

Phillip H. Wiebe

*God and Other Spirits: Intimations of
Transcendence in Christian Experience.*

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P.H. Wiebe's recent book *God and Other Spirits* defends the reasonableness of the claim that transcendent entities (God, angels and evil spirits), although unobservable, are real. They are a subtle form of nature. The most important task of this volume is to set the traditional Christian commitment to transcendent entities in an agreement with an empirically founded scientific worldview. This task seems not impossible to accomplish when we consider that the theoretical entities postulated by contemporary physics are as 'supernatural' and unobservable as God or other spirits (cf. the thesis of the convergence of physics and Eastern Philosophy in Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics*).

Improving on William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Wiebe claims more than subjective authority for the individual's encounters with spirits. He observes that generally speaking these encounters can be objectively described as part of our space-time causality. Our book is about how to capture belief in transcendent entities with a scientific method and is a brilliantly written major contribution in this field.

Chapters 1 and 2 deal with the empirical evidence leading to belief in transcendent reality. The examples come predominantly from biblical sources. Although Wiebe concedes that contemporary Western society is reluctant to believe in the existence of good and evil spirits, he maintains that there is belief particularly in evil spirits when human evil reaches proportions that appear nonhuman (e.g., in the case of apparently demonic forces at work in the Nazi Holocaust). In cases of personal experience there is an obvious problem with the evidence: how can the experiencing individual be sure about the nature of the encounter with spirits? In the end, we have to rely on the phenomenological description of what is experienced. These descriptions have to serve as evidence even for those who do not have religious experiences themselves.

Chapter 3 discusses the adequate method for the study of transcendent reality. Deduction, induction and the method of hypothesis (abduction) are the discussed alternatives. Wiebe settles for abduction. This method explains phenomena of the empirical world through postulating new kinds of objects or properties. The objects that are postulated to exist are conjectural and tentatively put forward. This choice of method is fortunate because it '... allows human "knowledge" to be expanded in creative ways, beyond those that are available by means of strict observation' (115). Abduction has already been very successfully used in the natural sciences for the last twohundred years. The thesis put forward in *God and Other Spirits* is that

religious experience can use this same method (cf. Edward Schoen's similar view in *Religious Explanation*). David Lewis also supports this approach, noting that in using abduction we do not need to know an awful lot about the hypothesized transcendental causes of the explained empirical phenomena (130ff).

Chapters 4 and 5 defend 'nonreductive naturalism' which interprets God and spirits as subtle forms of nature. In its ontology, immaterial nature (transcendent beings) is closely related to material nature (studied by physics). This seems to promote a physicalist outlook. The defended naturalism, however, is nonreductive because it differentiates irreducible levels of description. We do not have to choose between transcendent description of reality and scientific description because neither does justice to the complexity of the world today. In contrast to J.J.C. Smart's physicalist outlook, Wiebe doesn't believe that physicalism will eventually be able to explain the full range of religious experiences. Talk about transcendent reality will always remain meaningful. It must be noted, however, that *God and Other Spirits* reinterprets religious belief scientifically. Like the physicist's belief in unobservable physical entities on the subatomic level, religious belief is not a free act of faith but naturally adopted upon critical reflection on human experience. Our faculty of critical reflection allows us to be more or less impressed by the evidence leading to the belief in transcendent beings. In exploring the empirical world we find apparently inexplicable phenomena that fascinate us. The belief in transcendent beings arises naturally on this basis. 'I offer the conjecture that one of the reasons for the persistence of the cosmological and design arguments is that they describe phenomena that are psychologically impressive for many people' (216). W.V.O. Quine's *radical* naturalising epistemology, however, is rejected because it excludes the significance of reflection for the formation of belief (215).

Assessing Wiebe's account, we must mention that today scientific experience not only dominates but replaces the religious experience of earlier ages. Wiebe admits that nowadays even the Catholic Church has become reluctant to admit the objective occurrence of phenomena like possession by evil spirits. This does not distract Wiebe from gathering empirical evidence for encounters with evil spirits. Drawing the larger picture, however, it seems impossible for any author to hold on to both, (1) a scientific worldview and (2) phenomenologically describable experiences which cannot be captured by scientific means. Wiebe tries to save himself in talking about these experiences as hallucinatory (138). This makes the experiences psychologically explicable and thus an object of scientific investigation. In the end, phenomenology has to fade away and so does any alternative to a scientific understanding of reality.

The tension between Christian faith which is beyond science and Christianity as a belief system in need of empirical defense pervades every aspect of this volume. Unsurprisingly, this indicates not only problems but might also account for the book's attractiveness. After all, Wiebe is probably right that contemporary Christianity needs the support of scientific thinking: ' ...

faith cannot be expected to survive in a scientific age if its cognitive component is deemed to be without significant empirical support' (220). The idea expressed here doesn't seem to be new and the price paid by Christian believers for the much needed scientific support is quite high. Max Weber's conception of the 'disenchantment of the world' comes to mind. But in contrast to Max Weber, *God and Other Spirits* maintains the hope inspired by faith that Christianity can draw strength from knowledge of scientific truths.

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