

**Michael C. Rea, *The Hiddenness of God*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. xii+224 pp. \$30.00 (hbk).**

Adam Green  
Azusa Pacific University

That Michael Rea's much anticipated monograph on divine hiddenness is an important contribution to the hiddenness discussion goes without saying. Indeed, it should be required reading for anyone interested in philosophy of religion. Rea has given us a model of clarity, incisiveness, and at times courage as he pursues an approach to divine hiddenness that can satisfy desideratum derived not only from philosophy but from biblical studies, theology, and a sensitivity to religious trauma.

This review has the advantage, dubious but real, of coming late enough that Rea's book has had a number of competent reviews of it published already. Charity Anderson<sup>1</sup> and Michelle Panchuk<sup>2</sup> have given us very nice summaries of Rea's main line of argument for whether divine hiddenness should constitute a defeater for belief in God, raising pertinent questions and worries about Rea's approach along the way. In this review, I will take the liberty, after a comparatively brief summary of Rea's argument, to work backwards focusing on what Rea says about religious experience so as to bring out the tradeoffs of approaching hiddenness in the way Rea does.

For Rea, the problem of divine hiddenness is a matter of violated expectations. The fact that many of us do not experience God as showing up for us in a way we can recognize as loving or showing up for us at all runs athwart what we would expect if God existed. Putting the problem in this way, of course, invites us to ask whether our expectations are appropriate. Much like the skeptical theist casts doubt on our ability to judge whether God and the sufferings of our world could coexist, so we have to interrogate what expectations it is reasonable for creatures like us to have for how the divine would manifest itself.

Rea appeals first to divine transcendence. According to Rea, even a moderate account of transcendence relative to the biblical witness and Christian tradition calls into question our expectation that we would reliably recognize God's presence and love. Rea takes the otherness of God implied by transcendence to mean that we cannot think well in a non-analogical way about God's characteristics and what it would take to exemplify them.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Charity Anderson, "Michael C. Rea. *The Hiddenness of God*," *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*. <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/the-hiddenness-of-god/>.

<sup>2</sup> Michelle Panchuk, "The Hiddenness of God by Michael C. Rea," *Faith & Philosophy* 36, no. 2 (2019): 280-285.

<sup>3</sup> Rea allows that revelation is an exception, but even here, it's hard to put too much weight on this exception given that revelation has to draw on words familiar to us independent of revelation, which would at best apply to God analogically and/or on experiences which, as we'll see, end up being experiences of natural events influenced by religious background beliefs, which, again, have presumably at best analogical contents.

The limits of analogy for understanding God and what might be expected of such a being is underlined by his second main argument, namely, that God's love should not be expected to be ideal. It may be perfect in the sense that it is not flawed, violates no duty of God's, and is sufficient for ultimate human flourishing. That is consistent with God having other interests that do not concern us or benefit us which explain dimensions of hiddenness. Invoking Susan Wolf's argument against moral saints, Rea thinks that God wanting union with us over any other thing should not be something we expect of God. In fact, he sees in the biblical witness reason to think that we could not bear an unlimited union with God.

A helpful way of thinking about what Rea is up to here may be to think of it in terms of the problems we have delimiting the scope of analogies in non-analogical terms when it comes to God. One wants to say that God is loving but without limitation, and thus to employ our ordinary understanding of "love" when describing God is analogical. Yet, one might wonder to what extent we really understand what "without limitation" means here. There are a number of ways to think about what constraints on love we have. Not all of them seem coherent to remove, and it might not be desirable for others to be abrogated. Thus, one might doubt that we are in a position to employ an analogical understanding of God's love in a way that would allow us to have reliable expectations for how that love would lead God to show up for us.

Yet, Rea is unwilling to leave matters thus. If all we are left with at the end of the day are analogies for God's character that we can't delimit, then who's to say that the better analogies for God aren't negative ones, e.g. God as criminally negligent parent? Moreover, the Bible and Christian tradition is replete with language that relates God to positive relational categories. One might well wonder given Rea's first two lines of argument how those categories could be more apt than negatively valenced ones, but Rea has at least two more moves to make.<sup>4</sup>

Rea offers us a model for how it could be that positive religious experiences of God are more widely available than one might think. He, likewise, provides a reading of the story of Job that, at least in part, suggests how God might relate to those who find negative relational analogies for God apt. He describes how relational experiences that are ultimately positive might be possible for someone despite the, presumably temporary, aptness of impious protest. I want to focus this review on these moves, especially the first.

For Rea, all religious experiences are cognitively impacted. That is, our prior beliefs and perhaps other of our standing mental states influence what we experience and how we experience it. He remains relatively neutral on how this influence goes, but he is quick to provide examples that show that both positive and negative cases, expert perception and biased projection, fall under what he has in mind. On the one hand, this allows us to explain the diversity of religious experience in terms of, for instance, diverse background beliefs. It also provides a ready explanation for why at least some beliefs based on religious experience might be bad, but Rea thinks highlighting the way that the character, content, or interpretation of our experiences may be shaped by our background beliefs does not necessarily impugn them. Because God is the creator and sustainer of our world and everything in it, ordinary, natural experiences whether of events outside of us or of our own

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<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this review, I will not address every wrinkle in the last chapters of Rea's book. For instance, the fit of Christ's incarnation with Rea's thought is an interesting topic that, unfortunately, we cannot pursue.

minds, are reflective of divine agency. If our background beliefs allow us to conceive of our experience as reflective of the divine, then those background beliefs are pointing us in the direction of something true because God's agency is a necessary part of explaining whatever the object of our experience is.

The catch, however, is that Rea's model denies that God enters into "special" causal relationships. It is important to Rea that his model of religious experience be such that God gives everyone an equal chance. This is important for reasons pertaining to divine hiddenness in particular. If, for instance, God approaches one person Teresa with special opportunities to experience God that are not afforded to another person Bertrand, then it looks like God has been unfair to Bertrand or at least that a negatively valenced analogy for how God relates to Bertrand has been rendered apt. God would not play favorites. Thus, one might think it a point in favor of a model of religious experience if it holds that God approaches Teresa and Bertrand in the exact same way. Qua creator and sustainer, God treats everyone the same. Thus, positing any positively valenced causal relationship unique to God's relationship to one person or subclass of persons, the Teresas for instance, is automatically suspect in a way that God's sustaining agency is not. Rea's model invites us to consider how far we could get with no special causation.

Rea's thought here is not without precedent. One is reminded, for instance, of Maimonides' account of what a prophet is. For Maimonides, the divine emanation is completely impartial but the prophet has a receptivity to the divine that the non-prophet does not have which allows the prophet to speak eternal truth into the contingencies of his or her cultural moment.<sup>5</sup> God, like the sun, shines on the righteous and the wicked equally and in the same way. The difference, though, is that for Rea the divine relates to us through purely natural events that we then interpret in religious ways. Religious cognition is a matter of cognitively impacted experiences of things like the literal sun. By way of example, Rea says of Moses at Mt Sinai that the encounter of Moses with God was, in fact, Moses' experience of a storm which he, via cognitively impacted cognition, experienced as the Sinai event with which we are familiar. All theories of religious experience imply something about those who don't have them, if they do not presume a full-blown account of divine hiddenness. The same goes for theories of divine hiddenness. Moreover, any package of theories of presence and absence will run the risk of implying that some class of persons is in serious error about what they experience and why.<sup>6</sup> A useful way of categorizing treatments of divine hiddenness, then, is to ask whose experiences are being invalidated and why.

Return to Moses at Sinai. Moses' takeaway according to scripture and tradition is not simply that God created the universe or that God sustains the world (or storms) in existence. Supposedly God communicates in a particular way by, for instance, giving the people of Israel a code of living that will mark them as God's peculiar people. Why, one might wonder, is

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<sup>5</sup> More specifically, scholars are receptive via their reason and prophets via their reason and imagination. Cf. Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, translated by Chaim Rabin (New York: Hackett, 1952), 135-137.

<sup>6</sup> Consider, for instance the Jonathan Edwards quote with which William Wainwright made us familiar early on in the hiddenness discussion. One could explain all experiences of hiddenness as due to our "dreadful stupidity of mind" which manifests itself in a "sottish insensibility." What makes this an unpopular tack to take in the literature is not a conceptual lacuna but the distastefulness of applying it to all groups who experience God as hidden. William Wainwright, "Jonathan Edwards and the Hiddenness of God," in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, edited by Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 102.

Moses' experience or his relating of it to the people of Israel apt? It cannot be in virtue of any special causation on God's part because that's been prohibited. The prohibition on special causation also presumably excludes the expression of divine intent in patterns of natural experience. It can't then be that Moses picks up on propositions particular to him and his situation due to his expert perception. If those patterns are there to be picked up on, then one has special causation. I suppose that one could posit that the code we know as the law of Moses has been programmed into storms from the beginning of the world in a way that is blind to whether anyone is viewing the storm and who they might be. We can't have God leaving the code there because God knows that Moses will crack it eventually though, lest we have an exercise of divine agency that would be prohibited on the very same grounds that foreclosed special causation in the more straightforward sense. God seeming to play favorites before the foundation of the world is no better than playing favorites thereafter.

One is left with the question of how any content in a religious experience that appears to be responsive to the presence or state of an individual human could possibly be apt. Particularity, on Rea's model, must always come from the cognitive contribution of the individual in a way that floats free from any pattern unique to the event which is being detected. This is because, once again, responding in a way patterned to fit a particular individual and anything about their circumstances that doesn't generalize to all other persons would involve special causation. It ends up, then, that the price of Rea's package of views might be rather high, not least because experiences that involve particular content being had by founding members features in quite a number of religions, including, of course, Christianity. Only those religious experiences that say something generic about God and possibly something generic about God's relation to the created order are candidates for aptness.

Rea reads the Job story as an important one for thinking about how God relates to us when we relate to God through analogies that reflect negatively upon God. In God's interchange with Job, God shows that God is as terrifying and as other as one might fear. Moreover, God does not directly contradict Job's negative depictions of God. In saying that Job spoke rightly of God, one might see God as validating, if not the content of Job's accusations, at least the levelling of them. Rea says that what is most important in God's speech is that God shows up in a whirlwind and yet shows Job that God has room for Job even with his accusations. The storm of God's presence will not destroy Job. Indeed, it is in Job's protests that Job experiences God as importantly present.

There is a poignant vulnerability in Rea's meditation on Job, and I am hesitant to poke at it. Yet, there is an important tension here between how Rea reads Job and his general model of religious experience. Rea's response is importantly dependent on the idea that God shows up for Job, that God responds to Job's plight. If we plug in the rest of Rea's discussion, however, God showing up is equivalent to Job having a cognitively impacted experience of a whirlwind. Moreover, insofar as Job experiences God as relating to Job in Job's particularity, including the particularity of his protests, Job's religious experience is not apt. He has cognitively contributed something to the experience that presumes special causation. It ends up then that what God really does for Job is sustain a universe in which a suffering creature can cognize a naturally occurring whirlwind in a way that allows him to think God has taken his protest seriously. After all, if Moses had been on hand instead of Job, maybe he would have responded to the whirlwind by writing down a few more laws.

One might wonder, though, whether the first half of the book, the argument from transcendence and what I'm choosing to construe as our limited ability to judge the limits of divine analogy, can be detached from the second half with its model of religious experience and of divine validation of impious protest. There's some reason to wonder whether the two are in tension anyway. Where, for instance, do we get the idea that God must treat every person in exactly the same way and that special causation presumes favoritism if not from some cognitive appreciation of how norms with which we are familiar apply to God?<sup>7</sup> Yet, at the end of the day, one might think that the trade-offs that show up in the model of religious experience have a way of popping up in the first part of the book as well.

Consider, for instance, a passage Rea makes repeated use of in his motivation of his account of transcendence, Isaiah's famous statement that God's thoughts are not our thoughts and God's ways are not our ways. To Rea, this underlines the way in which God is other than and different from us. Thus, approaching God as too relationally familiar brooks on sacrilege if not idolatry. It's certainly the case that God's morally-laden otherness is there in the passage. Yet, the passage in context is an explanation of a divine invitation. "Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near" (Is 55:6). We are told God's mercy and pardon are available to the wicked. How could that be? The answer is that God's ways are not are ways. God's otherness is not simply an explanation of God's cognitive inaccessibility but the way God's manifest goodness violates our expectations.

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<sup>7</sup> There is a similar tension between the argument against ideal love and the discussion of transcendence. Consider, for example, this passage, "As I see it, however, part of what it is for God to be genuinely and perfectly personal is for God to be someone with interests and desires distinct from and not necessarily oriented around those of others, projects that further those interests and desires, and a personality that is at least partly expressive of them" (74). The inference is from personhood as we experience it, aka the fact that codependence is a lesser expression of being a person, to what we should expect of God.