Assessing Wesley Wildman's Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary, Comparative Inquiry

By: Kevin Schilbrack

Abstract

Wesley Wildman is one of the foremost philosophers of religion calling for the evolution of the discipline from its present narrow focus on theistic beliefs to become a discipline concerned with religions in all their diversity. Towards this end, he proposes that philosophers of religion understand what they do as multidisciplinary comparative inquiry. This article assesses his proposal.

Schilbrack, Kevin (2012) "Assessing Wesley Wildman's Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary, Comparative Inquiry" *Sophia* 51: 2 (ISSN: 0038- 1527). [DOI 10.1007/s11841-012-0315-3]. Version of record is available from www.springer.com

Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry

In this book, Wesley Wildman makes a proposal for re-envisioning the future of our discipline, shifting it from its traditional, relatively parochial focus on evaluating the rationality of traditional theism to a multidisciplinary, comparative inquiry of fully global scope. Let me distinguish my response to his proposal into three categories. First, I want to speak in broad terms about Wildman's vision for a philosophy of religion as multidisciplinary, comparative inquiry. Second, I want to respond to the specific philosophical approach that he recommends to us as the most promising way to advance that project, namely, pragmatism. And then, third, I want to speak about the example he provides to illustrate what the field looks like if we take this path. It is really only here with his suggestion about what it is that philosophers of religion should work on that I want to add a correction. About both his global vision and his specific approach, I will raise some criticisms, mostly having to do with the language we use to name this transformation, but I nevertheless agree with Wildman that philosophy of religion today should evolve into an inquiry that collaborates with other disciplines and that takes as its object all the religions of the world.

First, Wildman calls us to reconceive philosophy of religion – or as he reluctantly and temporarily prefers, religious philosophy−as a form of inquiry that is (i) multidisciplinary and (ii) comparative. Let me look at these two parts of his proposal.

When Wildman says that philosophy of religion is not “a” discipline, he reminds us that our work is not constituted by a single, common method. Instead, as he argues persuasively: “Philosophy of religion is not one project and has no unifying method or vision,” but is constituted instead by “mutually allergic projects” (x). It includes at

least the following styles: phenomenological, comparative, historical, analytical, literary, theoretical, and evaluative. I think that this idea of speaking of philosophy of religion as a multidisciplinary inquiry should not generate too much resistance. Some of these seven styles may be more prominent in some professional societies or journals, and other styles in others. And we can imagine an analytic philosopher of religion dismissing a literary approach, or an evaluative philosopher of religion dismissing an historical approach as "not really" philosophy of religion. Nevertheless, in some societies and journals – or some individuals!−one might find in all seven of them. Moreover, when Wildman says that philosophy of religion is multidisciplinary, he means this to be what we might call a summative description: he is not asking any one philosopher of religion to practice multidisciplinarily. Any individual philosopher of religion will typically have her disciplinary specialty; he is only asking each of us in our understanding of the whole of our efforts not to exclude the others. I therefore see this part of his proposal as a salutary reminder of the diversity within philosophy of religion.

Nevertheless, I don't accept the word "multidisciplinary." I accept the inclusive spirit of the proposal, but I am turned off by this label for it. What I mean is this: if we were to accept this way of describing our work, saying that philosophy of religion is not properly speaking a discipline because it does not have a single method, but instead includes multiple methods−multiple disciplines−then we have the following consequences that are awkward at best. First, if we accept this description, then we would say that phenomenological philosophy of religion, for example, has a method and therefore it is a discipline. But we know that the phenomenologists have never agreed on a single method, and they will split between those "classical phenomenologists" who hold closer to Husserl and those "existentialist phenomenologists" who follow Merleau-Ponty and those recent French "theological phenomenologists" like Jean-Luc Marion. Those are true disciplines, they will say, and phenomenological philosophy of religion is really a multidisciplinary inquiry. But then, in turn, the existentialist phenomenologists, for example, may object and claim that they do not have a single method but rather that some follow the early Merleau-Ponty on the primacy of perception, and others follow the late Merleau-Ponty on flesh as the matrix that gives rise to the perceiver. And so on. Second, if philosophy of religion is not a discipline, then surely psychology of religion is also not a discipline. We know that those who follow psychoanalytic methods differ among themselves, and differ also from those who follow William James or Eric Erickson or Victor Frankl, and so on. And then history of religions is also not a discipline, nor sociology of religion. "Things fall apart / the center cannot hold" is right! How we define terms like "discipline" turn on our purposes, and I worry that this proposal will encourage fractiousness in our field at a time when the field of Religious Studies is already accused of being an incoherent grab bag.

My suggestion is that in the way we represent ourselves−both to ourselves and to our audiences−we emphasize the coherence of our project. I would therefore prefer to speak of our work as united in a single discipline. And the house we live in (or perhaps a better analogy for a pragmatist: the laboratory where we work) is philosophy. Philosophy is a discipline that includes multiple methods, all of which are philosophical. Philosophy of religion is the application of that discipline and its methods to the subject matter of the religions. Do all those methods have one thing in common or are they a family resemblance concept? Let's answer that later, after the department gets funding. The second part of Wildman's proposal is that philosophy of religion should be or

must be comparative. My sense is that even the most narrowly theological philosophers of religion agree to this proposal in principle, but in practice – by which I mean what one finds in the textbooks that we publish, the courses that we teach, the journal articles we write and read – philosophy of religion is parochial in exactly the way that Wildman describes. In fact, I suspect that philosophy of religion is more parochial now – less interested in thinking and speaking across traditions, more willing to limit its interest to topics of solely Christian theological interest like atonement or the resurrection– than it was 50 years ago. So, I agree wholeheartedly with this idea that philosophy of religion should take as its summative object all religions and not just theism.

However, I hesitate to name philosophy of religion "comparative." Here is a bit of back-story. When I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago, the university planned and hosted a series of conferences called "Towards a Comparative Philosophy of Religion." The papers were subsequently published as a trilogy of provocative but relatively unfocused edited volumes (Reynolds and Tracy, eds., 1990, 1992, 1994). The editorial duties for that book series were then handed over to Purushottama Bilimoria, who is also the editor of Sophia, the philosophy of religion journal most committed to this cross-cultural vision of the discipline. But Bilimoria objected to the label comparative philosophy of religion on the grounds that it was modeled on the practice of comparative religions, and the latter emerged as an academic field in the nineteenth century as a pseudo-scientific attempt to create a pseudo-evolutionary hierarchy of religions from the primitive to the higher, and that therefore the label has an imperialist genealogy (Bilimoria and Irvine 2009: 28–9).

I think that Bilimoria is right about the genealogy of comparative religions, and I think that genealogical approaches make an important contribution to a reflexive understanding of the concepts that we use, often unreflectively. But I think that Wildman provides us with an account of what comparison is (both in this book and in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project [see Neville 2001a, b, c]) that successfully addresses that objection. By stressing that comparison is a dialectic between the data and one's categories that is always interest-laden, Wildman provides an account of the practice of comparison that is not unduly optimistic or pessimistic, but rather fallible and meliorist.

Nevertheless, though I agree with the transformation that Wildman is calling for, and though I think that he successfully employs the concept of comparison in a way that avoids the original colonialist uses, I would not want to say that philosophy of religion is comparative. My concern is that what I am looking for is a label that reflects a summative understanding of what it is that we do. I agree philosophy of religion should be global, and I agree that the practices of comparison are a crucial part of the whole. As I see it, a comparative philosophy of religion would be similar to the still emerging but relatively more established field of comparative religious ethics. A superb example of that subfield is Lee Yearley's book comparing the teachings about the virtues, especially courage, of the Christian Thomas Aquinas and the Confucian Mengzi (Yearley 1990). Another example would be Aaron Stalnaker's book comparing the teachings about spiritual growth, especially overcoming evil in oneself, in the Christian Augustine and the Confucian Xunzi (Stalnaker 2009). Philosophy of religion understood in this comparative way would also be similar to comparative theology. Paradigmatic examples here include Frank Clooney's Theology after Vedanta or John Thatamanil's comparison of views of God as immanent in the work of Paul Tillich and Shankaracharya (Clooney 1993; Thatamanil 2006). But if we are looking for a summative label of what philosophy of religion does,

our summative goal is not comparing. Even if the discipline as a whole accepts Wildman's proposal that the proper object of study is all the religions of the world, some philosophers of religion will continue to work on tradition-specific questions, and properly so. Writing on the Hick's attempted solution to the problem of evil or Chandrakirti's epistemology or pluralistmetaphysics in Jainismor Ibn Sina's doctrine of God – none of these explicitly involve comparing, but they are all proper projects for philosophy of religion. Here is my slogan: We compare religions so that we can find the truth about them; we are not trying to find the truth about religions so that we can compare them.

Wildman might reply that even if a philosopher of religion is not explicitly comparing two or more traditions, she is necessarily dependent upon concepts that are general in the sense that they name a respect in which different things can be compared. The terms "God" and "mystic" and "doctrine" and "good" and "argument" are not tradition-specific concepts. To think at all is therefore to compare, at least implicitly. Thinking and speaking is not possible with comparison. I grant this point. But if all thinking is at least implicitly comparative, it does not follow that the proper label for our discipline would be comparative philosophy of religion. If it were, then analogously sociology of religion should be comparative sociology of religion; psychology of religion would be comparative psychology of religion, etc.

My preferred label is to insist that philosophy of religion is properly a comparative or cross-cultural or global discipline, but that the best name for this discipline simply is philosophy of religion. With that label, I hope to put the burden on those who want to use the label but restrict it to theism.

Pragmatism as Method in Philosophy of Religion

Pragmatism treats the key word inquiry as an interest-driven problem-solving capacity common to all living things. On this approach, human inquiry is social, embodied, and grounded in our biological character as evolving organisms seeking survival. Common to pragmatism is a commitment to the fallibility of all the products of inquiry. If all the products of inquiry are fallible, then no products of inquiry are certain. But some pragmatists have confused their argument that that no knowledge is certain with the claim that no knowledge is true always and everywhere. And they have therefore identified pragmatism with the repudiation of metaphysics. They confuse an epistemic claim about how we know with an ontic claim about what we can know, and they thereby close off the possibility that we might make claims that are alleged to be true always and everywhere but about which we may be wrong. Wildman, by contrast, does not make this mistake. He endorses critical realism. On this view, we know reality only given the tools that we have (either technological tools, like a telescope and microscope, or conceptual tools, like democracy or philosophy of religion, that make claims to knowledge possible). Nevertheless, what we know is reality, not merely our tools−not merely our experience or our language. Moreover, some of the claims that we will be interested in making will not be about particular or local aspects of reality, but reality as a whole. Thus, his pragmatism permits a critical realist metaphysics.

I find pragmatism as a movement to be exceedingly squirrelly about what distinguishes pragmatism from its alternatives, and therefore it is harder to declare what pragmatism is. But given the previous paragraph, we can distinguish two broad

traditions: there is a pragmatism that permits critical realism and metaphysics (I trace its lineage from Charles Peirce to Donald Davidson, and now also to Wesley Wildman, Robert Neville, and Scott Davis), and there is also an antirealist and therefore antimetaphysical pragmatism (I trace its lineage from William James to Richard Rorty, Jeffrey Stout, and Cornel West). Given the successes of this latter, anti-metaphysical pragmatism, it is easy to overlook the existence of the former, but I agree with Wildman that a critical realist and metaphysical pragmatism is the pragmatism that holds the most promise for philosophy of religion.

What Aspects of Religion Are of Philosophical Interest?

Wildman makes a proposal about areas of cross-cultural overlap in philosophy of religion, and identifies six cross-cultural traditions of inquiry and debate. These are six points of intersection among religious intellectual traditions:

1. The ontotheological tradition: a religious focus on being. Quintessentially ontological arguments.
2. The cosmotheological tradition: a religious focus on the conditions for the very possibility of a dependent reality. Quintessentially cosmological arguments.
3. The physicotheological tradition: a religious focus on the detailed arrangements of the physical world. Quintessentially design arguments.
4. The psychotheological tradition: a religious focus on human experience, especially altered states of consciousness.
5. The axiotheological tradition: a religious focus on moral and aesthetic value judgments and arguments about their grounds.
6. The mysticotheological tradition: a religious focus on experiences that surpass cognitive grasp. Quintessentially arguments from mystical experience.

For the sake of time, let me bypass how suggestive and promising these six topics are and cut straight to some critical comments. I note first that if the word tradition assumes that something is “handed on” (trāditiō), then these are not, strictly speaking, traditions. If Christians fast during Lent and Muslims fast during Ramadan, they share the practice of fasting, but they don’t share a tradition of fasting. Second, I might also complain that some are so vaguely sketched that it is not clear what they include and exclude. Consider axiotheological inquiry: Confucius’s aim to teach filial piety through ritual and Plato’s speculation about the Form of the Good may both concern “value” in some elastic sense, but the goals of these two texts are so vastly different that much more work needs to be done to show that they are answering a common question. And thirdly, I might complain that as I survey the discipline of philosophy of religion, I see that there are pockets here and there that care about, for example, the cosmological argument, but for most theists – let alone most Buddhists−this is not really a live issue. In fact, it does not seem that these are even live issues for Wildman (though some of them help him raise the discussion of nontheistic or non-anthropomorphic views of ultimacy).

Despite those complaints, Wildman’s six recommendations for cross-cultural commonalities help to get us out of the crippling assumption that all thinking is done within a historical “silo.” And they are not offered as an exhaustive map of the topics for a cross-cultural philosophy of religion. What other topics would philosophy of religion work on? This is a crucial question for the future of our discipline. In closing,

I want to make a proposal for cross-cultural commonalities that can map out the other work that we can do. My proposal begins with this question: if philosophers of religions came to understand the scope of their work as global and not solely theistic, as Wildman is proposing, what aspects of the various religions should we focus on?

Religious communities often do have representative intellectuals who take on tasks of systematization and apologetics, and it is and probably always will be the central part of philosophy of religions to consider the claims and arguments given by religious philosophers. Call this the philosophical study of the doctrinal dimension of religions or (to use a nice phrase from Timothy Knepper) the philosophical study of religious reason-giving. But philosophers of religions should also move away from an exclusive focus on the work of literate elites, typically from a leisured class and typically male, to embrace the full range of religious phenomena. Philosophy of religion needs to develop the conceptual tools and questions to take as its object every dimension of religious phenomena. Doing so will build the most important bridges that it could between philosophy of religions and other disciplines at work on the study of religions. This is a proposal that Wildman does not spell out in the book, though I suspect that he would support it.

In closing, here is one way in which we might think about the objects of study for philosophy of religions other than doctrines. For the sake of convenience, I will use Ninian Smart's anatomy of the seven dimensions of religion (Smart 1996). Smart considers doctrines to be a central dimension of religions, but he also lists (1) the mythic or narrative dimension, (2) the experiential or emotional dimension, (3) the ethical and legal dimension, (4) the ritual dimension, (5) the social dimension, and (6) the material dimension. The doctrinal dimension is the product of religious philosophers around the world, and this could be understood in terms of Wildman's six themes. However, the other six aspects of religion, the other six things that religious communities care about, have received relatively little philosophical attention. For them, philosophers of religion will need to develop new tools and questions. For each of these six, I therefore point to what I think is a question that identifies a properly philosophical contribution to the study of that aspect of religions, and I will give at least one thinker who has started to address that question.

1. The mythic or narrative dimension: to what extent is religious understanding dependent on narrative as a form? (Ricoeur 1990)
2. The experiential or emotional dimension: to what extent are religious emotions cognitive? (Nussbaum 2003)
3. The ethical or legal dimension: are cultures necessarily moral orders? (Green 1988; Smith 2009)
4. The ritual dimension: in what ways is religious practice not merely a form of inculcating a religious teaching that originates outside the practice, but is a form of inquiry in its own right? (Schilbrack, forthcoming; Chap. 2)
5. The social dimension: to what extent are the conditions for the possibility of religious knowledge created by social institutions? (Foucault 1979)
6. The material dimension: how does the aesthetic imagination shape cognitive categories? (Casey 2002)

I believe that this proposal for the field is in the spirit of Wildman's vision for religious philosophy as multidisciplinary comparative inquiry and complements the attention he gives to theological debates with attention to religion as practiced.

References

Bilimoria, P., & Irvine, A. (2009). “The state of philosophy of religion and postcoloniality.” In P. Bilimoria and A. Irvine (Eds.), Postcolonial philosophy of religion. Dordrecht, NL: Springer.

Casey, E. S. (2002). Representing place: Landscape painting and maps. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Clooney, Francis X., S.J. (1993). Theology after Vedanta: An experiment in comparative theology. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Foucault, M. (1995). Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York, NY: Vintage.

Green, R. M. (1988). Religion and moral reason: A new method for comparative study. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Neville, R. C. (2001a). The Human Condition. Albany, NY: State University of New York.

Neville, R. C. (2001b). Religious Truth. Albany, NY: State University of New York.

Neville, R. C. (2001c). Ultimate Realities. Albany, NY: State University of New York.

Nussbaum, M. (2003). Upheavals of thought: The intelligence of emotions. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Reynolds, Frank E & Tracy, D., eds. (1990). Myth and philosophy. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Reynolds, Frank E & Tracy, D., eds. (1992). Discourse and practice. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Reynolds, Frank E & Tracy, D., eds. (1994). Religion and practical reason: New essays in the comparative philosophy of religions. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Ricoeur, P. (1990). Time and Narrative. v. 1–2. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Schilbrack, Kevin. Forthcoming. The Future of Philosophy of Religion. London, UK: Blackwell.

Smart, N. (1996). Dimensions of the sacred: An anatomy of the World’s beliefs. Berkeley, CA: University ofCalifornia Press.

Smith, C. (2009). Moral, believing animals: Personhood and culture. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Stalnaker, A. (2009). Overcoming our evil: Human nature and spiritual exercises in Xunzi and Augustine. Washington: Georgetown University Press.

Thatamanil, J. (2006). The Immanent Divine: God, Creation and the Human Predicament. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress.

Yearley, L. H. (1990). Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of virtue and conceptions of courage. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.