

## UNDERSTANDING RELIGION: THE CHALLENGE OF E. O. WILSON

by Philip Hefner

*Abstract.* E. O. Wilson's fundamental challenge is to bring knowledge and sensibility into an effective working relationship. Both ambivalence and opaqueness characterize his analysis of religion. Ambivalence refers to his conviction on the one hand that religion is essential for societal well-being and genetically resourced and his prediction, on the other hand, that religion will be superseded by scientific reason; the opaqueness refers to his strange insistence that religion be subjected to tests of literal facticity, whereas, in contrast, the arts are exempted from this test, because they constitute a delivery system that impacts the sensibilities directly, with no particular concern for literalness. Wilson's analysis of religion should be brought into consonance with his view of the arts, thereby recognizing the importance of myth, symbol, metaphor, and analogy in religious formulations and their status as direct delivery systems to the sensibilities. Wilson's distinction between empiricist/materialist and transcendentalist worldviews is reshaped by distinguishing between metaphysical and methodological transcendentalism. This reshaping enables us to recognize how the action required by human existence depends both on scientific knowledge and symbolic formulations that extend to human action, even though certain knowledge is lacking.

*Keywords:* action; empiricist and transcendentalist worldviews; knowledge; metaphysical transcendentalism; methodological transcendentalism; religion; sensibilities; E. O. Wilson.

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With respect to religion and ethics, E. O. Wilson's fundamental challenge is to bring knowledge and sensibility into an effective working relationship, underscoring the word *effective*. This challenge ultimately extends beyond religion and ethics—it pertains to our fundamental humanity. Wilson's engagement with religion takes three forms. First and most obvious is his insistence that the major issue between science and religion is the conflict between two worldviews, which he names the transcendentalist and empiricist or materialist. Sometimes he paints this conflict in the most vividly dualistic terms imaginable—a sort of spiritual Armageddon, “the coming century's version of the struggle for men's souls” (1998, 262). Either the materialist view “holds all the way” (1987, 98) or the transcendentalist does. Religious truth and scientific truth are “not factually compatible” (1998, 286). “As a result those who hunger for both intellectual and religious truth will never acquire both in full measure” (1998, 286).

A first response to this challenge would be to take up theological cudgels and try to batter the empiricist view into submission. I will not attempt this, because I favor a second response that would challenge the way Wilson has drawn the conflict, just as I would question placing something called “intellectual truth” in fundamental opposition to something called “religious truth.”

A second point of engagement emerges from Wilson's idea of conscience itself, in his words, that “religion must somehow find the way to incorporate the discoveries of science in order to retain credibility,” codifying and putting “into enduring, poetic form the highest values of humanity consistent with empirical knowledge” (1998, 290). Whereas the first challenge strikes me as a negative operation, with less interesting potential outcomes, this second one is a constructive challenge of the highest importance and with exciting prospects. As a matter of fact, both the work of theologians and the policies of the religious communities that inhabit what may be called the mainstream of Christianity already reveal much effort in this direction. It is unfortunate that Wilson's book *Consilience* gives virtually no attention to the theological work of the past two centuries that has already done a great deal to meet this second challenge. In an elegant, brief aside in his 1986 talk to the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (1987, 88–89), Wilson himself showed how this might be done when he suggested that the papal position on birth control could be modified in a way that would both be consistent with empirical knowledge and accomplish the main purpose of the papal pronouncements. To be sure, Wilson chose one of the easier examples of reworking religious ethics (at least conceptually easier), but he nevertheless provided an insight into how his own challenge might be met.

*The Nature of Religion.* This second challenge is surely the most important one. Nevertheless, from a theoretical point of view, I find even more interesting the challenge that emerges from Wilson's analysis of reli-

gion itself. This analysis is found between the lines, so to speak, in what I consider to be the ambivalence and opaqueness of Wilson's assessment of religion. I use the term "ambivalence," because I read Wilson's statements about religion to be dismissive and belittling, while at the same time they are not only respectful but even hold that religion is so fundamental to human nature that it could never be dismissed. There is a certain eat-your-cake-and-have-it-too character in his assessment of religion. I use the term "opaqueness," because I believe that Wilson omits a discussion of the inherent character of religion, and this omission leads him to puzzling conclusions. It may also account for his ambivalence.

*Wilson's Ambivalence.* Wilson asserts that the human mind evolved to be religious; it is "underwritten by genetic algorithms" (1998, 286). Let me read from his 1986 talk to the Catholic Bishops. After sketching the conflict of the two worldviews, transcendentalist and materialist, he says:

But, there is another side to the story, one that makes the contrast in world views still more interesting. The materialist position presupposes no final answers. It is an undeniable fact that faith is in our bones, that religious belief is a part of human nature and seemingly vital to social existence. Take away one faith, and another rushes in to fill the void. Take away that, and some secular equivalent such as Marxism intrudes, replete with sacred texts and icons. Take away all these faiths and rely wholly on skepticism and personal inquiry—if you can—and the fabric of society would likely start to unravel. This phenomenon, so strange and subtle as to daunt materialist explanation, is in my opinion the most promising focus for a dialogue between theologians and scientists. (1987, 82)

He goes on to say that "religious thought is too important to abandon" (p. 89). At the very least, he implies that religion has gotten some things right in its long history and that it has served what he believes to be the highest human value, survival.

At the same time, he seems to argue that we must make a choice between transcendental and empiricist worldviews, speaks about the factual incompatibility of religion and science (which means that facts are on the side of science), and predicts that religion will be secularized. This stance toward religion is markedly different from his talk about the arts and humanities. In chapter 10 of *Consilience* he goes to considerable lengths to reassure the reader that reductionism of the arts does not diminish their integrity but promises rather their re-creation (1998, 230). The arts have nothing to fear from reductionism. He sprinkles that chapter with such comments as these: "nor is there any reason to suppose that the arts will decline as science flourishes" (p. 230); "scholars in the humanities should lift the anathema placed on reductionism. Scientists are not conquistadors out to melt the Inca gold" (p. 230); after reductionism has done its work, we can still "if we wish (and we so desperately wish) inhabit the productions of art with the same sense of beauty and mystery that seized us at the beginning" (p. 259).

There is no such reassurance articulated in the chapter on religion, even though he does say that religion ought to put the highest values of humanity in “enduring poetic form.” Rather, he predicts that religion—venerable and valuable as it may have been—is on its way out, at some future date, and in the meantime there should be what he called in 1986 “an uneasy but fruitful alliance” (1987, 89).

*Wilson's Opaqueness.* I find puzzling Wilson's conception of the inherent character of religion. He speaks of religion as rooted in feelings, emotions, and myth. He speaks of a “three step etiology in mental development,” which presumably applies to all phenomena of the mind, including religion. In this etiology, innate genetic tendencies prepare individuals for certain learnings (such as not to commit incest), which in turn are “semanticized” in “symbolically transmitted taboos, myths, and laws” that form the content of culture (1987, 86–87). Yet, his discussions for the most part suggest that he considers religious beliefs and utterances in the most literalistic fashion. Creation myths are tested by their literal factual accuracy. Talk about God seems to be judged by the canons of experimental literalness. He describes himself as a deist for whom the proof of God is a problem in astrophysics (1998, 263).

I find this literal perspective puzzling, not least because he is so sensitive to the nonliteral character of the arts. He writes: “Artistic inspiration common to everyone in varying degree rises from the artesian wells of human nature. Its creations are meant to be delivered directly to the sensibilities of the beholder without analytic explanation” (1998, 233). Recognizing this direct delivery to the sensibilities, he does not fault Milton for his mythic rendition of Eden, nor the painter who takes liberties in representing the forms of everyday human life. Picasso, for example, is not rebuked for painting his figures blue or cubist.

I consider the failure to recognize that religion is inherently a symbolic and metaphorical realm to be a basic misunderstanding of the nature of religion. If we could acknowledge that religion is inherently committed also to a delivery system that aims directly at the sensibilities of people, for the most part without analytic explanation (only sophisticated theology is regularly committed to such explanation), we might be able to overcome the intellectual ambivalence I noted in his discussion of religion. That ambivalence is shaped by his acknowledgment on the one hand that religion has gotten many things right and that it is basic to human nature, and his insistence on the other hand that religion will be secularized. If the myths, rituals, and much of religious language, including language about God, are understood as symbolic and metaphoric (or, as the Western tradition has said, “analogical”), then it is not difficult to understand how these religious forms can convey information that is adaptive, serving survival,

while at the same time they are not articulated in ways that appear to be consistent with the formulations of empirical knowledge. (When these religious forms, furthermore, have mediated a personally compelling experience, they will be retained, even if they are defective, for the sake of the experience they have engendered. This is a topic that deserves exploration at another time.)

*Reshaping the Empiricist/Transcendentalist Distinction.* There is a deeper dimension of this symbolic character of religion that deserves some attention, however. Both religion and ethics involve *proposals* concerning the character of reality and human nature that surpass the state of empirical knowledge at any given time in history. A proposal is a hypothetical form of expression that presents itself as if it should be taken as truth and acted upon. Proposals are unnecessary in cases where certain or nearly certain empirical knowledge is available. In all cases where our empirical knowledge is uncertain or lacking, proposals are essential if action is required, particularly if it is required immediately or in the short-term future. Moreover, if a proposal must be acted upon, two leaps are required: first, the leap of interpretation, which judges the proposal to be worthy of consideration, and second, the leap of action that is guided by the proposal.

A relevant example is the decision to move ahead in the early 1940s with massive nuclear research and the development of the atom bomb and nuclear weapons. This decision and the actions that followed were undertaken with remarkably inadequate empirical knowledge. I am referring, of course, to uncertain knowledge not about nuclear physics but about the outcomes of decisions made concerning the use and future of the applications of this knowledge. There could be no certain knowledge at that time of the political and military applications of the nuclear research, no certainty as to what the consequences of the bomb would be, little certainty even of how the Hiroshima and Nagasaki explosions would turn out, and certainly no foreknowledge of the ensuing Cold War and nuclear proliferation fifty years later. There was little certain knowledge that many of the nuclear scientists and technicians would eventually develop, and die of, cancer. Proposals were made and acted upon that, in hindsight, were clearly made on the basis of leaps, not certain knowledge, particularly as to their outcomes. In some ways, we face a parallel situation today in our decisions to engage in genetic engineering. In technical parlance, we refer to this phenomenon under the rubric of "risk analysis," but we should not allow such antiseptic terminology to hide the actual methodological reality of leap, based on proposals.

In order to present themselves appropriately, proposals must be delivered directly to the sensibilities of persons, even though they lack analytic explanation. In the 1940s and later, most of the parties, including the

United States Congress and the voting population, not to mention even manufacturers and some scientists, were moved by proposals—some patriotic, some promises of favorable side benefits—not by analytic explanations. There were no available explanations to cover every aspect of the decision making and action. This is a scary enterprise, because, as Wilson himself points out (1998, 286), passion and action are aroused in behalf of proposals that cannot be demonstrated to be the truth—that is why a leap is required. Error, serious error, may result. This is the human condition, however—it cannot be avoided.

Let me clarify what I have just said. Proposals, as I have described them, can never be exhaustively correlated to empirical knowledge and analytic explanations. Furthermore, if we wish to quantify the matter, even a modicum of uncertainty in the proposal requires the leaps I have described. Even if we had known a great deal more about nuclear energy and its consequences for the human community, the decision to go ahead with it would have been a leap. We could have ensured that Leo Szilard and his colleagues did not expose themselves to carcinogens, but we could not have avoided other historical consequences and uncertainties. And even protecting the physicists from cancer would have altered the procedures of research and development and the timetable of progress toward the goals that were set.

This does not mean, however, that we must dig a sanitary canal between analytic explanations and proposals, between the realms of knowledge and the sensibilities. That would be to approach Wilson's "Armageddon" position from the other end of the argument. We continually strive to bring our analytic explanations and our leaps from proposals into relationship. Our leaps are not untouched by our analysis, nor is the analysis totally unaffected by the leaps that await us. Analytic explanations and proposals come together in the field of the sensibilities, and the two are related in a complex dance that never ends.

I read Wilson's call for religion to incorporate the findings of science as, finally, a plea for us to take more seriously the need to keep our proposals, aimed at the sensibilities, in concourse with our knowledge, from which we draw analytic explanations. This is his chief contribution to our thinking about religion. The importance of this contribution cannot be overestimated. Religious communities and their theologians will be counted as irresponsible if they fail to take account of this challenge.

If Wilson is to be faulted, it is because he sometimes gives the impression that knowledge can direct ethics by circumventing the sensibilities. I interpret his ambivalence toward religion as his recognition that not all religion is the same—some of it does not need to be circumvented, while some does. I could not agree more with him at this point. The task of theology in the Christian church is precisely this: to monitor the proposals of the religious communities and expose them to critique. Since 1800,

theologians in what I call the mainstream have begun to take seriously the fact that scientific knowledge must be included within that monitoring duty.

The foregoing discussion has assumed what needs to be made explicit: that proposals often must be framed in symbolic, metaphorical, even mythic language, otherwise they cannot perform their function of speaking to the sensibilities and motivating action. Even nonreligious proposals are often clothed in these forms: sometimes political symbols, as in the case of the nuclear research and production of weapons, sometimes sheer romanticism, as when *Time* magazine, in its January 17, 1994, issue, which first described the Human Genome Project, depicted director Frances Collins on a motorcycle dressed in black leather, or in the current NASA public relations brochures that describe space exploration in terms of fulfilling human destiny. In 1997, NASA spoke of its Human Exploration and Development of Space project in these terms: "Reaching for the seemingly unreachable in turn inspires greater personal achievement of many to the benefit of all. Ultimately, we seek to bring space fully within the sphere of human endeavor" (NASA 1997).

Religious proposals purport to be critical to the fundamental being of the human community. Because they deal with what theologians call the *depth* questions of human existence, they must all the more undertake a leap and dress themselves in symbolic language. Perhaps my examples of nuclear research and production, the genome project, and NASA are not nonreligious after all but rather quasi-religious.

Wilson does not give these kinds of issues the attention they deserve in his discussion of ethics and religion. What he calls the transcendentalist worldview comes into play here. This worldview can refer to out-and-out supernaturalism, which he seems to assume. It may also refer to this realm that I have filled with proposal, symbol, sensibility, and leap. It is important to keep in mind that there is a great overlap in the consequences that follow for methodology from these two positions: supernaturalism and acting upon proposals. The differences between the two are mainly metaphysical, not methodological. We might distinguish between metaphysical transcendentalism and methodological transcendentalism. My contention is that, whereas the former is not necessary, the latter is in most cases unavoidable as a methodology for both religion and ethics. Consequently, the authors Wilson labels as transcendentalist must be further interrogated as to whether they are in the metaphysical or the methodological camp. I propose this distinction as a reshaping of Wilson's categories.

Let me give one example from *Consilience* that makes my point. Wilson faults John Rawls for transcendentalism in general, and specifically for arguing that justice-as-fairness is consistent with human nature (1998, 272). He writes that Rawls "offered no evidence" that justice is "practicable as a blanket premise. Probably it is, but how can we know except by blind



trial-and-error?" (1998, 272) Let us grant the point that justice cannot be argued with exhaustive enough evidence of the type that Wilson calls for. Is he suggesting that we suspend our commitments to justice, embodied in law and moral preaching, until blind trial and error justifies them? What kind of blind trial-and-error experience would provide the evidence that Wilson seems to call for? I suggest that what we do is act on the proposal that justice is fundamental to human nature, and we engage in a leap when we do so. Or we do not so act.

At issue is an argument about contesting proposals, about contesting visions, of what is fundamental to human nature. Where do these visions come from? To some extent, perhaps, Wilson's three-step etiology will account for them. He himself calls for a "phylogeny of religious dogma" that can clarify the proximate origins of what I call religious proposals. As he himself points out, however, it cannot get us all the way to justice. Where do the proposals for or against justice come from? Where does religious myth come from? We do not know. Ethics and religion reveal, in such situations, that they have a great deal in common with the arts.

In these latter comments, I have reverted in part to the first of Wilson's challenges, attempting to clarify what is at stake in the differing worldviews that he describes, empiricist and transcendentalist. I have expanded our definition of the transcendentalist rubric and, I hope, argued against the polarization of worldviews that Wilson sets forth.

Wilson's challenge to understanding religion is very rich. The religious and theological communities should be grateful to him for his penetrating and passionate attention to some of the most basic issues that confront our thinking today. What are our underlying worldviews, and how do they condition our attitude toward religion and science? How can religion accommodate scientific knowledge? What is the role of symbol and myth in our intellectual and ethical life? These are the questions E. O. Wilson has raised; these are the questions we should be pursuing with passion for the truth.

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