

made of Ravaisson's Christocentrism, for instance, nor is Weil's emphasis on natural and intuitive action interrogated in terms of connaturality (or virtue more generally, perhaps with the help of Ravaisson and Biran on intellectual habits). Consequently, the conclusion is largely suggestive and slips the bonds of the earlier chapters, particularly as it reaches towards Sallie McFague and theologies of the environment. Yet these are quibbles in a book that exercises such control over an enormously wide-range of material.

The endorsements of Kotva's book are laudatory but not hyperbolic: 'brilliant [...] compelling' (Sherman); 'pioneering' (Pickstock); 'excellent and absorbing' (Milbank). Perhaps the greatest compliment is to raise a question that would be unfair to many lesser works: whither ontology? On the one hand, it is the *object* of attention—God 'receding endlessly from comprehension' (p.173)—that determines the effort-grace paradox, but elsewhere a theologised *subject* whose effort, bracketed by grace on both sides, dominates. Indeed, the flux of paradox seems to be a structuring principle of Kotva's ontology, but it is unclear whether this indicates openness to process thought or a hint towards Maximus the Confessor's ontology of repose, *systolē* and *diastolē*. The latter is suggested by the approval of *phusike theoria* (p.175, suggesting an openness to Christos Yannaras's extended apophaticism) but in the end the former seems most likely, as Kotva hints towards a reconfiguration of divine simplicity: 'it is no longer possible to leave weakness and vulnerability out of a description of God' (p.130). But without the absoluteness of infinite simplicity, can paradox overcome nihilism? To this end, Christ appears in Kotva's index, but God is absent. Or perhaps God is the index?

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SCM STUDYGUIDE TO RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE by Jeff Astley, *SCM Press, London, 2020, pp. xi + 306, £19.99, pbk*

For many years I co-taught an undergraduate course on the psychology of religion. It was often difficult to find supporting texts for it that did justice to all the phenomena and issues from a psychological viewpoint while remaining open to wider disciplinary approaches. At the very least I needed these to include the theological and philosophical. Although not particularly committed to a psychological perspective, and certainly not an introduction to the psychology of religion as whole, had Jeff Astley's book been available at the time I should have been pleased to add it to our list of recommended reading. Equally well, it could be flagged as worthwhile reading on a philosophy, theology, or religious studies degree, or suit a wider, intellectually curious readership.

The book is appropriately billed as a 'study guide'. With its companion volumes in the SCM series its purpose is to provide carefully guided introductions to a specific topic 'aimed at undergraduates and other readers with a serious intent in learning' (p. vii). In this case the topic is the highly contested category of religious and spiritual experience (RSE). Astley takes this to refer to a variety of 'spiritual, religious, sacred, supernatural, transcendent or mystical experiences ... that appear to the person undergoing them (or to others) to convey or imply some sort of contact with or knowledge about a power, presence or reality *beyond themselves and their sense experience*, and frequently beyond the realm of Nature, the physical or whatever is located in space-time' (p. 3, italics in original). Using such a carefully crafted, comprehensive definition, he steers us skilfully through the terrain. Even-handed and hospitable in its treatment, the book is both a trustworthy, knowledgeable, and perceptive guide for the neophyte, and likely to open the eyes of his 'other readers' to issues and approaches otherwise overlooked.

Definitions out of the way, the text comprises a further nineteen, fairly short chapters, sensibly focussed on data, debates, and different disciplinary approaches. Each not only presents the issues in a clear and balanced way, but also, in quasi distance-learning fashion, includes exercises for the reader, referring frequently to key articles, well-selected guides to further reading, and the occasional glossary. The writing is clear and accessible throughout; the authorial voice modest and retiring.

Arguably, the meat of the book is in its third section where Astley addresses such questions as the objectivity of RSEs and their interpretation, challenges of cultural diversity, religious language and revelation, and much more. He skilfully deploys his obvious expertise to guide the reader through a conceptual, linguistic, confessional, and inter-disciplinary mine field. A particularly welcome chapter, for instance, complements the often transformative, synchronically dramatic, 'experience', with the slower burning, diachronic, life 'experiences', often cumulative, which are often as, if not more, profoundly spiritual and life-changing, drawing helpfully on scholars such as Keith Ward and John Cottingham. For my money, the maturing ability to appreciate Easter in ordinary over a lifetime's experience, in contrast to the Road to Damascus, grounds a more catholic understanding of the breadth of RSEs. (Or maybe this just reflects my prejudice that only those over forty can truly resonate to Wordsworth!) I also appreciated the careful treatment of the idea that RSEs are nothing but social and cultural constructions, (as opposed to the essentialist assumption that they evince intrinsic or built-in properties). Citing Ann Taves's suggestion, Astley argues that we might wish 'to abandon the constructivist axiom that beliefs and attitudes are always formative of, rather than consequent to experience' (p. 98). As he rightly asserts, the distinction between experience and interpretation is rarely clear cut with a complex interplay between the two. Again, I agree, and can only nuance this by adding that both essentialists and constructivists often seem trapped in the assumption

of *linear* causality (experience A is followed by interpretation B, or experience A is consequent on interpretation B); psychological science, in contrast, is rapidly converging on the notion that all causality accounting for human behaviour is *circular* and temporally extended, back and forth, from world-to-mind-to-world, or mind-to-body and back again.

Philosophical arguments for the objective validity of RSEs, and the manner in which they are described, are also sensitively presented. I confess that my knee-jerk response to many of the former, especially those associated with some proponents of Reformed Epistemology, has been that they often seem contrived and smack of special pleading. As for the latter, I probably veer toward the Wilesian apophatic (p. 141): the more we become convinced of the infinite and transcendent nature of God, the more we are likely to view much religious language as worthless straw or even blasphemous. Astley, however, persuaded me to suspend my scepticism and appreciate that both of these debates are worth revisiting.

The book draws most of its inspiration from Christian literature and associated commentaries, although its overall treatment is applicable to RSEs in other faith traditions. Whether the balance would suit readers committed to or specialised in the study of other religions I am unsure. There is also a chapter critiquing what is commonly a male dominated field and set of topics. Women's mysticism and religious experience have too often been ignored, and the whole construct of RSE can look quite different when not seen through male eyes. Again, the weight of coverage here might not satisfy everyone.

The last section itemises and illustrates the different disciplinary approaches to RSEs of psychology, philosophy, scripture, tradition, theology, sociology, and anthropology. Some of these chapters were brief and had something of a lecture handout feel, often merely showcasing selected, if seminal, papers. They also inevitably intersected, with appropriate cross referencing, with issues and debates discussed earlier, but I expect they will be helpful to those completely new to these subjects. Work on the cognitive neuroscience of RSEs was not discussed, a sensible omission given its often reductionist slant, but a useful reading guide to it was provided.

On the whole, this is religious studies at its best and a volume worth having. A sophisticated religious thinker, Astley walks several tightropes, carefully balancing between naïve evidentialism, confessional theology's *fides quaerens intellectum*, Protestant *sola scriptura*, reductive scientism, life-less analytic philosophy, and postmodern cultural constructivism. It is no mean feat to keep one's balance like this and to instruct at the same time.

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