What is the value of religious and spiritual experiences within human life? Are we evolutionarily programmed to have such experiences? How will emerging technologies change such experiences in the future? Wesley Wildman addresses these key intellectual questions and more, offering a spiritually evocative naturalist interpretation of the diverse variety of religious and spiritual experiences. He describes these experiences, from the common to the exceptional, and offers innovative classifications of them based on their neurological features and their internal qualities. His account avoids reductionistic oversimplifications and instead synthesizes perspectives from many disciplines, including philosophy and natural sciences, into a compelling account of the meaning and value of religious and spiritual experiences in human life. The resulting interpretation does not assume a supernatural worldview nor does it reject such experiences as positive affirmation of this-worldly existence.

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RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

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# Contents

**List of figures**
- Page ix

**Preface**
- Page xi

**Acknowledgements**
- Page xiv

1. **Exploring a strange yet familiar landscape: a strategy for interpreting religious and spiritual experiences**
   - Introduction: 1
   - Motivating concerns: 4
   - Theoretical issues: 14
   - Conclusion: 25

2. **Spirituality and the brain: a revolutionary scientific approach to religious and spiritual experiences**
   - Introduction: 31
   - History of thought about spirituality and the brain: 32
   - Evidence for the neural mediation hypothesis: 41
   - Problems facing the neuroscience of religious and spiritual experiences: 48
   - Creative responses: 53
   - Conclusion: 67

3. **A smorgasbord of dangers and delights: the phenomenology of religious and spiritual experiences**
   - Introduction: 69
   - Mapping the terrain of religious and spiritual experiences: 70
   - Basic distinctions in the map: 77
   - Exploring shared territory in more detail: 89
   - Conclusion: 101

4. **Gateway to ultimacy: the importance of intense experiences**
   - Introduction: 104
   - Immediate responses to intense experiences: 108
   - Five core features of intense experiences: 115
   - The faces, functions, and cognitive value of intense experiences: 122
Contents

Evolution and the neurology of intense experiences 135
Conclusion 142

5 Can you trust your instincts? The cognitive reliability of religious and spiritual experiences 144
   Introduction 144
   Deepening the reliability question 145
   The perception analogy 156
   An ecological-semiotic theory of dynamic engagement 166
   The reliability of religious perceptual engagement 178
   Conclusion 185

6 The brain-group nexus: the social power of religious and spiritual experiences 187
   Introduction 187
   A dynamical systems approach to the brain-group nexus 189
   Describing all equilibrium social arrangements since the Neolithic 202
   Evolutionary origins of the pre-Neolithic equilibrium 211
   Behind the ideological curtain 218
   Conclusion 225

7 Make it start, make it stop! Religious and spiritual experiences in the future 227
   Introduction 227
   Past technologies, transformed in the present, hurtling into the future 228
   Unprecedented technologies 236
   Conclusion 241

8 Brains in bodies, persons in groups, and religion in nature: an integrative interpretation of religious and spiritual experiences 244
   Introduction 244
   Five key controversies 244
   Five key affirmations 252
   Conclusion 264

Glossary of key terms 266
References 271
Index 300
Figures

3.1 Overlap between vivid [V] and religious [R] experiences

3.2 Relations between religious [R] experiences and the two overlapping classes of vivid experiences: anomalous experiences [A] and ultimacy experiences [U]

3.3 Relations between religious [R] experiences and the two overlapping classes of vivid experiences: anomalous experiences [A] and ultimacy experiences [U]

3.4 Locating spiritual experiences (shaded area), as including all of ultimacy experiences [U] and a usage-dependent portion of religious experiences [R] that are not already also ultimate experiences

3.5 Schema for Kristeller's multimodal developmental model of meditation effects

3.6 Relationships among meditation experiences, religious experiences [R], and vivid experiences, where the latter class is constituted by ultimacy [U] and anomalous [A] experiences

3.7 Relationships among intense experiences, religious experiences [R], and vivid experiences, where the latter class is constituted by ultimacy [U] and anomalous [A] experiences

3.8 Relationships among mystical experiences, religious experiences [R], and vivid experiences, where the latter class is constituted by ultimacy [U] and anomalous [A] experiences

3.9 Relationships among all types of experiences discussed

6.1 The self-organizing landscape of social possibilities for the brain-group nexus
Religious and spiritual experiences (RSEs) are a puzzle. Some people receive them gratefully as reliable ways to discover the deepest truths about reality. Others approach them warily, as misleading side-effects of the human brain’s spectacular virtual-reality processing system. Great passion surrounds such opposed convictions, because the stakes are high. The first group defends the very meaning of human life, after all, while the second group protects the world from dangerous fanaticism. The passion on all sides makes patient inquiry exceptionally difficult but that has not stopped intellectuals from trying. As a result, endless streams of reflection on the puzzle, most promising impartial handling of evidence and judicious interpretation, pour into the present from all of the world’s literate philosophical and religious traditions. In our own time, studies of the social psychology and neuroscience of these experiences join the confluence of wisdom, sometimes naively claiming to offer the last word on the subject.

No approach, no researcher, no writer, and no book will speak the last word on RSEs. Advance in understanding occurs at the margins, to be sure, but the central puzzle remains because there are no knock-down refutations of the best versions of competing interpretations. The first challenge facing the interpreter of RSEs is therefore to avoid simple-minded thinking on the subject. This is more difficult than it may seem at first glance. It involves committing to working carefully across the relevant disciplines and traditions, thereby properly preparing the interpreter to avoid pitfalls into which less diligent inquirers routinely fall. Elementary traps include thinking that RSEs are self-authorizing, that they must be delusions because they have neural representations and causal conditions, and that it is sufficient to take account of wisdom on the subject from one religious tradition or one discipline. People fall into such traps so often that the overall picture is somewhat tragicomic – pitfalls becoming pratfalls. There are many less obvious traps as well. Awareness of many disciplines and many religious and philosophical traditions may not force a
resolution of the puzzle but, by helping the interpreter avoid mistakes that by now should feel more embarrassing than they do, multidisciplinary and multireligious competence makes inquiries more difficult to dismiss and far more interesting.

The second challenge facing the interpreter of RSEs is to acknowledge that the task is to evaluate the overall plausibility of entire systems of interpretation. Supposing simple arguments will defeat the interpretations of sophisticated opponents is a fool’s hope. Presuming that evidence (however construed) can neatly clinch the case one way or another is vulgar; every sophisticated interpretative framework can assimilate the same evidence in basic ways. Simple arguments and basic evidence can eliminate fundamentally inadequate interpretations, which can be extremely useful. But the best interpretations of RSEs, no matter how opposed, eagerly sop up evidence like a hungry worker consumes the remains of a bowl of warm soup. These are large-scale systems of interpretation that read the entire world in creative and compelling ways; RSEs merely ride on the impressive coattails. Such large-scale systems of interpretation are robust and adaptive to an exceptional degree.

The inquiry presented in this book fully accepts these two challenges, refuses shortcuts, and attempts to take responsibility for the interpretation offered. The approach to inquiry is described more fully in Religious Philosophy As Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry: Envisioning a Future for the Philosophy of Religion (Wildman 2010), so I won’t dwell on methodological questions in this volume.

The resulting interpretation is not only scientifically and philosophically informed; it is also theological in character. In this respect, as the subtitle indicates, it is a spiritually evocative yet naturalist theological interpretation of RSEs – a combination that can seem passing strange to some and a welcome relief to others. Naturalism is so closely allied with materialism and anti-religiousness for some that the term seems lost for spiritually and religiously positive uses. Impressive traditions of religious naturalism exist, nonetheless, and they have intimate connections with certain mystical theological viewpoints. The area of compatibility between naturalism and theology is larger and more intriguing than people supposing naturalism must be anti-theological might assume. The shared territory opposes supernaturalism (in the sense of disembodied intentionality) and rejects supranaturalism (in the sense of ultimate reality as a divine person with awareness and purposes and powers to act in the world), and that is enough to make it religiously useless for some. By contrast, theologians supposing that God is not a personal being but rather the Ground of Being, Esse
Preface

*Ipsum*, God beyond God, *Nirguna Brahman*, or the *Dao* That Cannot Be Daoed immediately grasp the point: there is harmony between such ground-of-being theologies and an anti-supernaturalistic, anti-supranaturalistic, spiritually potent form of naturalism. Religious naturalism in this sense is an ancient view, with a profound presence in all of the great religious and philosophical traditions, albeit usually on the underside of traditions dominated by supernaturalistic and supranaturalistic ways of thinking.

Taking the second challenge (above: the need to evaluate large-scale systems of interpretation) with due seriousness entails that I accept certain limitations in this inquiry. In particular, I cannot mount a full defense of religious naturalism in my sense against its anti-religious naturalist detractors and its supernaturalistic religious critics. This task is taken up in relation to the human condition in *Science and Religious Anthropology* (Wildman 2009b), and in relation to the metaphysical systems themselves in a forthcoming work on science and ultimate reality. I do not leave the challenge of evaluating large-scale systems of interpretation entirely to those other books, however. From beginning to end, this volume presents a religious naturalist interpretation of *RSEs* in relation to alternative interpretative frameworks, anticipating criticisms and issuing challenges. The overall case for the superior plausibility of the religious naturalist interpretation depends on the whole book. Frankly, because this case rejects the supernaturalist and supranaturalist premises of many traditional theological interpretations of RSEs, it risks not achieving a fair hearing in that domain. Similarly, because the case rejects the anti-religious premises of some prominent naturalists, it risks being dismissed out of court there, too. For those willing to suspend these typical assumptions for the sake of argument, and (better) for the sake of exploring an alternative interpretative framework, I believe the case can be persuasive – welcomed for its plotting of a path through what formerly seemed to be an intellectual impasse, toward the instinctively attractive destination of an affirmative-yet-critical appraisal of RSEs.

An interpretation of RSEs developed in a religious–naturalist framework has some unusual but intriguing features. Important among them is that the interpretation can affirm the value of RSEs (in a host of surprising forms, within and beyond religious settings) even while exercising skepticism about the meanings people often attach to such experiences. In this sense, the inquiry presented in this book takes up a middle position between eager boosters and nasty detractors of RSEs, able to grant a significant amount of what each side cares most about while pushing back against less judicious aspects of their opposed interpretations.
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xiv
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