


BOOK REVIEWS

Julian Perlmutter *Sacred Music, Religious Desire and Knowledge of God: The Music of Our Human Longing*

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Theologians have long appreciated that ‘faith comes from hearing’ (Rom. 10:17). But in *Sacred Music, Religious Desire and Knowledge of God*, Julian Perlmutter argues that by listening to sacred music, those without propositional belief in Christian doctrine can nevertheless gain valuable knowledge of the Christian God: knowledge grounded in desire for Him. Such knowledge can inspire a ‘journey of religious openness’, including Christian practice.

Perlmutter considers a question which might seem strange to philosophers whose research focuses on the epistemic rationality of Christian belief: ‘If one cannot believe that the God of Christian doctrine is real, how might one, nonetheless, remain open to the inestimable benefits that would be available if such a God *were* real?’ (5). In asking this question, *Sacred Music* responds to John Cottingham’s call for ‘humane’ philosophy of religion (see Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach* (2014)). On Cottingham’s account, humane philosophy of religion explores the rationality of religious belief and practice holistically: by examining emotional, moral, and cultural motives for faith alongside traditional arguments for the truth of religious beliefs. Perlmutter follows Cottingham in developing an ‘epistemology of involvement’ (2), which seeks to explain how the rationality of religious belief (and the understanding at which faith aims) is most readily evident to those who are spiritually ‘open’ and engage in religious practice. Detached observers are not in a propitious position to assess the credibility of religious doctrines, or to arrive at the epistemic goods which religions purport to offer.

Accordingly, Perlmutter is pursuing two tasks in *Sacred Music*. First, he develops a detailed account of how sacred music can inspire desire for the Christian God in non-theists, explaining how such desire can further lead to valuable knowledge of God (if He exists). Second, *Sacred Music* makes an apologetic case that for some non-theists – perhaps, including Perlmutter – the attempt to cultivate knowledge of God through listening to sacred music and wider Christian practice is rationally permissible (21–23; 150).

Following a brief introduction, chapter 2 explains some preliminary considerations crucial to Perlmutter’s main argument. He clarifies that he will examine the contribution which sacred music can make to the spiritual growth of ‘interested non-believers’ in Christianity. In Jamesian vein, interested non-believers are those for whom Christianity is a ‘live option’: they are sufficiently knowledgeable about and open to Christian belief and practice that exploring Christianity is a viable choice for them, even if they have low credence in its truth. Moreover, the relevant interested non-believers evince an

attitude of 'hoping acceptance'. That is, they 'accept' Christianity – resolving to regard it as true and to use it to guide their 'thinking, feeling and behaviour' (16) – because they hope that Christianity is true, and seek to recognize any truth which Christian discourse contains. Perlmutter grants that in committing themselves to Christian living, interested non-believers who doubt Christianity's truth may reasonably fear self-deception. But eschewing Pascal's wager, he charges that those who glimpse the possibility of transcendental fulfilment through relationship with God can reasonably engage in Christian practice without 'a careful weighing up of the potential gains and costs' (22).

The remainder of chapters 2 and 3 offers a detailed analysis of desire, although Perlmutter occasionally covers topics which appear somewhat extraneous to his central concerns. Nevertheless, at the end of chapter 3, Perlmutter offers an important explanation of the ways in which desire for objects grants knowledge of what they are like, or of what they would be like were they to exist. When one (i) desires something in a certain capacity, (ii) one's desire is realizable in a particular state of affairs, and (iii) one has some awareness of what would satisfy the desire, one gains 'desire-based knowledge' of one's object of desire (56). This is a form of 'phenomenal knowledge', as described in Jackson's 'Mary's Room' thought-experiment. For instance, one can learn something of what sort of partner would be able to satisfy one's desire for a romantic relationship, if one desires a fulfilling romantic relationship and if one has some experience of loving relationships. Such desire-based knowledge both grants knowledge of one's object of desire and discloses its personal and emotional significance. Importantly, one need not believe that something exists in order to desire it. Consequently, interested non-believers can desire God in various capacities, and thereby learn something of what He is like, to be able to meet their desires, if He exists and their desires for Him are appropriate.

In chapter 4, Perlmutter considers the role which music might play in generating affective states, elegantly rebutting the formalist arguments of Peter Kivy that music cannot be expressive of or arouse ordinary emotions. Drawing on the 'contour-theory' of musical expression, Perlmutter argues that music can arouse objectless 'moods' of which it is expressive, and that in virtue of its lyrics or wider context, music can generate affects with extra-musical objects. Thus, for instance, Mozart's setting of Psalm 117 ('Laudate Dominum') expresses 'effortless, radiant joy', and given its lyrics one might easily hear the piece as an expression of the joyful praise of God which can liberate us from fear and guilt (75). Naturally, attention to Mozart's piece might also move listeners to such praise themselves; or at least imbue a desire to praise God joyfully.

The fifth chapter of *Sacred Music* masterfully combines the insights of previous chapters to illustrate how listening to sacred music might inspire listeners to desire God, and thus generate desire-based knowledge of Him in interested non-believers. Perlmutter focuses on four pieces with different composers (Purcell, Rheinberger, Stanford, and Howells). Exploring each piece in detail, with attention to its text and its associations with broader Christian narratives and doctrines, Perlmutter shows how the pieces can generate desire for God in particular capacities. These desires grant distinct forms of desire-based knowledge of what God is or would be like to be capable of satisfying them. For example, Purcell's 'Hear My Prayer, O Lord' expresses a painful, desperate longing for divine help, which might arouse an analogous feeling in listeners. In feeling an analogue of such longing, listeners can understand something of what God would be like to be capable of fulfilling this desire for God in the face of severe suffering. God would require 'infinite resourcefulness: specifically, the ability to see more reasons for hope in a situation than any human ever could see, and the power to convey this hope to the sufferer in intimate, steadfast love' (95). Such desire-based knowledge of God grants both a vivid (if partial) sense of what God is like if He exists, and a sense of the value of relationship with Him. Consequently, such musically elicited desire can inspire interested non-believers

to become open to relationship with or experience of God, and might also influence the direction of their wider religious practice (e.g. their objects of prayer).

One might think that the author has now achieved the book's intended goal. However, the final chapter of *Sacred Music* problematizes the author's previously outlined epistemology. Perlmutter examines the relationship between the desire-based knowledge of God generated by sacred music and the understanding of God gained through 'contemplative prayer', as practised by Thomas Merton. The latter consists of immediate, phenomenal knowledge of God. It is infused by grace, and requires one to be 'freed of one's attachments to the things of ordinary experience' (124). Perlmutter's discussion is ostensibly driven by his suggestion that because contemplative prayer involves the 'purging or refining of one's desire for God', it provides a check that desire-based knowledge of God elicited by music is not merely a projection of one's needs or desires onto God (29; 121). But one suspects that the author is equally concerned to defend the rationality of engaging in contemplative prayer as a practice which is central to his own Christian tradition.

To this end, the author addresses two worries which suggest that contemplative prayer is incompatible with fostering desire-based knowledge of God through attention to sacred music. First, contemplative prayer involves desire for God as He really is, rather than desire to 'possess' God as someone who meets our spiritual or emotional needs. Second, contemplation is non-conceptual, and aims at a phenomenal knowledge of God in which all previous concepts or experiences of Him are revealed as inadequate. However, Perlmutter argues that the desires for and knowledge of God generated through listening to sacred music and contemplative prayer respectively are not too far divorced. Musically elicited desire for God need not be wholly possessive, nor need contemplative prayer unmask all concepts or experiences of God as entirely misleading. One might worry that because of the affective transformation involved in contemplative prayer, interested non-believers will have reason to forgo the latter; but Perlmutter suggests that sacred music's ability to make listeners feel restless and dissatisfied at life without God can rationally lead them to engage in emotionally transformative spiritual practices such as contemplative prayer. For Perlmutter this is of crucial importance, because contemplative prayer, which grants intimate knowledge of God, constitutes 'the heart of one's involvement in a religious life' (148).

Although Perlmutter sets himself a superficially straightforward task – to demonstrate that interested non-believers can somehow gain desire-based knowledge of God – the value of *Sacred Music* lies in its fine-grained description of how such knowledge can be instilled through music. The musical path to God which *Sacred Music* traces is not universally available, and Perlmutter's account largely engages with a single Christian musical and spiritual tradition ('Catholic' Anglicanism). But this narrow focus is appropriate if, as Cottingham suggests, motivations for and experiences of religious practice are highly personal. Accordingly, Perlmutter's study provides a valuable illustration of how humane philosophy of religion can develop an 'epistemology of engagement' to explain the rationality of pursuing a life of faith. Further, Perlmutter's individual treatments of desire-based knowledge, music's ability to generate affective states, and contemplative prayer possess independent value. *Sacred Music* will be useful for philosophers working on any of these topics, and *a fortiori* for any Christian epistemologists whose work might benefit from considering the epistemic value of desire for God, liturgical music, or religious practice generally.

However, Perlmutter's brief treatment of some epistemological questions might warrant further development of his argument. First, perhaps Perlmutter could draw on the Augustinian tradition that grace is necessary for the proper desire of God, to explain how interested non-theists with low credence in Christian theism can rationally engage in Christian practice. While sacred music might elicit desire for God, this seems

insufficient to motivate rationally many people who hold that Christianity is probably false to adopt Christian spiritual practice. This problem is acute since on Perlmutter's account, Christian practice transforms desire. Without a powerful and perhaps unpredictable (i.e. 'gracious') desire for God, many with low credence in Christianity should rationally judge Christian practice imprudent: not only are their nascent longings for beatitude unlikely to be fulfilled through the latter, but by adopting Christian practice their broader desires may be transformed so that they fail to seek natural goods properly. This difficulty remains even though sacred music sometimes leaves non-theists dissatisfied with their present life and longing for relationship with God. Like Odysseus' sailors, many non-believers without such 'gracious' desire for God should perhaps rationally stop their ears against the insatiable longings elicited by sacred music.

Second, Perlmutter might profitably explain how engagement with sacred music might equip interested believers to 'recognize [God] if he were eventually to become manifest in [their] experience' (115), other than by inspiring them to contemplative prayer or by making them 'open' to knowing God. Surprisingly, he does not discuss William Wainwright's suggestion that emotional transformation is important for the perception of evidence for theism (see Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason* (1995)), or Paul Moser's argument (e.g. Moser, *The Evidence for God* (2010)) that believers' emotional transformation itself provides evidence for the existence of a loving God. In particular, readers might wonder whether the fact that if the Christian God exists, He can satisfy many deep human desires evoked by beautiful music, itself provides evidence for His existence.

Sacred Music provides a refreshing and insightful discussion of how culture, aesthetics, and desire can motivate and enhance efforts to seek knowledge of the Christian God. Efforts to develop a philosophy of religion which takes these aspects of Christian epistemology seriously are well served by Perlmutter's work.

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Gorazd Andrejč and Daniel H. Weiss (eds) *Interpreting Interreligious Relations with Wittgenstein*

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One of the virtues of this edited collection is the diversity contained within it. There is diversity to be found in the uses made of Wittgenstein's writings, reflecting the diversity of ways of understanding religion found in Wittgenstein's work. Andrejč, in his introduction (3), suggests that there are four dominant ways in which Wittgenstein depicts religion: the nonsensicalist, existentialist, grammaticalist and instinctivist conceptions