Gutting, Gary


In _Talking God: Philosophers on Belief_, Gary Gutting conducts a series of interviews with philosophers to determine the relevance and place of religion in contemporary society. On one side, “some people say religion has nothing important to teach us; it’s just a residue of long-discredited ways of thinking and acting.” While Gutting admits that he is “open to that possibility,” he rather “think[s] it’s more likely that religion—like art, music, and science—deserves the central place in human culture.” However, at the same time, Gutting doesn’t “assume that we have an adequate understanding of how and why religion is important” since “many religious believers don’t have an adequate understanding of the real truth of their religion.” While “philosophical and scientific critiques may well undermine the ‘self-understanding’ of various religions … it doesn’t follow that there’s not a truth in religion that believers themselves do not (at least explicitly) grasp.” Thus, Gutting’s stated “goal … was to see what this truth, if any, might be.”

The series of twelve interviews were conducted in 2014 for _The Stone_, the _New York Times_ philosophy blog. For each interview, Gutting has “added introductions … providing some background and context, as well as further comments at the end, giving [his own] take on the issues raised in each interview.” The interviews are arranged into a series of subgroups centered on a specific theme. In this way, the individual conversations in each subgroup are placed in dialogue with one another. At the same time, since all the interviews explore a set of similar issues, in the final effect of the whole book, each conversation responds to a lesser or greater degree to the others.

The book begins with a broad discussion of theism vs. atheism: “A Case for Theism” (Alvin Plantinga) and “A Case for Atheism” (Louise Anthony). Both interviews address the possibility of the existence or non-existence of God and hinge on the issues of the limits of knowledge and the role of experience in knowing, as well as addressing the implications of the philosophical “Problem of Evil.”

The next subgroup considers various philosophical perspectives that seek to expand the traditional definitions of religion. In “Religion and Deconstruction,” John Caputo sees deconstruction as an affirmation, which is open to “the transforming surprise, to the promise of what is to come in whatever we have inherited.” Deconstruction becomes a way to rethink religious traditions, reinvent them, and “give [them] a future.” Religion in a deconstructive sense has nothing to do with “saving supernatural powers” and is rather “a mode of being-in-the-
world.” Caputo argues that any deconstructive sense of faith must also embrace doubt and any hope also bears some despair and that religion allows us to navigate the interstices. Similarly, in “Experience and Belief” Howard Wettstein sees the question of God’s existence or non-existence as “the wrong idea for God.” He argues that, because God becomes manifest in “the experience of God, the real question is one’s relation to God, the role God plays in one’s life, the character of one’s spiritual life.” Like Caputo, Wettstein advocates a more open-ended conception of God, and says he is “not easy with the idea of a ‘complete explanation.’” In “Soft Atheism,” Philip Kitcher conceives of religion as “an ethical view that is entirely consonant with ... ‘a fully secular world.’” Kitcher advocates what he calls a “refined religion,” which “sees the fundamental religious attitude not as a belief in a doctrine but as a commitment to promoting the most enduring values.”

The next subgroup’s focus turns to the oftentimes contentious relation between religious belief and modern science. “Religion and Scientific Cosmology” deals with the issue of creation ex nihilo. Tim Maudlin finds most religious cosmologies are predicated on an anthropocentric model, which “has no basis at all in the structure of the universe.” Maudlin wonders if “there need[s] to be a nonmaterial cause as an explanation for the entire material universe.” Yet Maudlin does not reject the possibility that God exists. While “atheism is the default position in any scientific inquiry,” it “may be overcome.” In “Religion and Evolution” Michael Ruse takes up what Gutting believes is “the strongest scientific challenge to religious belief” insofar as “evolution undermines the very idea of a creator god.” The interview is not concerned with biological evolution but rather with the evolution of knowledge, which is conditioned by “human cultural understanding and experience” and controlled by “root metaphor[s].” Metaphors are “heuristic, forcing [us] to ask new questions,” and in so doing allow us to move forward and evolve. While Ruse refers to himself as “an ardent Darwinian evolutionist,” he does not “think science as such can explain everything.” Like Maudlin, Ruse still preserves an opening for religious inquiry, since “there are questions about what is real that science cannot answer and that religion might, in principle, be able to answer.”

The conversations are not exclusively confined to the Judeo-Christian tradition. In “A Muslim Perspective,” Sajjad Rizvi explores the conception of “revealed religion” in “Western monotheisms.” The conception of “one God” central to Western religions is challenged in “Hinduism: Divinity without God” (Jonardon Garneri). Finally, in “Buddhism: Religion Without Divinity” Jay Garfield challenges the notion of divinity itself as essential for a “religious” belief system.