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0521549892 - Emotional Experience and Religious Understanding: Integrating Perception, Conception and Feeling

Mark Wynn

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EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE AND RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING

In this book Mark Wynn argues that the landscape of philosophical theology looks rather different from the perspective of a reconceived theory of emotion. In matters of religion, we do not need to opt for objective content over emotional form or vice versa. On the contrary, these strategies are mistaken at root, since form and content are not properly separable here – because ‘inwardness’ may contribute to ‘thought-content’, or because (to use the vocabulary of the book) emotional feelings can themselves constitute thoughts; or because, to put the point another way, in religious contexts, perception and conception are often infused by feeling. Wynn uses this perspective to forge a distinctive approach to a range of established topics in philosophy of religion, notably: religious experience; the problem of evil; the relationship of religion and ethics, and religion and art; and in general, the connection of ‘feeling’ to doctrine and tradition.

DR MARK WYNN teaches philosophy of religion and ethics in the Department of Theology, University of Exeter. He is the author of *God and Goodness: A Natural Theological Perspective* (Routledge, 1999).

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For Kate

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First, therefore, I invite the reader
to the groans of prayer
. . . so that he not believe
that reading is sufficient without unction,
speculation without devotion,
investigation without wonder,
observation without joy,
work without piety,
knowledge without love,
understanding without humility,
endeavor without divine grace,
reflection as a mirror without divinely inspired wisdom.

Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God*

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Preface

*The objective accent falls on WHAT is said, the subjective accent on HOW it is said . . . Objectively the interest is focussed merely on the thought-content, subjectively on the inwardness. At its maximum this inward 'how' is the passion of the infinite, and the passion of the infinite is the truth. But the passion of the infinite is precisely subjectivity, and thus subjectivity becomes the truth.*¹

Why consider the significance of the emotions in religious contexts? In the course of this book, I hope to provide quite a number of reasons for doing so, by showing how the landscape of philosophical theology and philosophy of religion looks rather different from the perspective of a reconceived theory of emotion. But even casual reflection will reveal that arguments about the cognitive status of religious belief often turn on some understanding of the significance of the emotions. Here, for example, is John Macquarrie's summing up of a central strand of the naturalistic critique of religious belief in the nineteenth century and later: 'In the nineteenth century the drift of philosophy had been increasingly in the direction of a mechanistic and materialistic world view, and in England this was powerfully advocated by such thinkers as Bertrand Russell, and, later, Alfred Ayer. The natural sciences were taken to furnish the only basis for assured knowledge, and anything that smacked of religion or mysticism was treated as non-cognitive and banished to the region of "mere emotion".'² One might try to evade this critique by keeping emotion out of religion, or at any rate by separating the cognitive bit of religion from the emotional bit – but any serious examination of the psychology of religious belief formation will reveal, will it not, the shaping influence of various kinds of emotional commitment? On this

1 Søren Kierkegaard, in *Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, tr. David Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 181, Kierkegaard's italics.

2 John Macquarrie, review of Ralph McNerny, *The Very Rich Hours of Jacques Maritain: A Spiritual Life* (University of Notre Dame Press), *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 February 2004 (No. 5265), p. 28.

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point, Ayer and other critics of religion are surely right. The quotation at the beginning of this preface suggests a second response, one that does acknowledge the close connection between emotional and religious commitment: let us allow that truth in religion is not after all ‘objective’ (a matter of ‘thought-content’ or ‘what’ is said) but has to do rather with a quality of relationship (with ‘how’ we rehearse that ‘thought-content’, and whether we commit ourselves to it with the requisite passionate inwardness).³ The proposal of this book offers another response again, one which privileges neither the ‘what’ (as the first response) nor the ‘how’ (as the second): in matters of religion, we do not need to opt for (emotional) form over (objective) content, the ‘how’ over the ‘what’; nor do we need to rid ourselves of the ‘how’ to retain the ‘what’. On the contrary, these strategies are mistaken at root, since form and content are not properly separable here – because ‘inwardness’ may contribute to ‘thought-content’, or because (to use the vocabulary of this book) emotional feelings are intrinsically intentional (themselves constitute thoughts). Or because, to put the point in yet another way, in matters of religion, perception and conception are often infused by feeling. So in response to the question of why we should study the significance of the emotions in religious contexts, we might say: such a study offers the prospect of an account which is at once sensitive to the psychology of religious belief formation, germane to the key assumption of one central tradition of religious scepticism, and attentive to the possibility that the ‘how’ and the ‘what’ of religious thought are not always separable.

This book is also animated by the thought that a discussion of these questions is especially opportune just now. In recent years, there has been an explosion of interest in the emotions in a variety of fields, and most notably, for our purposes, in philosophy, neuroscience, and psychology. The central theme of this book is that these developments are potentially of far-reaching importance for our understanding of the significance of the emotions in religious contexts. Of course, there are a number of recent monographs in the philosophy of religion which consider the epistemic importance of the emotions. The outstanding example is perhaps William Wainwright’s *Reason and the Heart*. However, this work was published before the most recent developments in philosophical treatments of the emotions to which I have just alluded.⁴ Petri Järveläinen’s *A Study on*

³ Of course, Kierkegaard himself did not deny the ‘objective’ truth of Christian doctrinal claims.

⁴ William Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995). My reading of various historical figures, notably Newman, Edwards, and James, is much indebted to this discussion.

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Religious Emotions is a helpful discussion which does engage with these developments, but his interests are rather different from mine.⁵ There are also various texts which seek to integrate affective experience within a larger account of the epistemology of religious belief without placing the emotions at the centre of their analysis. A good example of this strategy is William Abraham's defence of 'soft rationalism'. This is a stance which retains a role for evidence and argument (unlike 'fideism') while also assigning cognitive significance to personal, affectively toned experience (unlike 'hard rationalism').⁶ The discussion of this book could be read as a filling out of the 'soft rationalist' option in ways that give particular weight to the epistemic contribution of emotional experience.

As I have suggested, the book can also be read as a reworking of various established topics in philosophical theology and philosophy of religion in the light of recent developments in the philosophy (and psychology and neuroscience) of the emotions. The key themes of the book are these: emotional feelings can function as modes of value perception – in relation to God, the world, and individual human beings (Chapters 1–3); they can also function as 'paradigms', and can therefore properly direct the development of our discursive understanding, in religious and other contexts (Chapters 4–5); and finally, representations of 'the gods' can be understood by analogy with representation in the arts (Chapter 6). Using these themes, I seek to re-examine the topics of: religious experience, the relationship of religion and ethics, and the 'problem of evil' (Chapters 1–3 respectively); the relationship of religion and art and the working of religious language (Chapter 6); the idea that 'feeling' may run ahead of 'doctrine' in the way suggested by William James and others (Chapters 4–5), and the idea that feelings, conceptions, and perceptions may contribute to complex wholes which cannot be understood reductively as simply the sum of their parts (a recurring theme). The discussion is underpinned throughout by a single presiding idea: that emotional feelings can themselves carry intellectual content. I also argue that in some cases, this content may not be otherwise available, in which case feeling's role may be not just constructive, but indispensable. Finally, in Chapter 7, I consider some religiously motivated objections to the idea that affects

5 Petri Järveläinen, *A Study on Religious Emotions* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Society, 2000). The primary differences are these: I shall focus on the role of 'feelings' in constituting (rather than just being caused by) thoughts, and I shall give more attention to the idea that religiously significant affects need not be evoked by any religiously explicit subject matter. I shall also order my discussion around various standard themes in the philosophy of religion.

6 William Abraham, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985), Chapter 9.

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can be assigned this sort of significance, and here I argue that my approach is in sympathy with at least one influential tradition of spiritual formation. The central proposals of the book are presented in summary form in Chapters 4-5, where I offer a more comprehensive examination of the developments in philosophy and psychology which provide the immediate rationale for my discussion (Chapter 4) and use this material to formulate four models of the relationship between emotional experience and religious understanding (Chapter 5). The upshot of the discussion is that we need to see religious understanding as a commitment of the person in their intellectual-behavioural-affective integrity.

In writing this book I have of course read with profit the various authors whose works are acknowledged in the text, but I have also benefited from conversations and written exchanges with many friends and colleagues. I would like to thank especially Peter Byrne, John Cottingham, and Peter Goldie, who very generously read and commented upon the typescript in its entirety, and discussed some of the key issues with me in person – thanks to them, the argument is better integrated with the wider literature, and has a much clearer overall focus. I would also like to thank two readers for Cambridge University Press, who offered both encouragement and detailed comment on early drafts of some parts of the book, which proved of great assistance in expanding and reworking the text for publication. I am also grateful to Brian Davies and Richard Swinburne, who first introduced me to philosophical reflection on religion, for their continued interest in my work. I have been fortunate too to have the opportunity to rehearse many of the themes in the book in presentations at the Universities of Durham, Exeter, Glasgow, London (King's College), and Oxford, and the College of St Mark and St John, Plymouth. I have also learnt much from conversations with my colleagues in the field, especially Tim Bartel, Douglas Hedley, Dave Leal, and Tim Mawson. I offer warm thanks too to my colleagues and research students in the Department of Theology at the University of Exeter for their intellectual companionship and hard work on my behalf, and also to my former colleagues, now simply my friends, in the School of Philosophy and the School of Theology of the Australian Catholic University, where my thoughts on these issues first began to take shape. My thanks too to my undergraduate students at Exeter for their vigorous and constructive participation in my 'Emotions, reasons, and faith' class. The text could not have been written without the generous assistance of the University of Exeter and the Arts and Humanities Research Board, which provided for a period of leave from my usual duties during the 2003–4

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