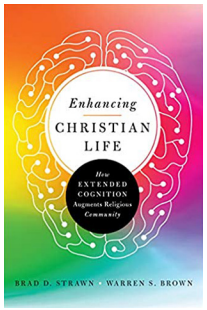
Book Review



Brad D. Strawn and Warren S. Brown.
Enhancing Christian Life:
How Extended Cognition Augments Religious Community
Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020
Softcover, pp. 166, $31. ISBN: 978-0-8308-5281-9.

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In his, now classic book, *Reforming Fundamentalism*, George M. Marsden uses the history of Fuller Theological Seminary to give a narrative about how American Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism was being shaped in the second half of the last century.[1] Faculty members of Fuller were in the vanguard of the so called "Battle for the Bible," which was the hallmark of the movement's struggle to find its new identity. In our own century a new battle, the "battle for the soul" seems to unfold, and prominent members of Fuller's faculty are, again, in the forefront. Nancey Murphy's *nonreductive physicalism*,[2] or Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen's *multidimensional monism* are two prominent examples.[3] Brad D. Strawn and Warren S. Brown, the authors of *Enhancing Christian* Life, are both members of Fuller's faculty, and very much in line with their evangelical colleagues "reforming" American protestant theological anthropology.

In this book, Strawn and Brown, expand on their previous work, *The Physical Nature of Christian Life: Neuroscience, Psychology, and the Church*.[4] They urge the reader to rethink how Christian faith and life might be enhanced by realizing that spirituality is not simply a private affair focused on the condition of the individual's soul, but primary exists within a network of relationships. The book is divided into three sections. Section one and two outlines the authors' theological anthropology (the radical embodiedness of human nature) and introduces various concepts and implications of extended cognition (closely invoking the work of Andy Clark). In section three they provide particular implications for Christian life building on their anthropological notions.

One of the aims of the authors to "clean up" theological language about spirituality and, as a result, to avoid historically problematic dualities. Thus, they prefer the phrase "Christian life" rather than "spirituality" and argue that "inner" should be only used as a metaphor which in no way connote spatial conceptions. In the same line of thought they strongly oppose "privateness" claiming that spiritual practices are always "forms of virtual soft coupling with the body of Christ (i.e., the church)" (120), and thus inevitably collective.

1 George M. Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1987).

2 See e.g., Nancey Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

3 See e.g., Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity*, vol. 3 of *A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

4 Warren S. Brown, Brad D. Strawn, *The Physical Nature of Christian Life: Neuroscience, Psychology, and the Church* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012).

There are three serious implications of this line of thought: (1) a renewed interest on the body; (2) a turn from individualistic approach and the centrality of personal feelings toward the "reign of God as central"; (3) and a necessary emphasis on Christian formation. Thus, the conclusion of "Section One" is that "Christian spirituality… is about bodies socially embedded in particular times and places" (34).

In their effort to renew language about spirituality the authors also attempt to provide a new understanding of "mind."[5] They claim that although human "mind" is physical it cannot be limited to the neural activity of body and brain. In their view a human being is a hypercomplex physical system that "has aspects of the whole person (like thinking, deciding, and feeling) that are emergent from the ongoing interplay of the parts (cells, neurons, neural systems, the brain, etc.) but cannot be said to be properties of the parts themselves" (43–44). "Mind" (or "minding" as they prefer to say) is constituted by the constant and complex action loops between the brain and body, between the body and its environment (i.e., in a specific, embedded life situation), and between brains and bodies (i.e., our historic, socio-cultural situatedness). The redefinition of "self" (or "I") naturally follows. The "self" or "I" is "this body that has this particular history of being an active agent in these contexts and with this particular imagination for the possibilities for my future action" (54). The "self" is the experiencing, thinking, learning, creating, and imagining body that always "embedded in relational networks" (115–16).

Another linguistic innovation is coining the phrase "mental wiki." This expression is used as a metaphor. It is "the accumulated and assembled contributions of a lot of other persons over a period of time … [and] contains knowledge that is readily available when needed to enhance our knowledge and thinking" (128–29). Cultures (including religious traditions) are the accumulations of "mental wikis" (129). Thus, the authors claim that "Christian faith is belief in wikis we have received" (134), including rites, rituals, and narratives. Christian individuals exist within niches of these wikis and into them they can extend. This concept leads to another important anthropological notion. Humans are not special because they have a unique soul, but because the "human system" has a special kind of wide plasticity and openness to assemble into bigger systems, using language as a special tool. Instead of focusing an individualistic image of a "soul," this openness must be the key for Christian spirituality. Thus, Christian life and spirituality "is inherently and inescapably extended into people and processes that are outside of ourselves" (150). Such extension "supersizes" human life and "enhance the possibility for formation, leading to more robust, embodied, and holistic form of Christian life" (87). Thus, church life must focus on creating a space for members to "regularly soft coupled to one another in reciprocal extensions … resulting in reciprocal cognitive and spiritual enhancements that makes Christian life richer, both individually and collectively" (94—emphasis omitted). The authors provide practical insights about prayer, reading of scripture, singing, hearing the spoken word, and being sent in this context (97–106).

Although I have great respect toward both authors and agree with most of their claims (especially when it is built on scientific research), I believe that part of their argument is based on a misrepresentation of piety and classical dualism. In my estimate, modern Western

5 In Anglo-American philosophy and theology "mind" and "soul" connotes the same meaning.

individualism (which I agree is a problem the American church needs to overcome) is much more a materialistic secular movement of the modern industrial society than an outcome of deceptive pietistic practices. A quote from Desmond Tutu[6] might be in order here: "People ask me about the source of my joy and I can honestly say it comes from my spiritual life—and especially these times of stillness. They are an indispensable part of my day, whatever else I might face. I also take quiet days when I do not talk, at least until supper. Once a month I take a room at a local convent and spend a day sleeping, eating, praying and reading, and at least once a year I go on a retreat of at least three or more days."[7] The life of this world renown cleric and theologian is an apt example of how "individualistic piety" can empower somebody for the kind of deep engagement with others within and outside the church.

Another critique comes more from a theological perspective. By redefining certain key aspects of human nature (e.g., soul, mind, self), and pushing back against individualism, the authors create an eschatological ambiguity. Namely, how personal resurrection is secured? In other words, if in "some sense, then 'self' is not soothing that we *have* or we *are* but is something that is *evoked* via our memories of what we did, or tend to do, in the context of the situations of our lives" (56—emphasis original), how this "self" has identity with the resurrected person? This "hard problem of personal identity"[8] is something that physicalists still yet to overcome. Furthermore, by putting the main emphasis on the "immanent work of God" the book somewhat neglects the transcendent actuality of God in the world. The authors are also aware of this and offer an explanation at the end of the book (145–46).

Nevertheless, as a pastor who tries to achieve some of the goals outlined in this book, I think that it could be an asset in the library of any minister or lay leader. The book reconceptualizes church governance in a way that helps not only to cope with recent sociopolitical changes in North America, but also gives recommendations about active social engagement, and guidance of how to become a thriving cooperative community. The authors provide drafts for a church that fosters extension and has genuine plug points for interactive soft coupling into the life of the local and wider church, and even beyond, into the neighboring society. Additionally, the authors provide resources for enhancing the liturgical practices already present in the church.

6 Although I am aware of the controversial theological stances about the South African theologian, I see in him an excellent example of somebody who attributes his ability of constant connectedness and thriving social engagement as something deeply rooted in the kind of "individual, internal, and private 'spirituality'" (4) that Strawn and Brown consider individualistic and counterproductive.

7 Desmond Tutu, *God has a Dream* (New York: Image Books, 2005), 102.

8 I play on words here referring to the famous "hard problem of consciousness" of course.