Response to Wesley J. Wildman's "Behind, Between, and Beyond Anthropomorphic Models of Ultimate Reality"

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Abstract This is a response to Wesley J. Wildman's "Behind, Between, and Beyond Anthropomorphic Models of Ultimate Reality." While I agree with much of what Wildman writes, I raise questions concerning standards for evaluating models of ultimate reality and the plausibility of ranking such models. This paper was delivered during the APA Pacific 2007 Mini-Conference on Models of God.

Keywords Wildman, Wesley J. · Models of ultimate reality · Comparative philosophy

Wesley Wildman's paper is a bold, wide-ranging treatment of a complex, intriguing problem in the philosophy of religion, namely, how to make sense of the multiple models of ultimate reality arising out of the world's philosophical and religious traditions. There is a great deal in Wildman's paper that I admire. I agree that models of ultimate realty or models of God are best construed as imaginative constructions. I also agree that these models are important not only for how they guide us *conceptually* by framing our thinking about what is ultimate, but also how they guide us *practically* in our attempts at engaging with what is real, and with embodying religious ideas. This is a point worth emphasizing, and I will come back to it.

One question that needs to be asked straight away, however, is whether a model of ultimate reality is necessarily the same thing as a model of God, the focus of this mini-conference. Wildman recognizes that they are not always the same thing, as in the case of process thought, for example, but he does vacillate between talking about models of God and models of ultimate reality. Of course, it might make a difference to the question of the adequacy of a model whether it is meant to be model of God or a model of ultimate reality. In any case, since most models of God are in fact also models of ultimate reality, maybe it is not worth dwelling on this point.

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So I will move on to Wildman's attempt at the practical and conceptual testing of models of ultimate reality. I am intrigued by this idea, but I am less sanguine than he is about reaching consensus on the standards for such testing. For example, Wildman seems quite taken by evolutionary psychology, and it does a lot of work for him in the evaluation of these models. But the reliance on evolutionary psychology might already betray assumptions based on some model of ultimate reality, one that understands the *manifestation* of reality, at least, occurring from lowest to highest forms rather than proceeding from highest to lowest, as in the Neoplatonic model of emanation, for example, to say nothing of a creationist model. So another question to be asked: how do we arrive at agreed upon standards of evaluating models of ultimate reality when these standards are themselves not easily extricated from these models and might even be dependent upon them?

Wildman says that his essay is an attempt at addressing how to manage the plural and constructed character of the Great Models. I appreciate the way in which the enterprise of constructing models of ultimate reality is valued and not dismissed out of hand as a species of what contemporary philosophers of a certain persuasion have regarded as "cave man metaphysics." Wildman comes to this exercise as a self-characterized "comparing inquirer," and, as such, is drawn to a solution – a winner, or winners, in other words – in the competition of getting it right. Since I seem to meet his description of the "multi-traditional appreciator," I happen to be partial to the Museum of Models approach but, unlike Wildman, I don't think this approach leaves unresolved the "theoretical and existential problem of *reconciling* conflicting models". A typology of models, for example, might make sense of the way models of ultimate reality both arise from different theoretical angles of perception and respond to different existential needs or aims without declaring an overall winner. But I don't have time to sketch such a typology here.[1] Instead, I would like to treat each section of Wildman's paper in turn.

In the section "behind" the models, I applaud Wildman's use of mystical theology as a corrective to the idea that we can arrive at some kind of accurate conceptual model of ultimate reality. I think he is right that the *via negativa* serves to relativize all ultimacy models. But I question the move he subsequently makes to posit a very few ultimacy models as best. This seems to fly in the face of the relativity of all ultimacy models as rendered by mystical theology.

I think Wildman is also right to say that all models are infected by human finitude and that religious philosophers "must embrace a thoroughgoing fallibilism". He is right that, "all models of ultimate reality are anthropomorphic". And, again, he is right to be concerned with "*excessive* or *careless* anthropomorphism rather than with anthropomorphism as such". But we would be right to be concerned with excessive or careless *isms* of any sort. Why pick on anthropomorphism? Yes, there have been abuses of anthropomorphic models of ultimate reality, and as one who appreciates the Museum of Models approach, I applaud Wildman's efforts at guiding our attention to the very attractive non-anthropomorphic models that do not get displayed as readily in our western galleries. But non-anthropomorphic models are not themselves immune from the distortions of self-interest or unconscious motivations or cognitive errors.

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[1] I am thinking here of something like what we find in Zaehner's threefold typology of mysticism. Roughly, Zaehner organizes mystical experience into three types: naturalistic, monistic, and theistic. See Zaehner, R. C. (1961). *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane*. New York: Oxford University Press. One could do the same for models of ultimate reality, with or without a hierarchical ordering.

Indeed, all thinking is subject to such distortions; including the kind of meta-thinking we are doing here regarding models of ultimate reality. If we intellectuals are to draw lessons from cognitive science and evolutionary psychology regarding "the effects of human vulnerability to cognitive error", then we need to be vigilant about this, and look for them whenever we think, not only when we think anthropomorphically, which, Wildman suggests, we are bound to do, anyway. But he is certainly right that religious philosophers in the west have not paid as much attention to this as they might have, and thus have failed to take seriously both the deleterious social effects of certain excesses in anthropomorphic models of God, including such dominant metaphors of God as King or Father, etc., and also our parochial insensitivity to the plurality of models of ultimate reality, including the non-personal ones.

In the section "between" the models, I not only question how we are to arrive at agreed upon criteria for evaluating the data – as I have already stated – but I also question just what is supposed to count as the data. For Wildman, the data base seems to be the religious ideas themselves. Now I'm no scientist, nor philosopher of science, but it appears odd to me to treat ideas or theories as the data to be analyzed or evaluated. I'm not sure the theoreticians of religions would regard their theories or theologies as data. Generally speaking, theologians regard theology as the second-order reflection upon the first-order data of divine revelation or religious experience. Theology is theory-building; revelation, public or private, is the data. This is how Thomas Aquinas, for example, basically sees things.[2] Shankara, too, in his *Vedanta Sutras*, depicts his philosophy – Advaita Vedanta – as a reflection on the revelatory data of the *Vedas*. Wildman is proposing "a comparative framework for a process of inference to the best explanation of all relevant evidence", but isn't it a category mistake to treat the theologies as themselves the evidence to be explained? Shouldn't the relevant data or evidence be the basis for the theologies or religious ideas, namely, the revelations or the religious experiences that give rise to the religions, and not the religious ideas or models articulated in order to make sense of this data or evidence?

Maybe this is a minor concern, or maybe I've missed the point, but I do wonder how a comparative project would look if it did take the revelations or the primordial religious experiences as the data and then looked to see how adequately the models account for the respective data for each respective model. The question then becomes, "what model best accords with the data of revelation, the anthropomorphic one or the non-anthropomorphic one?" Maybe one model accords with the some of the data, and another accords with different data, but no one model accords for all the data. In fact, this is what we find when we survey the Museum of Models, which is one reason why I prefer the multi-traditional appreciator approach. Yet, I do appreciate Wildman's main point in this section, namely, that philosophers of religion or religious philosophers ought to pay attention to the many models of ultimate reality out there rather than pretend that models other than one's own either do not exist or are simply irrelevant. We ought to be engaged in some kind of comparative inquiry into models of ultimate reality, even if it turns out, as Wildman suggests, that it is not clear that any one of the Very Great Models is better than any other.

Despite this admission, however, Wildman goes on in the third section – beyond anthropomorphic models of ultimate reality – to claim that highly anthropomorphic models are not among the very best, and so, he suggests, "we need to move beyond them". As I intimated earlier, I fear that this is an unjustified move. Wildman writes, "In the comparative

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[2] See *Summa Theologiae*, *Prima Pars*, question 1, article 2.

inquiry I am describing, personal theism is less proficient at explaining many important chunks of data than a lot of other ultimacy models". If not revelation or religious experience – or perhaps, in a more cosmological vein, the very existence of things – what chunks of data does this model fail to explain? And why assume that all models of God or ultimate reality are meant to be explanations for something or other and not themselves expressions of religious experience or philosophic awe at the very existence of things? Perhaps they are ways to get us to think about things so that we might become different kinds of people, that is, perhaps they are more like pragmatic tools than they are attempts at arriving at conceptual understanding. Perhaps they are simply "expedient means" (*upaya*) to personal transformation, as the Buddhists suggest, to be discarded when they have done their work. While the Buddhists, for the most part, do not go this route, I suggest that anthropomorphic models of ultimate reality might actually be quite useful at guiding us to personal transformation. After all, they provide us with models for what we – as persons – might ultimately become or become like, how we might embody the religious ideas or ideals incorporated in the models. What better model for becoming a fully formed person than a personal one?[3]

Nonetheless, I think we need to take seriously one fact that, according to Wildman, personal theism does not explain well, namely, the very "profusion of ultimacy theories in the Museum of Models". Wildman believes personal theism fails in this regard because "views that subsume other models within them" offer the best explanations for this profusion of models, and "personalist metaphysics operates with highly determinate categories, such as intention, awareness, and action, and thus tends to bluntly contradict alternatives". So, for Wildman, a non-personalist metaphysics, for example, "can subsume personal theism relatively easily by rendering its metaphysical framework in symbolic terms compatible with their own", while a personalist metaphysics can do no such thing.

There are a few things worth commenting on here. First, it is not clear that all forms of personal theism are "highly anthropomorphic models of ultimate reality." What is meant by "highly" anthropomorphic, anyway? Early in his essay, Wildman suggests a model is *highly* anthropomorphic when it ascribes to God "characteristics that are obviously derived from human experience, such as feelings, intentions, plans, and powers to act". But there are forms of personal theism that do not ascribe these characteristics to God, at least not without some serious qualifications. In classical theism, for example, God is impassible so does not experience feelings or emotions. And while God might be said to have intentions or plans or powers to act in ways that are analogous to human beings, God's intentions or plans or powers to act are so very different from ours – infinitely so, in fact – that one can question just what theists mean when they say such things.[4] And this is why some personal theists – the Pseudo-Dionysius and Maimonides, for example – prefer negative attribution to affirming any characteristics of God. So I wonder to what extent "highly" anthropomorphic models of ultimate reality serve as straw-men in this essay. If by "highly" anthropomorphic one means "excessively" anthropomorphic, well, sure, this can't be good. Everything in moderation, right? But one certainly ought not to think all forms of personal theism are equally highly (i.e., excessively) anthropomorphic. Just when a form of personal theism becomes too anthropomorphic is hard to say. Since Wildman seems to collapse all forms of personal

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[3]I develop this idea in Dell'Olio, A. J. (1998). God, the Self, and the Ethics of Virtue. *Philosophy and Theology, 11/1,* 47–70.

[4]See, for example, the critical discussion of the Thomistic doctrine of analogical predication in Ferre, F. (1961). *Language, Logic and God* (chap. 6). New York: Harper.

theism into highly anthropomorphic models, he doesn't give us clear criteria here. It might turn out to be a matter of taste. And I don't know how one evaluates that.

I do think Wildman is correct that personal theism tends to reject non-personal alternatives rather than attempt to subsume them within itself. But I'm not sure it need be this way. I can imagine a personal theist devising a hierarchy of models of God or ultimate reality but one that places non-personal models below or within the personal one, reversing, say, Shankara's hierarchy of *Nirguna* and *Saguna Brahman*, for example. The personal theist could do this on the basis of the personal model having more explanatory power than the non-personal model in that the personal model accounts for the existence of persons whereas the non-personal does not.

The claim would be that the first cause or ultimate ground of being, as the source of all that is, must contain within it whatever positive features are found in being, including persons. Since you can't give what you don't have, the ultimate cause of persons must be personal, just as the cause of goodness must be good, or even Goodness-itself, in fact, and just as the cause of beauty must be beautiful or Beauty-itself, etc. So "He/She Who Is" contains "that which is" within itself but is greater than merely "that which is" since "He/She Who Is" is also personal in nature. Indeed, it is the Personal-itself, the Self of all selves, the only One who can truly say "I am." The non-personal model of ultimate reality is thus subsumed within the personal model and then *aufgehoben* or sublated by it. In this way, the personal model of ultimate reality not only does a better job of explaining what there is, but also it better satisfies the sense that *ultimate* reality is also *supreme* reality, that is, is maximally perfect. Classical theism in the west – and I would venture to include Ramanuja's version of *Vedanta* here as well – are not only forms of personal theism but they are also forms of Perfect Being theology (and this is why these models of God are also models of ultimate reality).

Indeed, one could then go further than simply referring to God as the cause and hence standard for all the perfections in existence. As the maximally perfect being, God, the Pseudo-Dionysisus tells us in the last line of his *Mystical Theology*, is even "beyond every denial".[5] And that is why the Pseudo-Dionysius, the champion of the *via negativa*, also employs the *via eminentiae* or way of eminence, wherein God is best referred to as super-Good or super-Beautiful, or in this case, super-Personal. The way of eminence reconciles the affirmative and the negative ways as it both denies excessive anthropomorphism while also affirms the absolute transcendent perfection of the divine ultimate reality.

Now I'm not arguing here for the truth of personal theism, or for the claim that it can successfully subsume non-personal alternatives within it. I'm just saying that, *pace* Wildman, personal theism is no less suited for subsuming other models within it than are the non-personal alternatives. Personally, I prefer a typology of models without a hierarchy. Personal, non-personal, naturalistic, supernaturalistic, limited, unlimited – they all have their place in the great Museum of Models. For Wildman, "the comparing inquirer seeks out the grand collision of Great Models in a drawn-out competition that serves their truth-seeking impulse". But I wonder why the truth-seeking impulse need be couched in such combative, Darwinian terms? Aren't we to learn from the mystical, apophatic traditions that the absolute truth cannot be spoken, and that what can be spoken is only relative truth? If so, we should then *expect* a plurality of relatively true models, but not one absolute winner. Rather than seeing competition among models for a prize none can win, why not look toward cooperation

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[5]Luibheid, C. (1987). *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (p. 141). New York: Paulist (trans.).

among these great models? Wildman himself uses the metaphor of a "dance" of models. This is much preferable to a collision of models. Let us think in terms of a ballet rather than a battle. Indeed, a musical metaphor seems apt here, since harmony actually requires different notes, and even some silences. And we need not think in terms of a dance competition; no "Dancing with the Stars" here. I much prefer the kind of dancing one does at weddings where everyone can join in, something like the Italian Tarantella or the Jewish Hava Nagila circle dance, or somewhat less decorous, the Chicken Dance or Hokey Pokey.

Wildman has done us a great service by "welcoming every model with a stake in the conversation" to the dinner party. And he is right that this kind of inclusive inquiry is "all too rare in the history of religious philosophy". But I prefer a party that does not end with only one person standing – whether it be Socrates or Buddha, Aquinas or Shankara. I prefer one where all the participants get to stay in the dance, learning from each other's moves, creating a diverse, joyous celebration that never ends. Now, this would be even rarer in the history of religious philosophy – a symposium where there are no winners or losers but only those who dance the dance.