

The Model(ing) Philosophy of Wesley J. Wildman

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Introduction

Wesley J. Wildman has been a model for me in many ways over the years. My first encounter with him at the American Academy of Religion a quarter century ago (described in the introduction to this volume) woke me from my dogmatic disciplinary slumbers. As a young scholar I was somewhat proud of my interdisciplinary sensitivities – until that fateful afternoon in Chicago when his massively multi-disciplinary presentation stretched my mind in ways I had never imagined possible. Throughout our collaborations on a variety of projects over the years, he has also provided for me a model of philosophical courage and academic leadership. For reasons that will soon become clear, he gets my vote as America’s next top model(er). Most importantly, however, he has been a model friend – consistently meeting me with that rare combination of genuinely empathic concern and intensely ruthless candor. I find it disingenuous to refer to one of my best friends as “Wildman,” and so I beg the reader’s indulgence as I just call him “Wesley.”

As those familiar with our writings and public presentations will know, Wesley and I agree on almost everything, or at least on most of the big things (e.g., the value of naturalistic metaphysics, pragmatist epistemology, and Nietzschean-inspired ethics). Focusing on our agreements, however, would be quite boring – not to mention very un-Wesleyan (in the nominational, not the denominational sense). And so I focus instead on the main (and, as far as I can tell, only) issue in the philosophy of religion on which we do not always agree. I say “not always” because sometimes in our conversations I experience flashes in which I suddenly think he might be starting to agree with me. These do not occur very often, but often enough that I hold out hope that he is beginning to see the light (of my position). I’m teasing of course. I seriously doubt we will ever resolve this difference, but it is great fun to argue about. More importantly, the argument is worth having because of the serious practical implications of our competing claims.

I set the stage for explaining the difference between us by outlining Wesley’s *philosophical* (apophatic) modeling of Ultimate Reality and his *scientific* (computational) modeling of real human engagements with what he calls the axiological depth-dimensions of nature. These two sorts of modeling are central aspects of his approach to the philosophy of religion and to the scientific study of religion respectively. His work in the computer modeling and simulation of religion and other social phenomenon is not as well-known as his work in the philosophy of religion, at least among philosophers, ethicists, and theologians (who will likely be the main readers of this book). On the other hand, for most of the computational social scientists who will pick up this book, Wesley’s apophatic theology is not likely to have registered on their academic radar. It might seem that these two ways of “modeling” have nothing to do with one another.

However, I will suggest that attending to the relationship between them can illuminate some of the (robustly naturalistic) epistemological and metaphysical intuitions that regulate and integrate Wesley’s broader efforts in multi-disciplinary comparative

inquiry. The first section describes, compares, and contrasts the formal operation of these philosophical (or theological) and scientific approaches to “modeling” in his corpus. The second and third sections provide a brief exposition of some of Wesley’s own material models of “God” and “religion,” two highly contentious terms over which he and I cannot seem to stop contending. The final section makes explicit the key point on which we differ and clarifies (my perception of) the main reasons for this difference. Once again, but here for the first time in writing, I invite Wesley to embrace the iconoclastic urges of his inner Nietzsche more fully and join me in “doing philosophy (of religion) with a hammer.”

1. Computational and apophatic models: always wrong, sometimes useful

“Essentially, all models are wrong, but some are useful” (Box 1987, 424). This oft cited adage in the field of computer modeling and simulation might be worrisome for someone obsessed with apodictic knowledge but it is music to the ears of a philosophical pragmatist and evolutionary scientist like Wesley. What makes the mental models of *Homo sapiens* interesting is not their capacity to represent some allegedly absolute truth but their role in helping members of this highly social species adapt long enough to survive and reproduce before they die (and perhaps enjoy themselves a bit along the way). It might initially seem surprising that computer scientists and engineers are so comfortable with knowing they are always wrong. But even the best mathematical and computational models are “wrong” in roughly the same sense that a good geographical map is “wrong” – both are simplifications involving abstractions of a far more complex reality.

However, computer models can also be as “useful” as maps, again in roughly the same sense. A map is not the territory; if it were, it would not be very practical to carry around. What makes a map useful is that it adequately captures the structures and features of a territory that are most relevant for the navigation of the latter. Finding one’s way to the next town requires knowledge of the roads that go around the mountains but not the insects that go around the molehills. This also applies to computational models used to analyze and simulate the dynamics at play in industrial supply chains, successful marketing campaigns, or obesity epidemics: they are useful insofar as their causal architectures adequately capture the structures and features that make the dynamic system *work*.

What exactly is a computer model? I’ll give some concrete examples of Wesley’s own use of these techniques in the scientific study or religion in section 3, but let me offer some introductory comments here. Andreas Tolk has recently offered the following definition, “Modeling is the task-driven, purposeful simplification and abstraction of a perception of reality that is shaped by physical, ethical and cognitive constraints... Simulation is the execution of a model.” (Tolk 2017, 47). There are many types of models (e.g., agent-based, systems-dynamics, discrete event, etc.) but what most have in common is that they attempt to provide an interpretation of some structured reality or process in order to achieve some theoretical or practical goal. What about simulations? If statistical analyses take a “snapshot” of correlations among variables at a particular time and place, simulations provide “movies” of the interactions among variables over time within a multidimensional parameter space. What makes a model useful is that its simplified (“wrong”) causal architecture can be executed in a way that adequately simulates the relevant dynamics and features of its real-world target.

Apophatic models are also always wrong. As Wesley consistently emphasizes, all models of ultimate reality (or ultimacy, or God) are inadequate and literally false. The fate of every attempt to model ultimate reality will be “cognitive breakdown” (Wildman

2018b). Even theologians who believe in divine revelation and embrace anthropomorphic images of God usually still acknowledge that every model of ultimate reality fail to refer to its logical object literally. This is due both to the inherent incomprehensibility of conceptions of the truly infinite and to the inherent limitations of evolved human cognition. Although he defends the value of theology as an intellectual endeavor, Wesley insists that “it *is* obvious that speaking of ultimate reality must fail, ultimately... we know from the outset that any properly ultimate reality... necessarily must surpass the cognitive grasp of any being whatsoever, including human being” (Wildman 2017b, 260; see also Wildman 2013).

But can apophatic modeling also be useful? Wesley thinks it can be, and in at least two senses. First, apophaticism, properly understood, is not a complete turning away from language but a radically permissive approach “promoting precision and play, and inspiring vigorous conceptual wrangling until the very last and best of our concepts fracture into shards at our clay feet” (Wildman 2018b). He commends an apophatic wholeheartedness that recognizes the “treachery of words” when dealing with ultimate reality, but “liberates us to play, and play hard, celebrating our species’ linguistic genius and taking delight in mocking our linguistic pretensions... words both empower and mislead, both refer and distort – and nowhere more than in our outrageous attempts to speak of ultimacy” (Wildman in press, 291). Apophatic modeling can engender a healthy intellectual competition among Great Models from the world’s religious traditions, each of which claims to do a better job of naming the unnameable before collapsing into silence.

Acknowledging the fallibility and final fallaciousness of all apophatic models, Wesley nevertheless playfully leaps into the academic arena and stakes his claim: “...the model of ultimate reality I am describing falls, like all ultimacy models fall, but it falls later in the plunge to silence, a mark of being closer to the truth of the matter” (Wildman 2017a, 152). We will return below to his proposal for a collapsing metric by which to judge apophatic models, and provide a brief exposition of his own naturalistic ground-of-being model of ultimacy, and but the point here is that Wesley’s mystical theological approach not only *relativizes* all models but also *relates* them to each other by rating their relative adequacy and “explaining the sense in which they truly express ultimate reality – both through *describing it more or less accurately* and through enabling people to *engage it more or less authentically*” (Wildman 2018b, 41, emphases added).

The final highlighted phrase in that last citation brings us to the second sense in which Wesley finds apophatic modeling to be potentially useful. In addition to promoting intellectual wrangling, such models can also facilitate human *engagement* with ultimate reality or “God.” Acknowledging that the religious symbols in apophatic modeling are always broken, Wesley argues that the intensity of human life depends on them. “Without religious symbols to help us conceive our world and orient ourselves to it, the moral character of human life would be perpetually superficial and localized. The world would remain a terrifying jumble rather than becoming a kind of cosmic home” (Wildman 2006, 624). Although this kind of theology may not be everyone’s cup of tea, apophatically minded religious philosophers can “recognize the virtues of theoretically articulated ultimacy models as intellectual avenues for potentially authentic engagement with ultimate reality” (Wildman in press, 35).

What exactly is an apophatic model? For Wesley, apophasis begins with the acknowledgement that we simply cannot describe ultimate realities. In one respect, then, apophasis is “*not* a modeling strategy.” This is because it “declines modeling for the sake of testimony to a reality that utterly transcends human understanding.” However, insofar as they use well defined negation techniques that provide structure and meaning

to their conversations “there is a kind of modeling at work among apophatic mystics and their theological kin” (Wildman 2006, 618–19, emphases added). Wesley’s scientific and theological kin have something in common: both computational and apophatic models are always wrong – but sometimes useful. Despite this similarity, there is a fundamental difference between these two types of modeling. The computer scientist intends to understand and explain the finite conditions that constrain and enable some complex system within the real world, and there is no predetermined stopping point in her intellectual trajectory toward ever more adequate simulation of the phenomena.

The religious philosopher who intends to speak of the “unconditioned,” on the other hand, knows in advance that her fate is apophasis. If “ultimate” reality is alleged to be that which infinitely transcends (and yet somehow immanently conditions) all finite reality, including all human experience and thought, then it cannot be simulated or even conceived by the human mind (or any other computational apparatus). This intellectual trajectory involves “indirect” and “artful” speech, but it must “finally yield to silence... the deepest theological truth is conjured in the echoes left behind after the *collapse of words*, and not finally expressed in their utterance” (Wildman 2011, 83, emphases added). An apophatic “model,” then, is a human construction that (more or less) artfully and indirectly attempts to refer to that which is beyond finite linguistic reference, to conceive the inconceivable, to describe the conditions for thinking and engaging the undescribable unconditioned – in other words, to “eff” the “ineffable.”

In the next two sections, I limit myself to a brief exposition of some of the most salient aspects of Wesley’s own proposals for modeling “God” and “religion.” This will set the stage for the final section of this chapter, in which I outline the basic disagreement I have with him about strategies for the conceptual and computational modeling of this multidisciplinary terrain.

2. Modeling “God”

Wesley has an ambivalent relationship to “God.” In both of his most recent books, he refers to this term as a “valuable but potentially parochial name for ultimate reality” (Wildman 2018b, 7; Wildman in press, 3). As we will see below, its putative value lies in its ancient heritage and evocative power while its parochializing potential lies in its susceptibility to anthropomorphism (Wildman 2007). The latter is the main reason that “ultimacy” is usually Wesley’s “preferred general term for the logical object that is of final concern within religions. ‘Ultimate realities’ and ‘ultimate concerns’ are the objective and subjective sides of ultimacy, respectively...” (Wildman 2009, 23). This preference seems to go back at least to his collaboration with Bob Neville and others in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project. In that context, he and Bob explained that “ultimate realities” is a vague category of comparison that “means something like this: *that which is most important to religious life because of the nature of reality*” (Neville and Wildman 2001, 151).

In his later monograph on *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry*, Wesley maintained this terminology, defending a form of pragmatic inquiry that engages as many disciplines as necessary when making comparative evaluations of hypotheses about religious matters, including matters of ultimate concern (Wildman 2011). He also wrote an entire book on *Religious and Spiritual Experiences*, which he argues can engage human beings authentically with “the valuational dynamics and structures of reality itself, and are thus an indispensable opening for understanding ultimate reality and our place within it” (Wildman 2011, 256). More recently, he has explicitly identified his favorite symbols for ultimate reality as “the ground and abyss of being” and “the depths structures and dynamics of nature,” which he understands as the “well-spring for all

possibilities and their realization, not merely the ones we can appreciate... what we actually sense in the moral possibilities around us are definite axiological structures, including a moral logos pointing neither to the Bad nor to the Good but to if-then relationships" (Wildman in press, 278).

Of course, most symbols for ultimate reality in the religious traditions that flowed from the Axial Age have referred to divine beings that are "morally concerned in a way that is scaled to human interests, as they take shape in relation to both individual existential orientation and regulation of social life" (Wildman 2018, 210). Wesley is acutely aware that his own employment of "God" language within his "naturalistic ground-of-being" model of ultimacy is a "dramatic departure from this pattern." For him, ultimate reality is not an agential-being who cares what human beings do (as in classical theism). And he rejects the idea of reserving the name "God" for a subordinate deity that is distinguished from ultimate reality (as in process theism).

Instead, Wesley wants to use the word "God" (or "God-Beyond-God") as well as "ultimate reality" to refer to the same unconditioned, indeterminate, morally irrelevant "Whence" of human experience. He knows that his approach is not likely to win a popularity contest among the Great Models of ultimate reality, at least not any time soon. After setting out and defending his position in comparison to agential-being and subordinate-deity models, Wesley imagines his interlocutor's response: "And what is the 'payoff' for all that effort? We get an interpretation of ultimate reality that is so austere anti-anthropomorphic that the only God on offer is irrelevant to human moral life! Why bother?" (Wildman 2018b, 210–11). Indeed, why does Wesley bother to go to all this trouble? First, he has a pastoral concern for the growing number of individuals with post-supernaturalist worldviews, many of whom may find non-supernatural models of ultimacy helpful in their pursuit of experiences of intensity. Second, he believes that the debate among proponents of the Great Models ought not to be conceived as a popularity contest but as an intellectual endeavor that rigorously contests popular conceptions of ultimate reality, which are generated by evolved cognitive biases that promote uncritical anthropomorphism.

The subtitle of *In Our Own Image: Anthropomorphism, Apophaticism, and Ultimacy* hints at Wesley's main concern with most popular models of ultimate reality or "God." In fact, he frames the debate between three of the Great Models in terms of their strategies for resisting three dimensions of anthropomorphism: Intentionality Attribution, Rational Practicality, and Narrative Comprehensibility. Humans have evolved in such a way that our minds relatively easily interpret confusing or frightening phenomena by relying on these anthropomorphic cognitive defaults. Agential-being models resist Rational Practicality, indulging in theological speculation about ultimate reality rather than focusing only on practical life challenges. Subordinate-deity models resist Intentionality Attribution, at least when it comes to "ultimate reality" (in such approaches, "God" often sounds quite intentional). Religious-naturalist models, the category into which Wesley's own proposal falls, resist Narrative Comprehensibility as well as the other two dimensions of anthropomorphism. This more radical contestation of evolutionary biases is one of the most important reasons for his commendation of naturalistic ground-of-being models of ultimacy.

If all ultimacy models are wrong and must fall into silence, how does Wesley justify ranking these Great Models in order of their anthropomorphic tendencies? Remember that apophatic modeling is not a total refusal to speak in the face of mystery. Rather, apophaticism provides a way of ordering speech before its eventual and inevitable collapse. "The apophatic mystic's positive way of naming, the *via positiva*, organizes ultimacy images from the most noble to the least adequate... The apophatic mystic's negative way

of denial, the *via negativa*, organizes literal ultimacy images from least adequate to most adequate” (Wildman in press, 34–35). In other words, the apophatic approach can yield a “collapsing metric,” a “conceptual measure that disintegrates as we draw close to ultimate reality but that further away yields meaningful judgments of the relative adequacy of ultimacy models” (Wildman 2018b, 41). This metric always collapses because human cognition cannot grasp ultimate reality, but it still provides a strategy for handling the conceptual challenges of apophatic modeling by establishing the order in which the Great Models collapse – identifying the “last” (ultimate) thing that can be said about ultimacy before falling into silence.

Despite the dangers of anthropomorphism associated with the term “God,” Wesley still uses it to refer to ultimate reality. This is confusing to both agential-being theists and subordinate-deity theists, all of whom use “God” in much the same way most layfolk do: to refer to a somewhat comprehensible, intentional, morally-relevant being. How does Wesley defend himself?

“Against the argument that the word ‘God’ should not be used unless it is personal theism that we have in mind, proponents of naturalistic ground-of-being... ultimacy models point to the long contest since the axial age over usage of ‘God’ and cognate words. Judging by this history, confining ‘God’ to personal theism would be changing the rules, not upholding them – and this remains the case even while acknowledging the greater popularity within both folk religion and philosophical theology of understandings of God as personal or not-less-than personal” (Wildman 2018b, 204).

Wesley detects a “rule” in the religious philosophical tradition: theologians have been arguing forever over the right way to use the word “God” in their models of ultimacy and they should continue doing so.

Although he regularly breaks other sorts of time-honored rules, Wesley is committed to obeying this one. “This godless world is not without an abysmal ground... a Creative Dao, a God Beyond All Gods, or a One Beyond Comprehension. The name of *God* still testifies to this fact, and to the reality it hints at, so long as that name is wrested away from the religious legitimators of cultural meaning making.” Wesley approvingly refers to those who affirm “the name of *God* as a pointer to something unconditioned that we seem to encounter in our experience of reality...” (2011, 83, emphases added). The same rule seems to apply to other ancient and anthropomorphically tinged terms. For example, he refers to the luminescent creativity and abysmal suffering that “are co-primal in the *divine* nature as they are in our experience... All things testify to the *divine glory*. All things without exception” (Wildman in press, 85, emphases added). An intense experience of beauty, trauma, or insight can engage us with the axiological depths of reality, within which “we find the *holy*, and it is *sanctified* through being manifested as holy in that experience of intensity” (2014, p. 257, emphases added).

Sometimes Wesley’s obedience to this particular rule about sticking with God-language leads to rather anthropomorphic sounding expressions. For example, he writes that “We engage God in all our moral decisions, the good and the bad... As we transform our environment, we can love passionately, create beautifully, connect deeply, and live justly... These are possibilities God *gives* us in creation. On the human scale, God’s sustaining of creation constitutes an *invitation* to engage life richly, despite complex choices and inevitable failures, and thereby to engage divine reality itself” (Wildman 2018b, 226, emphases added).

A desire to conform to ancient theological protocols is not the only reason Wesley seems willing to risk confusion (at best) and anthropomorphic interpretations of his position (at worst) by using the word “God” in this unusual way. This willingness is also an expression of his commitment to salvage what he can of “religious” traditions; as their supernatural beliefs and behaviors are dismantled by naturalism and secularism, Wesley wants to find and refurbish those parts of these traditions that post-supernaturalists might be able to use in constructing new modes of intensive axiological engagement with ultimate reality.

3. Modeling “religion”

I’m guessing that most of the readers of this volume would sit on the philosophy, theology, and ethics side of the metaphysical chapel in which Wesley marries the disciplines of religious philosophy and computer science. In this section I provide such readers with a brief introduction to some of the ways in which computational methods have been applied to the study of “religion.” Like “God” in the sub-heading of the previous section, this term also appears in scare quotes for reasons that will soon become obvious. As is the case in almost all scientific approaches to the study of psychological and social phenomena, the use of computer science methodologies requires that the relevant variables be identified and operationalized so that their function within a system or their distribution within a population can be statistically measured and analyzed. As we will see, this applies equally to scientific research on “religion.”

My collaboration with Wesley on computer models of religion began as part of our work in an interdisciplinary research project headed by Ian Hodder at the archaeological site of the Neolithic town of Catalhoyuk in what is now southeastern Turkey. Over several intense days in a Turkish hotel, Wesley grilled me on my knowledge of the site and the ways in which theories from disciplines such as cognitive science, moral psychology, and cultural anthropology might shed light on the conditions under which – and the mechanisms by which – Neolithic humans shifted from a social structure sustained primarily by hunting and gathering to one characterized by sedentation and agriculture. That was one of the most challenging and intellectually enjoyable experiences of my academic career – I was hooked! The causal architecture that began to take shape during those days eventually became the basis for a computer model that simulated the role of religion within the dynamics of the complex adaptive social systems leading up to and beyond Catalhoyuk (Shults and Wildman forthcoming).

Prior to that time, Wesley had already done work on at least three other computational models of phenomena related to religion, including a model of the evolution of groups with (more or less) costly signals of commitment (Wildman and Sosis 2011), a model of the transmission of violent tendencies among (some) anabaptist churches during the radical reformation (Matthews et al. 2013), and a systems-dynamics model of the causes and consequences of secularization (Wildman 2017c). Since that time, Wesley and I have co-authored and co-presented a number of papers on the use of computer modeling and simulation in religion and the humanities more generally (e.g., Wildman, Fishwick, and Shults 2017), and on the sort of meta-ethical and moral issues that are entangled within such endeavors (Shults and Wildman in press). We have also developed a model of the role of religious ideas and practices in the shift from pre-axial to axial age civilizational forms in west, south, and east Asia (Shults, Wildman, et al. forthcoming)

Most of our collaborative computer modeling has occurred in the context of the Modeling Religion Project (MRP) and the Modeling Religion in Norway (MODRN)

project, which were funded by the John Templeton Foundation and The Research Council of Norway respectively. As part of the MRP our research teams have developed a variety of computational models. For example, we have developed agent-based models that are able to simulate the role of religiosity in managing experiences of mortality salience (Shults et al. 2018) and the role of identity fusion and other social psychological mechanisms in the generation of mutually escalating religious violence (Shults et al. 2017). In each of these latter models, we operationalized “religiosity” as the integration of two distinguishable but interrelated statistically measurable traits: (1) the tendency to look for (and believe in) familiar supernatural agents, and (2) the tendency to long for (and participate in) familiar religious rituals. Both of these dispositions are intensified by mortality salience.

In other words, death awareness can activate two evolved dispositions related to religion: reliance on supernatural causality (to explain confusing or threatening events) and compliance with supernatural conventions (to ease anxiety in ritually cohesive groups). These tendencies can be further amplified by personality and contextual factors that lead individuals to identify strongly with their in-group. This is an example of the “operationalization” of religiously salient variables. By clearly specifying the phenomena we deemed “religious,” we were able to construct artificial societies of simulated agents with varying levels of these traits and to develop simulation experiments to test hypotheses about the mechanisms that increment or decrement them in human populations.

The MODRN project has also produced several computational models meant to contribute to the scientific study of religion. For example, the variables and interaction rules of the simulated agents in one of our recently published models (Gore et al. 2018) were formulated in light of factor analyses of international social surveys as well as other empirical research demonstrating the positive correlation between low religiosity and high education and existential security in human populations (Lemos et al., 2017). But does increased education within homophily networks *cause* religiosity to decline? Our simulation experiments lent plausibility to this hypothesis by forecasting the rates of decline in belief in God and supernatural agents in 22 countries up to three times more accurately than linear regression models. This helps to explain why the “godless” prosper in cultural contexts with high levels of education and existential security, such as Scandinavian societies (Shults et al. forthcoming). The MODRN teams are currently working on computer models that will allow us to simulate societies in which one can “grow” populations where there are larger numbers of analytic and altruistic atheists who are affiliated in healthy social networks.

Let’s return to the scare quotes around “religion.” In all of these computer models, that contentious term is operationalized by referring to beliefs in and rituals around *supernatural agents* – an approach almost universally followed in the bio-cultural study of religion (Shults 2018). This approach makes sense not only because it allows scientists to identify statistically measurable traits in a population, but also because *supernatural* beliefs and ritual behaviors are consistent factors found in factor analyses of psychological and sociological datasets. For example, one study found that “supernatural-related belief/practice” is “the only unique diagnostic feature of religiosity.... and empirically distinct from sociability, virtue, hope, etc.” (Schuurmans-Stekhoven 2016, 36). The findings of another set of psychological experiments designed to measure the implicit beliefs of believers and skeptics suggests that “supernatural content” is “the only thing that distinguishes religiosity from non-religiosity” (Lindeman et al., 2016, 225). Regression analysis suggests that spirituality – like religiosity – is primarily predicted by “belief in supernatural spirits” (Lindeman et al., 2012, 172). Recent factor analyses of survey data also confirm that beliefs and practices related to

supernatural forces form a relatively independent cluster of variables (Schofield et al. 2016; Lemos et al., 2017).

In his publications within the *scientific* study of religion, Wesley consistently uses stipulated definitions that refer to the alleged supernatural agents and authorities imaginatively engaged by religious in-groups. In other contexts, however, when he is engaging philosophers of religion, philosophical theologians, and scholars in religious studies, Wesley uses the term “religion” in a quite different way. In his book on *Religious Philosophy*, for example, he answers the question “What are the universal or partial features of religion?” by describing “the religious” as a vague category that involves the following:

- A way to relate every aspect of life to something ultimate and fundamental, in terms of ideas, values, and practices.
- An answer to concerns about death and immortality, including the ultimate origins, fate, and meaning of human life and all of reality.
- A means of bonding human beings tightly together through obligation, responsibility, and ritual, in order to stabilize social life and realize relational ideals such as peace, pleasure, power, or prosperity.
- A solution to the problem of human evil and a means of healing, liberation, social transformation, and personal self-cultivation.
- A source of orienting narratives by which we discern our place in a cosmological framework and gather the courage to make moral decisions (Wildman 2011, 37).

Note that none of the descriptions of these features include any reference to *supernatural agents* and that all of them could just as easily apply to individuals and groups committed to atheism and metaphysical naturalism as they do to those committed to the Islamic State or Roman Catholicism.

As a thoroughgoing naturalist, Wesley rejects the existence of any and all supernatural agents, but still calls himself “religious.” In fact, when writing as a theologian or philosopher, he tends to call *everyone* religious: the human race is *Homo religiosus* (Wildman 2009, 218). He argues that all human knowledge is in some sense religious. “If we understand ultimate reality as the ground of being in naturalistic fashion... then *all knowledge*, regardless of subject matter, is the result of engagement with a reality that grounds and transcends us, that we encounter as partially given rather than entirely at our cognitive disposal, that resists our ideas about it to some degree, and that forces us to adapt our interpretations” (Wildman 2018b, 197). Indeed, if all human experience is “religious” in this vague sense, then we can “expect to find ultimacy not just in religious practices and beliefs and communities, but lying at the intense root of every aspect of human life” (Wildman 2014, 256). All of this is related to Wesley’s use of the apparently oxymoronic phrase “religious naturalist” to describe his own apophatic approach to modeling God or ultimate reality.

When writing for those on the “scientific” side of his academic audience, Wesley uses conceptual or computational models that define religion with reference to particular phenomena related to supernatural agent beliefs and behaviors. When writing for those on the “theological” side, however, he utilizes the term religion (and God) in a way that refers far more broadly to universal human experiences of natural phenomena. In my view, this not only unnecessarily confuses and complicates the multidisciplinary conversations Wesley aims to foster but also inadequately confronts and contests the religious biases that foster superstition and segregation in our contemporary global context. This brings me, at last, to the main difference between us.

4. God, forsaken... and no religion too

It comes down to this: I want to forsake the use of the word “God” when referring to the truly infinite and the use of the word “religion” when referring to the general capacity of human beings to engage in meaningful and valuable experiences. I want to use these concepts to designate the philosophically incoherent idea of a Supranatural Agent invented by theologians in the west Asian monotheistic traditions and to the supernatural beliefs and practices of laypeople that bind them together in ritually mediated in-groups, respectively. Wesley, on the other hand, wants (sometimes) to use the term “God” to indicate his non-anthropomorphic model of “ultimate reality” and the term “religion” to indicate the axiologically intense aspects of human life.

What is at stake here? Why can't Wesley and I stop arguing about this (apparently) minor difference in our *formal* rhetorical use of a couple of terms? After all, when it comes to our *material* positions on philosophical issues related to metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics (not to mention scientific issues related to the biocultural study of shared imaginative engagement with axiologically relevant supernatural agents), we seem to agree on almost everything.

In the introduction to this chapter, I alluded to the fact that our disagreement had something to do with the philosophy of religion. Wesley has worked hard over the years to reform and reinvigorate this academic discipline, which he describes as a form of multidisciplinary comparative inquiry involving “philosophical research into religious beliefs and practices” (Wildman 2018a, 266). We both agree that philosophers of *religion* ought to approach their subject matter in a way that is informed by the theoretical insights and empirical findings of the many scientific disciplines that converge within the “biocultural” study of religion. We also agree that the *philosophy of religion* should strive to be as unbiased as any other sub-discipline (e.g., the philosophy of language, the philosophy of mind, the philosophy of education). Finally, we both believe that the work of philosophers of religion could have *practical* ramifications in the real world as future generations increasingly let go of reliance on supernatural agents and compliance with supernatural authorities to make sense of nature and act sensibly in society.

However, we disagree on the best strategy for putting the philosophy of religion to good use in helping humanity survive and thrive as we make the transition from cultural configurations whose cohesion relies on hidden gods to new forms of secular organization that rely on healthy governments and institutions. In the previous section, I suggested that Wesley's terminological habits unnecessarily confuse and complicate multidisciplinary conversations and inadequately confront and contest religious biases that engender superstition and segregation. In this section I try to explain why I think this is the case by setting our conversation in the context of the heuristic framework of theogonic reproduction theory that I have developed elsewhere (Shults 2014b, 2018).

The evolution of theogonic (god-bearing) mechanisms helps to explain where supernatural agent conceptions come from and why people keep them around. Why are gods so easily “born” in human minds and so consistently “borne” across human cultures? Most contemporary *Homo sapiens* are naturally drawn into the bio-cultural gravitational field created by the integration of two reciprocally reinforcing evolved tendencies: anthropomorphic promiscuity and sociographic prudery (see Figure 1). These cognitive and coalitional tendencies are part of our phylogenetic inheritance and have been reinforced by millennia of social entrainment practices. In the environment of our early ancestors the selective advantage went to hominids who were able to quickly

detect relevant agents in the natural environment and whose groups were adequately protected from dissolution as a result of cheaters and freeloaders in the social environment.

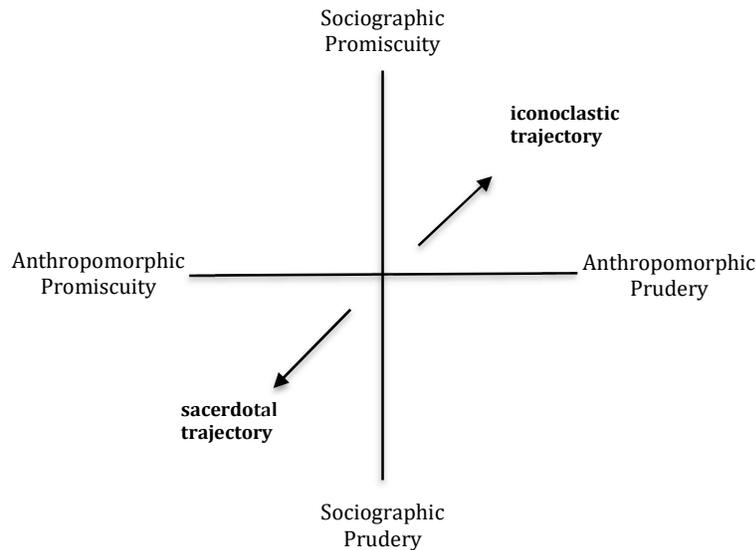


Figure 1. Trajectories in the philosophy of religion.

Think of the horizontal line in Figure 1 as a continuum on which one can mark a person’s tendency to guess “hidden human-like supernatural force” when confronted with ambiguous phenomena in the natural environment. An anthropomorphically promiscuous person will always be on the lookout for intentional causes, jumping at explanations that appeal to “agency” even – or especially – when such inferences are not easily verifiable. The anthropomorphically prudish, on the other hand, are suspicious about such appeals. They prefer to reflect more carefully before giving in to their intuitive desire to grab at agential interpretations.

The vertical line represents a continuum on which one can register how tightly a person is bound to conventional modes of inscribing the social field, i.e., to the proscriptions and prescriptions that regulate the evaluative practices and boundaries of the coalition with which he or she primarily identifies. Sociographic prudes are strongly committed to the divinely sanctioned social norms of their in-group, following and protecting them even at great cost to themselves. They are more likely to be suspicious of out-groups and to accept claims or demands that appeal to the allegedly supernatural authorities within their own coalition. On the other hand, the sociographic promiscuity of those at the top of the continuum leads them to be more open to intercourse with out-groups about alternate normativities and to the pursuit of innovative modes of creative social inscription. Such persons are also less likely to accept restrictions or assertions that are based only (or even primarily) on appeals to a religious tradition.

What does any of this have to do with the philosophy of religion? The conceptual framework depicted in Figure 1 can help us discern two distinct trajectories within this discipline. The *sacerdotal* trajectory (lower left quadrant) has by far been the most popular among philosophers interested in religion and the idea of God. This trajectory is fueled by the integration of the evolved biases discussed above and reinforces the linguistic symbols of transcendence erected and protected by priestly elites, symbols that all too easily activate and amplify their flock’s shared imaginative engagement with

person-like, coalition-favoring disembodied intentional forces. Unfortunately, these biases are reciprocally reinforcing: thinking about supernatural agents activates segregative inscriptions of the social field and participating in supernatural rituals activates superstitious interpretations of natural phenomena (for a discussion of the empirical evidence for these claims, see Shults 2018). These mutually amplifying theistic biases helped hold together some human in-groups (as they competed with and sometimes destroyed out-groups), but they have now become maladaptive in our contemporary pluralistic, ecologically fragile environment.

On the other hand, the *iconoclastic* trajectory (upper right quadrant of Figure 1) has been the road far less traveled among philosophers of religion. As the central two sections of this chapter amply attest, Wesley strongly prefers this path with its integration of naturalist and secularist sensibilities. He wants to locate the philosophy of religion in the University and resists apologetic approaches within the discipline that defend a particular supernatural coalition. And his apophatic theology clearly involves a more “comprehensive *iconoclastic* protest against anthropomorphism” than most scholars are willing to make (Wildman 2018, 71, emphasis added). In other words, Wesley is purposely promiscuous in his sociography and a veritable paragon of prudish anthropomorphism. He does the hard intellectual work and makes the necessary emotional effort to challenge the biases that keep most (religious) philosophers under the spell of sacerdotalism.

Wesley and I both do our best to follow this iconoclastic trajectory, but we differ in the extent to which we are willing to challenge the linguistic “icons” of allegedly transcendent supernatural agents around which the priestly and intellectual elites of religious coalitions rally their in-group members, reinforcing laypeople’s superstitious beliefs and segregative behaviors while maintaining their own dominant role in mediating ritual access to supernatural agents and policing interpretation of supernatural authorities. My strategy, to paraphrase Nietzsche, is to do philosophy (of religion) with a hammer. This does not *always* mean smashing icons to bits; hammers can also be used to sound out their hollowness or to pry them apart and build something new and useful. But, mostly yes: I prefer the smashing. My relatively aggressive iconoclasm is driven primarily by my worry about the potentially deleterious effects of the vestiges of Platonism in philosophy and theology on the psychological and political well-being of contemporary members of *Homo sapiens* (Shults 2014a).

The dangers inherent in supernatural beliefs and behaviors are not lost on Wesley. “No matter how invisible they may seem, religious ideas can be socially explosive under triggering circumstances” (Wildman 2018, 53). Generally speaking, however, his iconoclasm is far gentler than mine. There are at least two reasons for this. First, he believes that the symbols of traditional religious language, even those that are overtly anthropomorphic, are not only potentially valuable for the task of apophatic modeling but actually necessary for any and all attempts at effing the ineffable. “Without religious language, without its technical tricks and its specialized discourse communities, ... we’d be *mute* in the face of ultimate reality... I can say *nothing at all* about it, and it remains unthinkable, without the linguistic exertions of vast religious traditions with their memorial encodings of insight. This fact *morally obliges me to take religion seriously even when its doctrines are fantastic and its fanatics are dangerous*” (Wildman in press, 289, emphases added).

A second reason Wesley hesitates to unleash his inner Nietzsche on the pious but perilous parlance that pervades priestly philosophy is practical. He believes that most human beings are dependent on the structures provided by religious rituals and the nurture of professional pastors to help them cultivate the virtues they need to live well

and feel good in the modern world. He worries that hammering too strongly on the psychologically repressive and politically oppressive iconic edifices constructed and defended by followers of the sacerdotal trajectory would leave future generations without the resources they need to guide them into and through intense experiences with the axiological depth structures of reality. I hesitate to criticize Wesley's judgment here not only because I respect his wisdom on all matters, but also because on this particular issue his assessment is based on decades of ethnographic observation at dozens if not hundreds of churches and thousands of conversations with students and colleagues at his day job training pastors at Boston University School of Theology. I find the courage to criticize anyway because of my own experience of (and conversations with others about) the abuses of religion, and of the capacity of individuals in pluralistic, existentially secure, secular contexts characterized by high levels of naturalist and humanist education and freedom of expression, to engage those axiological depths without any help from religious icons.

I say let "God" be forsaken, except as a designation for the anthropomorphic being that the term evokes in the minds of almost all philosophers of religion and all normal people. Richard Dawkins would agree with me. Wesley's response: "why should religious naturalists surrender the word 'God,' which has always been contested, simply turning it over to personalist, supernaturalist theists because Dawkins says they should. Surely it is a word worth fighting for" (Wildman 2011, 25). Surely not, I reply. And the reason for turning it over is not "simply" because Dawkins (or I) say he should, but because it weakens the force of his apophatic argumentation by confusing his philosophical interlocutors and invites the very anthropomorphic interpretations against which he so vigorously and valiantly battles.

And no "religion" too. Or, at least no use of the term to refer to general phenomena that applies to all human experiences and every human group. If religion refers to everything, then it might as well refer to nothing because it fails to pick out any empirically tractable distinction in the real world (such as supernaturalist, as opposed to naturalist, beliefs). The only people who typically use the term in this broad way are conservative apologists when they are trying to defend the value of their own in-groups and liberal scholars when they are trying to obscure the dangers of religion so as not to offend members of out-groups. Wesley is neither. I argue that he should give up this usage even when writing for theologians, and stick with the way in which he employs the term when writing for computer modeler and scientists who study religion. This would have the added benefit of further unveiling the covert operation of the theistic biases that engender beliefs in discarnate anthropomorphic entities.

And this is where this "debate" with Wesley always ends, whether it is carried out in private or over drinks in front of an audience (red wine for me, water for Wesley, hard liquor for everyone else). Despite all that we share in common, we differ in our judgments about the way in which we should use terms like religion and God. Wesley finds my usage insufficiently sensitive to the valuable role that religious ideas and institutions can play in people's lives as our species increasingly shifts from supernaturalism to naturalism. I find Wesley's usage insufficiently sensitive to the damaging role that they play in activating evolved biases that amplify superstition and segregation thereby diminishing our prospects for making the shift peacefully (or at all). After every iteration of this argument I think the same thing: even though neither of us will ever budge, it is probably healthy for us to keep having the conversation because the most feasible strategy for managing the shift likely involves a creative tension between our positions. Drinks all around!

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