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978-1-107-00008-7 - Religious and Spiritual Experiences  
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## RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

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 reductionalistic 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.

WESLEY J. WILDMAN is Associate Professor of Philosophy, Theology, and Ethics at Boston University, where he directs the doctoral program in Religion and Science. His previous recent publications include *Religious Philosophy As Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry* (2010) and *Science and Religious Anthropology* (2009).

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WESLEY J. WILDMAN

*Boston University*



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,  
 São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press  
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org  
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107000087

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First published 2011

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Wildman, Wesley J., 1961–

Religious and spiritual experiences / Wesley J. Wildman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-00008-7 (hardback)

1. Experience (Religion) 2. Technology. I. Title.

BL53.W573 2011

210—dc22

2010037095

ISBN 978-1-107-00008-7 Hardback

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*For Gay*

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## *Preface*

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 prat-falls. 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*

*Ipsum*, God beyond God, *Nirguṇa 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.

## *Acknowledgements*

This book first emerged as a series of lectures given at Boston University during the 2007–8 academic year. The lectures were organized by the Religious and Psychological Well-Being Project, an interdisciplinary collaboration funded by Metanexus Institute, through the Templeton Research Lectures for the Constructive Engagement of Science and Religion grant program. I am delighted to acknowledge this support from John Templeton Foundation, Metanexus Institute, and Bob Neville, Director of the Religious and Psychological Well-Being Project. I am also grateful to the members of the project, all of whom helped me refine the argument of this book: Linda Barnes, Nathaniel Barrett, Catherine Caldwell-Harris, David Eckel, Deb Kelemen, Brian McCorkle, Jon Roberts, Chris Schlauch, and George Stavros.

I was privileged on three occasions to be a teaching assistant for Huston Smith at the University of California, Berkeley, during graduate school. Because of the connection forged in those teaching experiences, Huston met weekly for almost three years with me and a couple of my graduate-school friends, including Kate McCarthy (now at Cal State Chico). I suspect Huston kept it up in part to convert us to his way of thinking, but he also seemed genuinely fascinated with our ways of thinking, including our reasonable yet stubborn refusal to buy into his perennialist worldview, which seemed so compelling to him. In the informal setting of those meetings, we talked about everything under the sun, including RSEs. It is to Huston's endless fascination with RSEs, and to the sheer force of his personality, that I owe the birth of my own intellectual interest in the subject. Moreover, the union of religious naturalism with ground-of-being theism and ultimately with apophatic mysticism, which is central to my intellectual profile as a theologian and also to the case presented in this book, derives in part from those formative conversations and Huston's influence.

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Neuropsychologist Leslie Brothers (author of *Friday's Footprint*) was an early partner in my work on RSEs. Some years ago we jointly wrote a near-monograph-length paper setting forth a pragmatic theory of such experiences that drew as heavily on the semiotic theory of Charles Peirce as on social neuroscience and philosophical theology. Those early conversations were of great importance to me and I am grateful for Leslie's friendship and collaboration. More recently, Patrick McNamara has been a marvelous research partner on issues surrounding RSEs. It is fitting that his own book on *The Neuroscience of Religious Experience* appeared with Cambridge University Press in 2009; these two books reflect the complementarity of our work together in the Institute for the Biocultural Study of Religion.

This book is dedicated to Gay Lane, friend of many years, loyal companion through many joys and troubles, consistent supporter of my family, the occasion for my friendship with the inimitable Cowabunga-Dude Doug, and the person above all others who has made my adopted country feel like home. In her unique way, Gay represents many people for whom I would like this book to be especially meaningful: deeply curious, self-aware, morally inspiring, and blessed with spiritually profound experiences that do not fit the categories and naming conventions of traditional religions. Our manifold engagements with Ultimate Reality are more diverse than any religion will admit, more precious than their detractors pretend, more difficult to interpret than we realize, and more profound than we can express. That should encourage all of us.

A few sections of this book derive from previously published work, though there is only slender connection to the originals. I am glad to acknowledge the publishers of the following articles:

(With Leslie A. Brothers), "A Neuropsychological Semiotic Model of Religious Experiences," in Robert John Russell, *et al.*, eds., *Neurosciences and the Person: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action* (Vatican City: Vatican Observatory; Berkeley, CA: Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 1999): 348–416.

"Consciousness Expanded," in B. V. Sreekantan and Sangeetha Menon, eds., *Consciousness and Genetics: A Discussion* (Bangalore, India: National Institute of Advanced Studies, 2002): 125–41.

(With Patrick McNamara), "Challenges Facing the Neurological Study of Religious Belief, Behavior and Experience," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 20/3 (2008): 212–42.

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-00008-7 - Religious and Spiritual Experiences  
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Frontmatter  
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*Acknowledgements*

(With Nathaniel F. Barrett), “Seeing Is Believing? How Reinterpreting the Direct Realism of Perception As Dynamic Engagement Alters the Justificatory Force of Religious Experience,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 66/2 (2009): 71–86; published online December 17, 2008, [www.springerlink.com/content/e7737tm607216745/fulltext.pdf](http://www.springerlink.com/content/e7737tm607216745/fulltext.pdf).