spiritual dimension to humans" (195–196). For him, the shift towards experiential insight and away from claims to credal knowledge opens up more room to affirm the value of more of the world's religions. Ward does not go so far as to affirm that all religions, or even all the major religions, are equivalent, but he stresses the aptness of an open and flexible approach to religion and the possibility of "multiple belonging" (204). Within Stump's framework, Ward's multiple belonging sounds like having an open relationship in a rather different sense.

One of the emphases of various essays in the book is the need for an integrated, engaged approach to religious understanding. Religious understanding is acquired by being lived and lived holistically. In the Cambridge Platonists of the seventeenth century, Charles Taliaferro finds exemplars of just such an approach. They emphasized that "philosophy is best done by not just thinking virtuously but living virtuously" (214). That is, part of an integrated, lived approach to religion is not just the uniting of religious practice and aesthetic sensibility but the exercise of the moral virtues. Taliaferro is keen to bring out the moral track record of the Cambridge Platonists who, for instance, opposed the mistreatment of native peoples on the basis of the value of all human persons. For Taliaferro, though, what allowed the Cambridge Platonists to be exemplars was more their being innocent as doves than their being (politically, socially) wise as serpents. Indeed, one of the main points Taliaferro would have us take away is that we should "shun the vices of strategic thinking" (226). Part of a fully integrated approach to religious understanding is being so committed to wisdom for its own sake that one forswears laying dialectical traps or hiding the weaknesses of one's views, viewing one's interlocutors more as partners than opponents.

In the foregoing, I have adopted a useful fiction. In so doing, I've summarized what I took to be the best from each essay and stitched together

a single model. Rather than trying to qualify the (actually rather remarkable) level of agreement in the volume by teasing out differences and disagreements I've passed over, I want to close by framing an objection or perhaps a caution to the model as I have presented it, which is again, largely composed of what I found most helpful in each essay.

Return to the brain analogy. As handy as it is to refer to different traits or processes as left-brain or right-brain, one is hard-pressed to find neuroscientists talking that way. Neuroscientists tend not to classify neural functions by hemisphere. That's too coarse-grained, and the majority of the sub-networks they do recognize are bilateral to one extent or another (cf. Stephen Smith et al., "Correspondence of the Brain's Functional Architecture During Activation and Rest," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 106 [2009]: 13040–13045). The modus operandi of the brain is to draw on both hemispheres. That's not to say that there aren't interesting differences between them but rather that in a neurally healthy individual, they complement each other. What is true of the brain analogy is true of "left brain" and "right brain" approaches to the philosophy of religion, or so I contend.

The danger, to my mind, in dichotomizing these different approaches to the philosophy of religion is that even the so-called right-brain approaches will be impoverished for being juxtaposed to the left-brain ones. Somewhat ironically, one of the differences that does exist between the two hemispheres is that right-hemisphere dominant processing tends to recruit more from the left hemisphere than vice versa (Stephen Gotts et al., "Two Distinct Forms of Functional Lateralization in the Human Brain," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 110 [2013]: 3435–3444). The nature, validity, and value of religious experience needs to be informed by a theoretical background that should itself be open to discussion, debate, and refinement of a "left-brained" character. A hemispherectomy is no more desirable in philosophy than anywhere else. That cuts both ways. Experiential resonance is an important check on the kind of reflection and analysis being associated with left-brain approaches. The problem with dis-engaged approaches isn't that they're using the wrong hemisphere as it were but rather that they're not using both to best effect. I don't know that all the authors in this volume would object to my point (Cottingham entertains and then rejects such a point on 35–36). Performatively, however, the authors tend to set up their positive projects with negative ones that proscribe resources of a left-brained character. In my opinion, the authors in this volume stand on firmer ground when affirming what they are for rather than what they are against. After all, for a model so focused on being expansive, holistic, and integrative, it would be a shame to find a fundamental failure to integrate left- and right-brained approaches at its foundation.