Religious Studies **48** (2012) doi:10.1017/S0034412511000096
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Wesley J. Wildman *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry: Envisioning a Future for the Philosophy of Religion.* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010). Pp. xx+376. £20.75 (Hbk). ISBN 978 1 4384 3235 9.

The current state of philosophy of religion is pretty dire, according to Wesley Wildman: there are now so many radically different ways of doing the subject that it is 'writhing in agony over the loss of [its] disciplinary identity' (p. x). But philosophers of religion need to get over this, says Wildman, and move forward; for whatever consensus about the scope and methods of the subject may once have existed, this only served in actual fact to mask 'ideological narrowness and religious parochialism' (p. xi). The cure is for philosophers of religion to come out of the parochial ghetto and learn to play a role in a broader and much healthier academic enterprise, that of 'religious philosophy', construed as the 'multidisciplinary comparative inquiry' of the book's title – an enterprise that would, as the jacket blurb tells us, be 'well suited to the modern, multicultural, secular university'.

This is pretty strong stuff. But is contemporary philosophy of religion really in such a mess? Wildman points to its lack of 'unifying method or vision', and to how different practitioners (from Alston to Marion to McGrath to Plantinga) pursue 'diverse and often mutually allergic projects' (p. x). But multiple methods of proceeding have been a hallmark of all philosophy ever since its inception, not just in the area of religion but in almost every other area, and one only has to look at the history of twentieth-century philosophy to be struck by the constant succession of different conceptions of how to philosophize (positivist, ordinary language, Wittgensteinian, linguistic, postmodernist, naturalistic), interspersed with periodic manifestos (for example from the likes of Richard Rorty) proclaiming the 'end of philosophy' as we know it. Yet despite this chequered history, philosophy today is in rude health, with publishers' lists bursting at the seams, and ever more journals being launched – and philosophy of religion seems no exception. So why should diversity of approaches be such a problem? Why should we not let a thousand flowers bloom, and allow that debates about the nature and direction of this particular branch of philosophy are simply an inevitable and essential part of the ongoing history of philosophizing in general, rather than signs of some terrible crisis?

In the particular case of philosophy of religion, however, there is reason on Wildman's view to diagnose an especially unhealthy situation. One symptom is the 'marked decline' in 'the number of employment opportunities in US colleges and universities devoted to philosophy of religion' (p. 17) – though the evidence

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cited for this claim is very sketchy. More disturbing is what Wildman sees as a growing wariness among some academics towards philosophy of religion, which he attributes to serious doubts about its fairness and objectivity. There is a 'widespread assumption within religious studies' that 'philosophical and theological modes of thought are inevitably biased and unworthy of a place within the scholarly study of religion' (p. 22). I must say I was surprised to read this, since in my own limited acquaintance of those working in religious studies I have tended if anything to find an exaggerated (and often undeserved) deference towards philosophical modes of thought rather than a condemnation of their academic 'unworthiness'. But this may be one of many instances of Wildman's perspective being coloured by the situation in the USA, where the influence of religion in public life and certain areas of academia is markedly different from anything found in the UK. Some of the things Wildman is worried about – the college teacher who 'starts proselytizing in the classroom on behalf of a particular … way of salvation' (p. 25) – would I suspect be far less likely in Britain, with its centrally controlled virtual state monopoly on tertiary education (though the latter of course has serious problems of its own).

However that may be, in the chapters that follow Wildman sets out his stall (I forebear to say 'proselytises') for his new conception of 'religious philosophy', which, if I understand him correctly, he hopes will subsume or incorporate what is worth retaining in the otherwise moribund and bias-infected disciplines of philosophy of religion and theology. The new subject will encompass 'multidisciplinary forms of theological and philosophical reflection on religion that prize impartial analysis and refuse institutional religious bias' (p. 26). Two interesting questions, I think, arise out of this. The first concerns the charge of impartiality and bias, while the second concerns the attractiveness and viability of the multidisciplinary model itself.

On the first issue, Wildman argues his case by targeting the supposed flaws of philosophy of religion as practised by by some past and present luminaries. Richard Swinburne's inductive or probabilistic strategy for supporting theism, for example, comes in for some stick, because it fails to 'broach nontheistic ultimate religious explanations for reality such as those of most forms of Buddhism, many parts of Chinese religions, some aspects of Indian religions, and some versions of religious naturalism' (p. 104). Though I have my own doubts about the probabilistic approach, I find this complaint of Wildman very curious, since it seems to imply that any assessment of the probability of a given hypothesis can only be valid if it includes exhaustive consideration of every other approach ever offered by anyone else: would we fault a virologist's account of chicken pox on the grounds that it failed to 'broach' non-microbial explanations? Another of Wildman's targets is Anselm, who is hauled into the dock because the way in which he tackles the problem of God's existence is 'strongly conditioned by his Platonic philosophical heritage, his personal mystical experience', and 'the

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emphasis of his monastic community on a life of prayer' (p. 97). Wildman graciously concedes that it would be 'anachronistic' to impute avoidable narrowness of perspective to Anselm himself, but he thinks that with hindsight we can see how things might have been done better: the *Monologion* argument, for instance, could be 'completely recast if a few disciplinary specialities of South Asian and East Asian philosophical traditions were allowed to contribute' (p. 98).

Perhaps it could; but would adding all these ingredients to the dish produce a better meal, or just an indigestible sludge? Wildman proposes to cast his net very wide indeed, so that the 'tasks' of the new 'religious philosophy' will involve investigation of 'every kind and degree of religious phenomena', using various approaches, 'phenomenological, comparative, historical, analytical, literary, theoretical and evaluative', and drawing on 'diverse disciplines', including 'natural sciences, social sciences, humanities and professional crafts such as law, medicine, and politics' (p. 35). Anyone who has sat on a faculty syllabus committee must surely turn pale at the prospect of having to talk that one through on a long Wednesday afternoon.

But by their fruits shall ye know them, and it would be unfair to disparage such an enterprise before seeing some examples of how it works. Wildman is at a disadvantage here, since his book is not itself an instance of the proposed genre, but rather a general methodological manifesto. He does, however, offer a few 'case studies' to provide an indication of the kind of thing he has in mind. One of the most suggestive is the topic of *food*, about which there has been an 'impressive silence' (p. 105) from philosophers of religion. How, asks Wildman, would a philosophical approach to food in religion proceed if it were to take advantage of the resources of other disciplines? Evolutionary and game-theoretic models could illuminate the role of food as something that involves co-operation; biological study of hormones and behaviour could help disclose the role of food in power and self-assertion; historical studies of the emergence of agriculture could show how food cultivation is involved in the complex 'self–other dialectic' that marked the emergence of complex civilisations; social studies of the place of food in celebration together with understanding its chemical function as a possible entheogen or hallucinogen could teach us about its role as a doorway for self-exploration and self-transcendence; and so on. Such reflection on the manifold significance of food for the human condition would in turn help to explain how religious ritual is so 'richly knitted into the world of food', as in the Hindu *puja* ritual, the Christian Eucharist, the Jewish Shabbat meal, and the Ramadan fast for Muslims (pp. 105–114). All this seems interesting and important (though it is surprising to see no reference in the index to Leon Kass, whose *The Hungry Soul* (1994) explores many of the rich connections between food and spirituality); and it perhaps goes some way to indicating how a multidisciplinary approach might be fruitful. What is less clear is how exactly it supports Wildman's further claim that it will be fruitful 'in ways that correct many deficiencies in

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approaches to the human condition pursued within traditional philosophy of religion' (p. 114).

These and other battle lines drawn in this book provide much food for thought. The general picture to emerge by the end is of an approach to religion that is much more descriptive, more empirical, and more 'scientific' than that taken by most philosophers (Wildman displays, for example, a marked scepticism about the authoritative status of supposed *apriori* reasoning, pp. 178–179); and to this extent the book takes its place among a growing number of attempts (for example in the study of consciousness, and of morality) to advance what Brian Leiter has called the 'naturalistic revolution' in philosophy. One powerful reason for the appeal of the empirical-scientific image in our culture is of course its allegiance to strictly impartial and objective standards of inquiry; and that may in the end be what is at the root of Wildman's disapproving attitude to philosophers of religion who work *within* a given religious tradition. Proponents of the latter, traditional, approach would no doubt say that it is only by focusing on the fine detail that one can get to grips with the really challenging aspects of religious thought. Part of the issue here relates to an old academic turf war between those who favour a more specialised intensive curriculum over an extensive one. But there is a philosophically deeper and more fascinating question at stake, unfortunately not explored by Wildman, of whether there may not be aspects of reality that can only be properly studied via a detailed and committed immersion into a particular conceptual world. If they are, then 'comparative' scrutiny from an impartial distance may simply lose sight of what is most salient about religious belief in the lives of those who subscribe to it.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412511000096 Published online by Cambridge University Press