

Introduction to the Work of Wesley J. Wildman

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Wesley J. Wildman is the most original, audacious, creative, encyclopedic, and integrative thinker working within and across the fields of philosophy, ethics, theology, and the scientific study of religion in our time. Scholars in each of these disciplines are likely to be familiar with his contributions to their own field, but few are aware of the multidisciplinary breadth of his work. This multidisciplinaryity is a defining feature of Wildman's pragmatic comparative inquiry into religion (as with every other topic). The chapters in this volume critically and constructively engage some of his most significant and provocative transgressions of disciplinary boundaries. The purpose of this book is to invite readers into the web of ongoing conversations that are occurring in the wake of Wildman's scholarly production. This chapter provides a brief introduction to the content and trajectory of his constantly expanding corpus and a preview of the following chapters, each of which explores some aspect of his philosophical, theological, scientific, or institution-building efforts.

Wesley John Wildman was born in 1961 to a warm-hearted, working-class family in Adelaide, Australia. He was raised in the Methodist Church, which became part of the Uniting Church of Australia during his teenage years. Wildman was ordained in the Uniting Church after receiving a bachelor of divinity degree from the University of Sydney in 1985. Earlier he had

received a bachelor of arts degree in mathematics, physics, and computer science from Flinders University in 1980 (at the age of nineteen) and achieved first class honors in pure mathematics in 1981. After his BD, he pastored for a year in Sydney and then went to the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, where he received a PhD in philosophy of religion. During his years at the Graduate Theological Union, he also served as an associate pastor of a local church in Piedmont, California, and acting assistant professor at Stanford University. In 1993, he joined the Boston University School of Theology, where he revived a flagging doctoral program in science, philosophy, and religion. Two early graduates of the program, Nathaniel Barrett and Sarah Fredericks, contributed chapters to this volume. Over the decades, Wildman has been involved in several multiyear research projects, such as the Comparative Religious Ideas Project and the Simulating Religion Project; founded the Center for Mind and Culture in Boston; and established the multidisciplinary journal *Religion, Brain & Behavior* (these are described below in the chapters by Neville, Shults, and Sosis).

Wildman's academic position at Boston University is in theology, interpreted broadly to include engagement with philosophy and ethics, and more recently in statistics and computer science. His first book, *Fidelity with Plausibility: Modest Christologies in the Twentieth Century*, was a significant revision of his PhD dissertation and came out in 1998.¹ It had two parts, the first of which consisted of "reflections on Ernst Troeltsch and the origins of the crisis of plausibility in contemporary Christology." Here Wildman established himself as a "mediating theologian," requiring Christianity to relate positively to modern science and the Enlightenment generally in order to be plausible. The second part was an explicit rejection of "absolutist Christologies," which are the most common kind in the tradition, and a recommendation of projects that he refers to as "modest Christologies," such as those proposed by John Hick and John Cobb Jr. His critical engagement of these thinkers' approaches to ultimate reality already anticipated arguments that he has fleshed out in more detail in later books (discussed below). In 2009 Wildman published two books on what Christian theologians call "ecclesiology," with collaboration from Stephen Chapin Garner, a former student and local pastor. *Lost in the Middle?* and *Found in the Middle!* were multidisciplinary (social scientific and theological) analyses of contemporary American Protestant church life with the aim of showing how Christians can be theologically liberal, in the sense of modern plausibility outlined in *Fidelity with Plausibility*, at the same time that they could be evangelical, in the sense of enthusiastic devotion to religious experience and

regular congregational participation.² He rejected both extreme liberalism in ecclesiology, which he took to be destructive of church life, and extreme conservative evangelicalism with its supernaturalism and right-wing cultural politics.

During the decade that followed, Wildman has produced six volumes that provide a systematic presentation of his “religious philosophy.”

- Volume 1: *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry: Envisioning a Future for the Philosophy of Religion* (2010)³
- Volume 2: *In Our Own Image: Anthropomorphism, Apophaticism, and Ultimacy* (2017)⁴
- Volume 3: *Science and Ultimate Reality* (not yet published)
- Volume 4: *Science and Religious Anthropology: A Spiritually Evocative Naturalist Interpretation of Human Life* (2009)⁵
- Volume 5: *Religious and Spiritual Experiences* (2011)⁶
- Volume 6: *Effing the Ineffable: Existential Mumbblings at the Limits of Language* (2018)⁷

The remaining chapters of this book examine the key arguments he sets out in these volumes, and so our discussion here is brief. Rather than outline them in the order of publication (the logic of which had to do with balancing academic life and dealing with publisher timetables), here we present them in the systematic order in which Wildman conceptualized them from the beginning (the logic of which he spells out in the prefaces of the various volumes).

Volume 1, *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry*, outlines the intellectual project that Wildman will carry out in the remaining volumes. The book begins and ends with a consideration of the academic viability of “religious philosophy” (an overarching phrase he typically prefers to “philosophy of religion” and “philosophical theology,” although these subdisciplines often overlap). Here Wildman presents his program to deal with “big issues” in religion, including the great normative questions such as the nature of ultimacy. Rejecting the limitations imposed by some scholars within analytic philosophy and postmodern philosophy, Wildman argues that religious philosophy should include considerations from the

social and natural sciences as well as from philosophy, history of religions, and theologies from multiple traditions, all of which he engages in this first volume. His general theory of inquiry is based on the pragmatic traditions, especially the philosophy of Charles S. Peirce. Wildman claims that the same logic of inquiry runs through all disciplines, scientific, philosophical, historical, and theological: a logic of “problem solving.” He argues that religious philosophy (in the bold sense he proposes) is historically rooted in six ancient, grand, and sometimes overlapping traditions of thought that he calls the ontotheological, cosmotheological, physicotheological, psychotheological, axiotheological, and mysticotheological. Wildman observes that all of these are now in crisis and suggests that each can be helped by adopting his program of multidisciplinary comparative inquiry.

Volume 2 (conceptually) in this series is *In Our Own Image*, a sustained essay on assessing models of ultimate reality. Wildman distinguishes three basic families of models: ultimate reality as an agential being (e.g., a monotheistic, not-less-than-personal God), ultimate reality as ground of being (e.g., Nirguna Brahman, Perennial Philosophy, Tillich’s God beyond God), and subordinate-deity models in which a finite God is a component of ultimate reality (e.g., James’s, Whitehead’s, or Cobb’s God, polytheisms). Each of these families has many variants, and Wildman compares them by analyzing the extent to which they follow three strategies for resisting anthropomorphism (resisting intentionality attribution, rational practicality, or narrative comprehensibility). He points out the strengths and weaknesses of all three classes of models and evaluates their variants in light of the criteria set out in volume 1 above. Wildman’s own preference is for a version of the ground of being model of ultimate reality, which he defends as providing (among other things) greater internal coherence, better comportment with the findings of the natural and social sciences, and higher consistency in following all three strategies for resisting anthropomorphism than its competitors. From beginning to end, Wildman also insists that the logical object of the ground-of-being metaphor is beyond modeling or language of any kind, embracing an apophaticism whose virtues he explains throughout the remaining volumes.

In the preface of volume 3, *Science and Ultimate Reality*, Wildman explains that this third volume of his religious philosophy should be conceived as a companion volume to *In Our Own Image*. The latter introduced the method and criteria for adjudicating between the great models of ultimate reality and concluded that ground of being theism meets them better than its rivals (albeit not by as much as Wildman expected at the beginning of

his multidisciplinary comparative inquiry). *Science and Ultimate Reality* completes this analysis by focusing on a series of fields not explored in volume 2. For example, he explores the implications of discoveries related to Big Bang cosmology and evolutionary biology for the human understanding of ultimacy. This leads him to an examination of some of the classical debates among theologians and philosophers over the best way to interpret the apparent design in the cosmos and in biological organisms. Wildman also tackles the thorny problem of divine action, arguing that here too ground of being models are less problematic than personal theism and subordinate deity models. In this case, Wildman arrives at this conclusion after a series of chapters dealing with the philosophical problems of causation and relations, and the relevant scientific findings from fundamental physics and mathematics as well as emergent complexity.

Volume 4, *Science and Religious Anthropology*, was actually the first volume of Wildman's systematic religious philosophy to be published. As the preface to that book makes evident, he already had the other volumes clearly in mind. In this context, he defends the thesis that human beings are religious by nature (*homo religiosus*), using a broad definition of religion that refers to the way in which humans bind themselves (*religio*) to that which they take to be of ultimate, existential, spiritual, or social concern. As the subtitle of this book suggests, however, he also insists that (a religiously sensitive) metaphysical naturalism provides the most plausible theoretical framework for making sense of this dimension of human life. In other words, there is no place for supernatural beings or revelations in his ontological inventory. The bulk of this volume is a series of chapters in which he sets out a thoroughly naturalistic religious anthropology, drawing heavily on findings in contemporary science that have provided new perspectives on human evolution, social groups, brains, bodies, sexuality, and the microbial and ecological habitat for human life.

Volume 5, *Religious and Spiritual Experiences*, is the fifth volume in Wildman's religious philosophy. This book began as a series of lectures that were part of a grant-funded project at the Danielsen Center at Boston University. A true heir to William James's philosophical, social-scientific, and neurological approach in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Wildman provides a rigorously naturalistic account of religious experience as consisting of certain kinds of intense experiences that can serve as "gateways to ultimacy." Building on his understanding of humanity as *homo religiosus*, and of ultimate realities as the depth dimensions of nature, Wildman engages the neuroscientific literature that has altered the theoretical (and practical)

landscape for understanding religious and spiritual experiences and sets out a new set of distinctions to map the territory. He also addresses one of the most controversial issues in this field that has a special bearing on philosophy of religion: are such experiences cognitively reliable? Wildman concludes that they are (or they can be), but only if such assessments of their reliability are grounded within a naturalistic cosmology, an ecological-semiotic account of perception as dynamic engagement, and a symbolic account of religious cognitions (conditions that he outlines in detail).

Volume 6, *Effing the Ineffable: Existential Mumbblings at the Limits of Language*, is the final volume in the religious philosophy series. As Wildman pointed out already in the first volume, religious philosophy should be not only multidisciplinary and cross-traditional but also pluralistic in its styles of inquiry—including the phenomenological, the comparative, the historical, the analytical, the theoretical, the literary, and the evaluative. Each of these styles is evident in all of the books discussed so far, but this concluding volume stands out for its intensive literary and phenomenological style. Wildman develops a theory of language for dealing with the ineffable and draws upon literature from a broad range of religions. The book itself is divided into three parts: Ultimacy Talk, Ultimacy Systems, and Ultimacy Manifestations. These parts are loosely correlated with three traditions within philosophical theology, each of which Wildman is deeply immersed in: the American pragmatist tradition, the analytic tradition, and the continental tradition. All of the chapters in this volume point in the direction of a proper spiritual engagement with an ineffable ground of being. The book concludes with a powerful autobiographical essay that describes one of the intensive experiences that drove (and continues to drive) Wildman to keep trying to eff the ineffable.

The six volumes of his systematic religious philosophy are only the tip of iceberg that is Wildman's scholarly corpus. He has published several other books including, most recently, a collection of (robustly naturalistic) sermons, *God Is . . . Meditations on the Mystery of Life, the Purity of Grace, the Bliss of Surrender, and the God Beyond God* (2019); and a book on the future of technologically enhanced spiritual experience, *Spirit Tech: The Brave New World of Consciousness Hacking and Enlightenment Engineering* (coauthored with Kate Stockly).⁸ Wildman has also edited or coedited eight books, most of which have explored the relationship between science and religion and/or contributed to the scientific study of religion. He has also published a plethora of scholarly articles—more than 130 at the time this volume went to press. Many of these expand on philosophical, theological,

and ethical issues treated in his books, while others explore other scientific disciplines and spiritual paths. Over the decades, he has become increasingly productive in the scientific study of religion, a productivity that has accelerated in recent years as he has led several funded research projects dedicated to multidisciplinary theoretical integration and the use of novel methods such as computational modeling and social simulation.

It is not possible to provide a comprehensive assessment of Wildman's work in a single book, but the chapters that follow represent our joint attempt to contribute to (and promote) such an assessment by engaging most of the core elements of his corpus. The first four chapters focus primarily on Wildman's contributions to *philosophy*, or, at least, they approach some aspects of his multidisciplinary comparative inquiry through a philosophical lens. Shults's chapter compares and contrasts the ways in which Wildman approaches the "modeling" of religious phenomena, especially human experiences of ultimate reality, in his apophatic theology and in his contributions to the computational science of religion. He also critically evaluates Wildman's broad usage of the term "religion" in social science and his ambivalent usage of the term "God" as a way of referring to ultimate reality. Knepper's chapter engages Wildman's proposals for reconstructing the philosophy of religion as an academic discipline. Although he agrees with the overall project, he expresses concerns about the use of the phrase "religious philosophy" and commends a more explicit acknowledgement of the role of Christian theism in the decline of philosophy of religion in recent decades.

Fredericks explores the strengths and weaknesses of Wildman's method of inquiry in relation to debates within the discipline of philosophical ethics. She argues that the latter has much to learn from his emphasis on comparison, fallibility, and multidisciplinaryity, but also that Wildman's approach could be enhanced by the incorporation of insights from contemporary ethical discourse about power and diversity. Barrett's chapter, the last in this philosophically oriented cluster, examines the relationship between Wildman's pragmatist method of inquiry and his axiology (theory of value). After clarifying some of the tensions between classical pragmatism and Whitehead's aesthetics of intensity, he draws out the implications for the future of pragmatism in general and for pragmatist contributions to the scientific study of religion in particular.

The next four chapters are more focused on the *theological* dimensions of Wildman's work, although here too it is impossible to separate them from the philosophical and scientific dimensions. Like Barrett, Raposa's chapter takes up the theme of Wildman's pragmatism, but in this case the focus is

on the implications of his approach for the future of philosophical theology. Here Raposa offers an appreciative analysis of Wildman's "religious philosophy" (though he shares with Knepper a concern about the phrase itself) but defends the value of (a certain kind of) anthropomorphism in theology. Shilbrack's chapter explores the tension between theology, as traditionally understood, and the academic commitments now prevalent in secular universities. After a careful analysis of the tasks and criteria that are appropriate in such contexts, he argues that Wildman's multidisciplinary, comparative method of inquiry is the best hope for the future of theology in the modern academy.

The chapter by Neville, who has been Wildman's colleague for more than a quarter century, explores some of the key similarities and differences between their theological approaches. Scholars who have followed the interactions among Wildman and Neville over the years will be pleased to find the latter's concise analysis of their differences in relation to theology's public, the role of comparative erudition, hypotheses and understanding, the function of anthropomorphism, language about ultimacy and apophaticism, and the place of religious symbolism in philosophy of religion. Frankenberry's chapter is critical of Wildman's (and Neville's) theory of meaning and approach to symbology. Building on insights from Davidson and other pragmatic philosophers, she challenges the whole project of hermeneutical and mystical theology represented by Wildman and argues that we should acknowledge that religious claims are palpably false without any effing qualifications.

A final cluster of chapters provides a series of critical evaluations of various aspects of Wildman's contributions to the *scientific* study of religion. Corrington's chapter compares and contrasts his own version of "ecstatic naturalism" with Wildman's, discussing the potential of each to engage the modern secular (and scientific) interpretation of humanity. Focusing particularly on religious naturalism and the concept of the sacred, Corrington argues that their approaches are complementary (and necessary) but acknowledges that Wildman's may have a better chance of facilitating radical changes in contemporary religious self-understanding. Sandage's chapter explores Wildman's "relational" disciplinarity, with special attention to the way in which he integrates theology and psychology. In addition to describing Wildman up as a model integrationist (especially in his pluralism and realism), Sandage also offers some psychological reflections on his treatment of the virtues of humility, loneliness, intensity, and bliss.

McNamara's chapter addresses some of Wildman's contributions to the neuroscience of religious and spiritual experiences, including his direct contributions through empirical research on such experiences and his indirect

contributions as a mover and shaker in a number of academic and policy-oriented organizations. Like Raposa, McNamara also challenges Wildman's interpretation of the role of anthropomorphism in human evolution and his metaphysical rejection of supernaturalism. Taves also critically engages Wildman's understanding of religious and spiritual experiences. Her chapter appears in the form of an imagined dialogue with Wildman, in which they explore the similarities and differences in their respective views of such experiences. Sosis's chapter focuses primarily on the way in which Wildman has contributed to the scientific study of religion through his work as a founder and leader of institutions (e.g., the Center for Mind and Culture in Boston) and as a founder and editor of leading journals (e.g., *Religion, Brain & Behavior*).

Wildman himself gets the last word. In the final chapter, he provides a response to his friendly critics. Our hope is that the chapters in this volume will both further the conversations within and strengthen the multidisciplinary inquiry across the various fields in which Wildman has worked, including philosophy of religion, religious naturalism, spirituality, theology, ethics, computer science, and the scientific study of religion.

Notes

1. *Fidelity with Plausibility: Modest Christologies in the Twentieth Century*, with a foreword by John B. Cobb, Jr. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998).

2. *Lost in the Middle?* with Stephen Chapin Garner (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2009) and *Found in the Middle!* with Stephen Chapin Garner (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2009).

3. *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry: Envisioning a Future for the Philosophy of Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010).

4. *In Our Own Image: Anthropomorphism, Apophaticism, and Ultimacy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017).

5. *Science and Religious Anthropology: A Spiritually Evocative Naturalist Interpretation of Human Life*, with a foreword by Philip Clayton (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009).

6. *Religious and Spiritual Experiences* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

7. *Effing the Ineffable: Existential Mumbblings at the Limits of Language* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2018).

8. *God Is . . . : Meditations on the Mystery of Life, the Purity of Grace, the Bliss of Surrender, and the God beyond God*, with a foreword by Robert Allan Hill (Eugene, OR: Cascade/Wipf and Stock, 2019) and *Spirit Tech: The Brave New World of Consciousness Hacking and Enlightenment Engineering*, with Kate J. Stockly (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2021).