

Introduction

The View from Everywhere

Value ... is the very substance of exaltation, or more exactly it is the reality we have to evoke when we try to understand how exaltation can change into creative force.

Gabriel Marcel¹

Exaltation is at the heart of all religions. The aesthetics of religions disclose the values of the practitioners who shape the religion, and who, in turn, are further shaped in their practice and aesthetic experience. Religious life involves all the dimensions of aesthetics: beauty and ugliness, aesthetic emotions such as awe and love and hate, feelings of guilt and shame as well as joy and ecstasy, and a staggering range of artistic works. The field of aesthetics raises an array of religious concerns: Can we have aesthetically charged experiences of the divine? What is the relationship between beauty and divinity? In *Is God Invisible? An Essay on Religion and Aesthetics*, we investigate the aesthetics of religious life and values.

A major theme in this book involves bringing to light the relationship between the visibility and invisibility of persons and God. We are not always visible to each other. Due to racism, sexism, economic destitution, and other forms of oppression and divisiveness, some of us are ignored or shunned by society and deemed ugly and unworthy of attention. Moreover, each of us has a subjective life of aesthetically complex experiences of anguish, longing, and desire, which are elusive and often hidden from others. In this book we measure this invisibility in light of the belief in an all-seeing God, an ideal aesthetic observer and subject to whom all things are known and from whom no secrets are hid.² Divine omniscience may be described as *the view from everywhere*

¹ Cited by Kenneth Gallagher in *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1975), p. 93.

² Language borrowed from *The Book of Common Prayer* as used in the Anglican communion, various editions. We develop the God's-eye point of view, drawing not just on Christian tradition, but also from Judaism, Islam, theistic Hinduism, and forms of Buddhism that highlight the eyes of the Buddha.

insofar as it encompasses all actual and possible points of view.³ Given the unideal point of view that defines our human condition, we experience each other only episodically: Sometimes a face becomes visible for the first time simply because a flash of reflected light brings your eyes to see another. Or, fraught with urgency, a voice breaks through the noise and we hear an emotional vulnerability we had been ignoring. In so many of our interactions, it takes intentional attention, perception, and imagination to truly acknowledge the reality of others' subjective hopes, desires, fears, love, and hate. And our vices of vanity, envy, jealousy, self-serving rage, and contempt can easily lead to the willful concealment of others, banning them from our attention and concern. Just as it takes virtuous attunement to see each other, it may take a related attunement or openness to appreciate the importance of a God's-eye point of view (which affirms the reality of other persons' lives) and even an openness to the reality of a sacred, transcendent being (God, Allah, Brahman).⁴

The idea of a God's-eye point of view in aesthetics and value theory has been criticized as incoherent, a projection of male philosophers, and potentially exploitative. We respond to such charges, contending that an allegiance to a God's-eye point of view (or the view from everywhere) can be emancipatory and form an important ground for pursuing justice. We propose a God's-eye point of view in which *nothing is hidden*. Such a view provides vital support for grounding realism in aesthetics and ethics, as well as in making sense of the very idea of truth (there being truths that are not dependent upon human perception or language).

Our overall aim is to engage the religious dimension in all three areas of aesthetics: the affective nature of experience, the philosophy of beauty and ugliness, and the philosophy of art. Because each area involves experience, our methodology is *phenomenological*. In phenomenology (from the Greek for "that which appears"), philosophy is grounded in experience, so much so that *experientialism* would be a fitting synonym. *Experience* here is meant to be broader than relying only on the five senses plus memory and reason; in addition, there are aesthetic, ethical, and religious experiences; the experience of using the imagination; and experiencing the emotions and desires that

³ Divine omniscience has been defined as "God knows everything" and "every property and every individual is such that if the individual has the property then God knows of that individual and property that the former has the latter," A. N. Prior, "Formalities of Omniscience," *Philosophy* 37 (140), 1962, pp. 114–129. For a further account, see "Divine Cognitive Power" by Charles Taliaferro, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 18, 1985, pp. 133–140. For accounts of omniscience that explicitly address God's knowing the affective experience of others, see *Omnisubjectivity* by Linda Zagzebski (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 2013) and "God and Concept Empiricism" by Michael Beatty and Charles Taliaferro, *Southwest Philosophy Review* 6:2, July 1990.

⁴ It is possible to accept the validity of a God's-eye point of view, essentially what is known as an ideal observer theory, without believing there is a God or ideal observer. We address the ideal observer theory in Chapter 5.

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contribute meaning in our lives. Typically, phenomenology is distinguished from *analytical philosophy* with its stress on *analysis* (from the Greek for “to cut apart, divide”) of concepts and language. We do not see this as an either/or matter: while our principal methodology is phenomenological, we also draw on the resources of analytical philosophy. With the help of some analytical philosophy, we engage in a phenomenological inquiry into the aesthetic experience of persons with each other and the experience of a divine transcendent reality. We uphold what we are calling *aesthetic personalism*, the view that recognizes the central importance of the phenomenologically evident reality of persons. Persons of all ages, genders, ethnic, economic, social, sexual, religious, and political identities are valuable, self-aware subjects with aesthetic lives.

We also engage in the philosophy of the meaning of life in light of an aesthetic study of five great world religions and an alternative, secular naturalism. The topic of the meaning of life is receiving fresh attention after much neglect in the mid twentieth century. We believe that investigating the meaning of life must take religion and aesthetics seriously. Nearly all people throughout history have practiced some form of religion, and all people everywhere experience the aesthetic dimension of being alive in conscious and subconscious ways.

Our aim is not just to write about abstract theoretical matters, but to critically evaluate some museum practices and thus to contribute to the philosophy of museums (or museology). Philosophical and religious principles can enhance the perception of religious objects. We think that some religious artifacts should be approached personally, both respecting the persons or groups that made the objects as well as appreciating how some artifacts have a character or personality that invites us to view them as persons. We propose that some works of art should be recognized as possessing agency; sometimes works of art *do things*. A statue of the Buddha can invite you to meditate. We will critically consider cases when the personhoods of some religious art objects are respected and when they are not. An important qualification: we are not assigning personhood to some art objects the way some treat corporations as persons (with accompanying legal rights).⁵ We will, rather, be making a phenomenological point about how our experience of some religious objects can be akin to our experience of a healthy, embodied person who integrates desires and purposes.

A final chapter offers a personal guide in pursuing the study of religion and aesthetics. This chapter builds on some practical exercises Evans introduced to

⁵ We have reservations about treating corporations as persons legally and ethically, though we think that corporations can be experienced as having a character or personality. For a critical approach to corporations as persons see *On Caring* by Milton Mayeroff (New York: Harper Perennial, 1971), p. 7.

European curators and philosophers at the University of Glasgow. The exercises involve drawing from the observation of works of art.⁶

We remind readers that this book is *an essay*, not a treatise or encyclopedia. We do not address every philosophically and theologically interesting dimension of the relationship between religion and aesthetics.

Putting our book in the context of the current literature, we have sympathy with why some philosophers and theologians disparage philosophy of religion today. We believe this is largely because they do not appreciate its power to phenomenologically engage in the rich aesthetic dimensions of religious life and values. We seek both to engage these elements as well as to challenge what we believe are highly misleading caricatures of the concept of God and the sacred. Since the mid twentieth century, some philosophers have assumed that the God of the Abrahamic faiths is a nonnatural, disembodied person akin to a spooky but supremely powerful poltergeist. We have set out to reset the stage for a sounder, philosophically articulate religious understanding of the sacred in the Abrahamic faiths, Hinduism, and Buddhism. We are especially critical of the way in which critics of theism (David Hume, Bertrand Russell, A. J. Ayer, and others) depict God as an aesthetically anemic specter.

The disparagement by some people of mainstream philosophy of religion reminds us of a time when we witnessed a salvage operation in the midst of a disaster. On the afternoon of December 20, 1992, we arrived at a conference on science and religion held in Windsor Castle, England. A fire had broken out in the late morning. Despite the presence of 35 fire engines and over 200 firefighters, a constable welcomed us onto the grounds where firefighters were rescuing what they could as the fire gradually got under control. Today some philosophers and theologians seem to treat traditional philosophy or, more specifically, philosophy of religion, like a burning building, as depicted in “Burning Down the House? D. Z. Phillips and the Metaphysics of Theism” in which Phillips is described as seeking to undermine the metaphysics of classical theism.⁷ There are ample voices calling for the reform, re-visioning, or renewing of philosophy of religion, and some calling for the end of the field and even of philosophy itself. An article in the *Times Literary Supplement* has the title “Philosophy Is Dead.”⁸ We do not think this proclamation is accurate. (Perhaps we are somewhat battle hardened as one of us is also a painter who continues to paint through periodic pronouncements of the death of painting.) While we are not alarmed about the destitution of contemporary philosophy

⁶ This took place at a conference, “Philosophy and Museums: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Ontology,” in 2013. The conference was part of the international *Abstracta in Concreta* project that focuses on how abstract religious and philosophical ideas are represented (and sometimes misrepresented) in museum collections. Evans led participants to engage works of art by sketching them.

⁷ *Philosophia Christi* 9 (2), 261–270, 2007.

⁸ *Times Literary Supplement*, “Philosophy Is Dead” by Jonathan Ree, June 20, 2018. Interestingly, this review article of a book by Raymond Geuss concludes that Geuss’s case against traditional philosophy is itself philosophical and thus demonstrates that there is still life in philosophy.

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and philosophy of religion, we are committed in this book to fresh, constructive work that challenges the philosophical arsonists of our day. We do so, in part, by focusing on *what it's like to be religious* and its panoply of rich, aesthetically charged experiences and values.

Rather than picturing the chief task of philosophy of religion as salvaging objects from a burning castle, we commend seeing philosophy of religion more in line with the life and work of Al-Biruni (973–1050), one of the greatest of all scholars and scientists, known for his combination of impartiality and a passion for cross-cultural and especially cross-religious understanding. Fluent in Arabic, Farsi, Greek, Hebrew, and Sanskrit, Al-Biruni studied Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. While he was a devout Muslim, his reputation for fairness in addressing religious traditions other than his own is monumental; he is a model for us all today. Rather than burning down religious worldviews and their secular alternatives (metaphorically or literally), he sought to exalt – in the sense of lift up for us to see and assess – a multitude of religious worldviews and practices.⁹

While the medieval scholar Al-Biruni is our role model, closer to home we acknowledge our indebtedness to David Brown, Victoria Harrison, Douglas Hedley, Gordon Graham, Gwen Griffith-Dickens, Anthony O'Hear, Margaret Miles, Anthony Rudd, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Mark Wynn, among others, who have done groundbreaking work in philosophy of religion in the context of art and philosophical aesthetics.

⁹ As a scientist, Al-Biruni was also extraordinary, sketching an evolutionary account of life and geology. He measured the radius of the Earth and was off by only 200 miles (an error of less than 1 percent).