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Diagramming the Will: Ethics and Prayer, Text and Politics

by

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Abstract

Framing prayer as an ethical exercise that operates on a recalcitrant will, this essay examines both this practice in the Vineyard, an American Neocharismatic church, as well as texts written by Vineyard pastors for the purposes of instructing believers in how to engage in prayer. It argues that the same abstract play of forces can be identified in both of these areas. But that does not mean the two areas are identical. While prayer as a practice is marked by a certain indetermination about how and in what ways prayer is effective, instructional material about prayer are shown to be much more exacting. However, different choices among pastors in how they situate prayer is shown to have specific political effects; it also suggests some of the benefits for an anthropology of ethics in being careful to disarticulate ethical practice from texts describing means to properly engaged in ethical practice.

Key Words

Neocharismatic Christianity, Prayer, Ethics, Will, Politics

Diagramming the Will: Ethics and Prayer, Text and Politics

During my time in the Vineyard, prayer was a mystery. There are a lot of things about prayer to puzzle over regarding this Southern California originated, but now world-wide Charismatic Christian church-movement. There is the question of how prayer heals, something that these middle-class believers are certain occurs. There is the question of how it is that many of them use prayer to battle demons, expelling them from the bodies and minds of distraught fellow believers.[1] There is the question of how during prayer they experience, sometimes audibly, God speaking to them in return.[2] Then there is the question of how they not only take these communications from God seriously, but sometimes use these messages to make life decisions, occasionally large ones. These are all important issues, and ones that I, as well as other anthropologists who study American Charismatic Christianity, have struggled to understand. But in some ways the strangest is the way these believers willed to pray it be God's will that their own will should change.

Not all prayers were along these lines; in the Vineyard, believers would pray for things like opportunities at work, an end to a family problem, or the health of someone dear to them. Devotional prayers and expressions of gratitude are also common. But they would also often make up their minds to pray to change their minds. At the close of a sermon delivered in a rented grade-school auditorium on a Southern-California Sunday morning, the grain of a pastor's voice staining with emotion as he says, "Let us pray to be a people who can be vulnerable to one another." Heads bowed in a condominium living room on a weekday night, someone in a small

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[1] Bialecki 2011.

prayer group says, "I pray that we learn to put you first." Prayers of this nature were sometimes

much more specific, and more private as well: someone confiding that they had prayed for God

to make him end his obsession with Internet pornography, for instance.

What is odd about this sort of prayer is that it involves a little hiccup in volition, a tripartite

folding of wills. It might seem that if one willed something, then one would will it directly, a

singular will turned towards its object. But there is not a 'singular' will here. Rather, there are

three kinds of will, distributed between two entities: the active will of the person animating the

prayer; the will of God; and the person's recalcitrant will, the unwilling aspect that has to be

overcome, the stubborn attachments that prevents a person from simply choosing what she wills,

and not having to attempt to change their direction by threading their will through God.

In this essay, I argue that the act of locating these various wills in the person is a vital, though

contested, aspect in the Charismatic imaginary. Instantiations of the will are variously situated

either in the body or soul, in the neurology of the brain or the psychology of the mind, in one's

biography or in one's genes. In these multiple, and to some degree irreconcilable presumptions

about how the will works or is worked, Vineyard accounts end up fracturing that will. These

different accounts make a difference. These representations of the doublings and redistributions

of will spill over, metonymically colouring other aspects of the world, and allowing or

foreclosing imaginable action. Some of the actions that are aided or hindered by this sense of

what a person is, and where their will resides, could be considered political action, at least at the

level of "micropolitics," the generative sense of the kind of linkages that can be made and

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[2] Luhrmann 2012.

actions undertaken.[3] As we shall see, this is particularly the case when prayer is transposed into a different strata, when its form is traced and reduplicated into text as a part of instructional ethical monographs rather than as performative acts; specifically, when it takes the form of self-help texts intended to assist in self-actualization as a religio-ethical project. And due to a surprising immanentization that these transpositions sometimes makes possible, some of these linkages and actions go in directions that are not countenanced by the American religious right, the political movement that these charismatics have frequently been a part of for most of the past thirty years.

"We can either stand at the side of the river, or jump in"

This essay is also written against the background of increasing anthropological interest in the will. While it would be going to far to say that there has been a 'wilful turn' in recent anthropology, volition, as either a subjective phenomena, a culturally mediated form, or a political trope, has been the recent subject of articles, special issues, edited volumes, and monographs within the field.[4] Even though this material cannot be said to have coalesced yet into a common conversation, what this essay shares with these other contributions is an interest in how a subjective experience can be mediated and narrativized in ways that have political effects. What is particular to this essay, though, is a notion that in at least some cases, in the same social milieu there can be different ways in which a single embodied, social practice of negotiating the will can be actualized, and that this means that the political horizons opened up by the same practice can be quite different.

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[3] Deleuze and Guattari 2004.

[4] Ahmed 2014; Murphy and Throop 2010; O'Neill and Matza *in press*; Povinelli 2012.

But to see how people in the same movement can produce such divergent understandings of prayer, the will, and the person, and how these understandings can hint at different fundamental orientations towards the world, it's helpful to know in the first place how prayer functions there. Collective prayer in the Vineyard involves people gathering (any number from a couple to a whole church), whether at the end of a church service, a volunteering member's home, or some other such place. With hands lying stretched out over, towards, or on the petitioner, those praying will audibly address the person's concerns, though couching it in slightly varying language to preserve a sense of spontaneity. One of the chief engines of spontaneity is the mental images that come to believers during prayer. This imagery, understood as inspired by the Holy Spirit, gets threaded into the unfolding prayer narratives, giving them a sometimes-allegorical verve. In an improvisatory mode, other fellow believers chime in, recoding the image and giving it a slightly different reading, and perhaps adding a new valence to the prayer itself.

An example of this occurred during a change in leadership in a weeknight prayer and Bible study small group that I had been attending as part of fieldwork. The outgoing leaders were a dynamic married couple in their late twenties who, after more than a year of leading the emotionally charged and often intimate weekly session, felt that they had been "called to something else." The incoming leaders, a paediatrician and her insurance-broker husband, were a pair of soft-spoken and reflective introverts; I had heard that the incoming leader had volunteered them to jointly take charge, despite his wife's obvious discomfort with their being placed at the centre of attention. On the night of the handover, a covey of twenty-somethings convened in the living room of a Spanish-style condominium to bless the transition. The roughly fifteen-member group had gathered by around seven, and everyone stretched their hands over the incoming

leaders as people took turns praying aloud for them. Gradually, during their prayers, some started reporting images that had flashed into their heads. One woman reported seeing a stream flowing through the centre of the prayer group; glossing her own image, she read this to indicate that God has a plan to "keep the group moving," thus endorsing the new arrangement. The next person to volunteer improvised by transforming that image, re-articulated the statement, structuring it at once as a gloss and a request by praying, "we can either stand at the side of the river, or jump in"—in short, making it a metaphorical plea for heightened levels of commitment to and participation with the prayer group at a moment when its continuity was tenuous.

This style of metaphoric speech stands at the centre of most prayer, including prayers for healing, a frequent topic in the Vineyard. In healing, the ailing aspects of the body or mind are depicted with the same kind of imagistic language, either describing the current ill state or envisioning the transformation to a new, healed one. I heard different prayers for the same long-standing depression use meteorological metaphors for the psyche, or describe a dark brain lighting up as it turns to a state of physical health. Alternately, the depression was reified as an effectively demonic entity that was ordered out "in Jesus' name." However, there was also prayer couched in terms of the soul, with a request that the petitioner "accept God's grace and forgiveness" in order to overcome the self-loathing that supposedly stood at the depression's centre.

This shuttling between various modes of depiction suggests that these frames are interchangeable, one description of the subject as a physical, physiological, spirited, or souled person always capable of being traded for another. But at another level, there is an unarticulated

sense of an underlying incompatibility, or at least hierarchicalization, of these frames. I remember talking in a coffee shop one evening with a Vineyard believer who was also a clinical psychologist, working on a large project involving brain scans of sufferers of schizophrenia. He discussed the intersection of his work rather freely, focusing for the most part on the ways that his belief torqued interactions with patients in a positive manner. He spent a great deal of time, for instance, describing the peace he had received when he silently prayed for patients as they were being scanned. Near the end of the conversation, I asked which it was that was determining in the end: the neurobiological, the spiritual, or both? Slightly flummoxed, he said it had to be one or the other—that he, as a Christian, thought it was the spiritual, but it couldn't be both, could it? As he rolled that last possibility out loud, there was a slightly troubled look on his face, as if it were at once the answer to a dilemma and yet a complete non sequitur.

Prayer's Diagram

How does this sense of a hierarchical yet undetermined structure of the person open up the question of the will? The importance of this implicit order lies as much in the mutability and fungibility of these hierarchical orderings of aspects of self as it does in what is structurally assumed in the prayerful request for will. But what is structurally assumed in such prayer? A human weakness, physical, mental, or social. By requesting intervention, prayer marks the moments and spaces where the will is insufficient. It is an appeal to another agency to make so what the person requesting prayer could not. At the same moment, prayer is still a volitional act, a capacity to come to terms with a lack of capacity and turn instead to God. This, of course, is not necessarily the perlocutionary fruit of prayer, where at the level of social pragmatics it can serve as anything from the start of a conversation, an invitation for intimacy, or a cry for help.

However, the wilful supplementation of the will is entailed at least in the *formal logic* of such

prayer.

We could call this abstract relation the "Pentecostal/Neocharismatic diagram." By "diagram"

we mean, following Deleuze, an architectonic mapping of the play of forces, one that is easily

transposable to other domains and capable of being actualized in different ways.[5] What is

important about this conception for a comparative anthropology of prayer and of the will is that

framing this diagrammatically at once highlights recurrent self-reflexive functional patterns,

while at the same time allowing a space for variance in the creation of concrete assemblies of

discourse and practice, as well as for different relative speeds and intensities through which these

forces act on one another (think of the various styles in which the same diagram can be drawn,

still expressing the same set of relations while not being identical to one another).

Such a move would be in harmony with the anthropology of religion's recent tendency to

highlight an ethical auto-pedagogy. Considered this way, the Vineyard can be seen as another

instance of the broader tendency to emphasize religious groups' voluntaristic and self-directed

discipling practices engaged in to produce oneself as a clearer exemplar of a certain *telos* internal

to the religious project: the proper faithful person (however this may be variously reckoned).

Examples of this line of analysis can be found in the anthropology of Islam, of Hasidic Judaism,

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[5] Deleuze 1988. See also De Landa 2006): 29–30; Bialecki 2012: 310–312. This should not be thought of as a diagram in the classical structuralist sense, but more along the lines of relations capable of being expressed in pictorial form, though not reducible to pictorial form (cf. Gell 1999).

of South Asian religion, as well as in Catholic and Protestant variants of Christianity.[6] These approaches in turn have been informed by a growing anthropology of morality and of ethical practice.[7] This concern for morality and ethics has drawn from a variety of sources, relying on Aristotelian,[8] Late-Foucauldian[9], Heideggerian[10] and Dumontian[11] frameworks; however, there is enough of a family resemblance to speak about a common refrain in this literature. Generally, this literature concerns itself with the implementation of specific practice of directed self-development, of techniques through which the subject transforms herself in the desired manner. These practices are sometimes taken from existing discourses and traditions, and at other times they are improvised by singular figures (James Faubion being exceptionally useful on this point).[12] But like the discussions of religious practice they inform, in the end these are about the self-production of the dutiful subject, and also about the subjects change.

There are obvious resonances between the approach presented in this essay and a religio-ethical framing. But the notion of a diagrammatic relation is also a break with this ethical framing as well, or at least as it is currently constituted. As we shall see below, because it is defined not by substantive content, but by an abstract relation of forces, a diagrammatic approach allows for differing iterations of these modes of self-production. This iteratability allows for different realizations, such as practice and text, to have a formal resemblance, while being at the same time quite dissimilarly constituted substantively. While there is not space to fully present

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[6] Mahmood 2005; Fader 2009; Laidlaw1995; Lester 2005; Rudnyckyi 2010; Robbins 2004; O'Neill 2010.Simon 2009.

[7] See e.g. Fassin 2012: Lambek 2010; Zigon 2008.

[8] (Lambek 2000)

[9] (Faubion 2001, Faubion 2011, Laidlaw 2002, 2014)

[10] (Zigon 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2014)

[11] Robbins 2007

the critique here, there is a tendency in some of the anthropology of ethics, especially when dealing with textually orientated religions, to laminate together practice, experience effectuated by practice, and textual instructions for how to proceed in practice, treating them as the same thing; this can be seen when textual instruction is used unproblematically as transparent representation of the practice it is suppose to chart. This move occludes the fact that the non-identity of practice and of discourse on practice is as important as any presumed identity between the two categories.[13] This lamination of practice and discourse about practice also makes it difficult it grasp the process of differentiation, the mutagenic tendency of practice and discourse about practice to drift and transform through iteration.

An example of the flattening encouraged by the religio-ethical approach is Saba Mahmood's well-received *Politics of Piety*, a study of the women's mosque movement in Cairo, Egypt. In this work, Mahmood documents this movement's drive to replace a secular mode of ethical judgment and practice with an Islamic one. This work is rightly noted for how it problematizes concepts of resistance and agency, as well as for how it interrogates versions of liberal and feminists politics that would valorise freedom; it does this in part by contrasting the women's mosque movement with Westernized forms of Egyptian Islam, which are based on a different set of assumptions about the subject. But in doing so, the differentiating elements in the women's mosque movement are eclipsed. Mahmood skips seamlessly from expert discourse about practices of piety, to interview and observational data of pietist students, as if these were not separate strata; in her reading of the movement, specific understandings of high Islamic theological doctrine and particular fashions of performing the morning prayer collapse into one another. But this lamination occurs not only with different strata, but between differently situated

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[12] Faubion 2014.

iterations as well. Mahmood gives us depictions of different milieus where the women's mosque movement is played out; we are shown well-ordered middle class mosques, as well as more raucous working class mosques, and we are told of the different topics of concern and standards of comportment in each of these locations. But what is important to Mahmood is that they are ultimately "structured by the authority ascribed to norms of usage that are grounded in scholarly discourse," and "the means through which the discursive logic of a scholarly tradition comes to be lived by its ordinary adherents."[14] In short, it is a common telos and process that Mahmood stresses. This is not to say that Mahmoood is ahistorical, nor that she does not acknowledge difference within Islam. Her history of the development of the women's mosque movement, as well as her juxtaposing it against rival forms of 'liberal' Islam in Egypt, shows that this is not the case. But still, the effect on micro-politics that might arise from differential realizations are obscured.

Of course, the common framing of all these religiosities by an anthropology of ethics by no stretch of the imagination makes them all the same. Part of what differentiates these religiosities is not just the topology of how the folding of the will is carried out, but the categories used to understand the aspects of the person who must use the will on the will. As seen in the brief discussion of prayer above, in practice Vineyard believers have a host of different frames for the specific aspects of the person that either acts in the request, or is acted on by God. These are obviously not discourses that are particular in any way to the Vineyard, or even to Anglophone forms of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. Rather, they are snatched from their circulation in a broader cultural imaginary, and are deployed exigently as a part of practice.

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[13] Jenkins 2013.

These differing intuitions about the will that surface in practice are not, however, substantive theories of the person. Though there are some minimal entailments in practice between the media that subjectivity is imagined to be embedded in and possible limitations on how the subjective can be conceived, given the structure of the diagram what is important to note is the *easily translatable nature* of assumptions about the mode of being accessed in self-reflexive prayerful subjectivity. In short, while the relations between the active and recalcitrant aspects of the will remains the same in any variant of the diagram, in each instance the particular frames used to describe the active and recalcitrant will is unfixed.

Now, this bisection of the Christian subject is not new.[15] What is new is the proliferation of new expert discourses used to frame the contemporary subject, in combination with the simultaneous democratization and decentralization of institutional power found in much of Pentecostal and Neocharismatic Christianity. These allow for a variety of public and authoritative ways to figure both the aspects of the will that are capable of engaging in volitional surrender, as well as those wilful aspects that necessitate surrender in the first place. Allowing for differently mediated aspects of the will makes a split in the subject easily thinkable, but proliferating these media allows them to metonymically link different forms of freedom, different spaces of agency, and different modes of power.

Spiritual Formations

This plurality of possible schematizations may not have much effect when dealing with practice, where only nonce formulations exist, but when the diagram is articulated in more lasting form,

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[14] Mahmood 2005: 99.

such as print, an 'authoritative' understanding of the materialities involved can have lasting

entailments. Or, rather, it is the *differential* positing of one aspect in relation to another, aspects

with different materialities, that has entailments. In short, it is not always the same registers of

self that are identified as either capable of will, or a block to it, which are relied upon in

literatures central to religious movements.

To illustrate this, we may examine works of two different Vineyard figures, Don Williams

and Ken Wilson. Williams, the more senior of the two, was an intimate of both John Wimber, the

Vineyard's founder, and of Francis McNutt, a central figure in both the Catholic and Protestant

Charismatic movements during the seventies and eighties. During the mid-nineties, when the

Vineyard was under attack by many Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christians as nothing more

than a heterodox cult of experience, Williams authored the original Vineyard statement of faith,

as well as several position papers, to refute these charges.

Ken Wilson is also influential, serving not only as a pastor at a large, long-running Vineyard

fellowship, but also in the denomination's central governing body; while he did not have the

same kind of determining historical role as Williams, he nonetheless enjoys a high profile in the

Vineyard as an author and public figure. More importantly, both Wilson and Williams have

written (or co-written) influential books that are meant to give biblical and experiential

grounding into basic Vineyard practices and belief.

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[15] Wasserman 2008.

Both books have the effective imprimatur of the Vineyard in the form of distribution by Vineyard Resources, the Vineyard's non-profit media wing, and both are commonly sold by the sort of Vineyard bookstores or book tables that are a common part of these churches. Williams' book, *Signs, Wonders, and the Kingdom of God*, featuring a forward by John Wimber himself, is often described as a Vineyard "classic."[16] Wilson's *Empowered Evangelicals* (co-written with another important Vineyard pastor, Rich Nathan) is also a Vineyard staple; during my fieldwork, it was the most commonly referenced book when people wanted to recommend something that would tell me "what the Vineyard is all about."[17] Both authors have also penned other books in the "spiritual formation" genre, accounts of processual ethical individuation resulting from a serious engagement with Christian practice. These are books designed not just for reading, but for taking up as a program; each book is supplemented by post-chapter questions and tasks that the reader is suppose to use as exercises in spiritual growth.

Both of these "grounding" books concern themselves with an account of what the Vineyard understands as its basics: a suturing of the Evangelical and the Pentecostal. Williams achieves this merger through an evangelically articulated reading of the overarching biblical narrative, which is presented as foundational to both Evangelical theology and Pentecostal-style practice. Even more than these hermeneutics, though, it is the trope of testimony that serves as the Evangelical *bone fides* of this book. It is shot through with moments of personal witness: first-hand accounts of demonic deliverances and emotional healings, all in biographical sketches that attempt to recapitulate a larger Biblical arc at a human scale.

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[16] Williams 1989.

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Nathan and Wilson's "grounding" book does the same work, heavy with biographical sketches such as Wilson's night shifts as a suicide counsellor, or the early, struggling days of setting up a family or a ministry. Here the argument is made not through a sweeping reading of the Bible, but instead through a series of topically orientated chapters that serves as a description of what might be called 'best practices' in marrying a Pentecostal exuberance (the "empowered" part of the title) with the "evangelical" sobriety that makes up the title's second half.

Despite this shared aspects in these grounding texts, the specificities of the two other spiritual formation books are rather different. Williams' book, *12 Steps With Jesus: How Filling the Spiritual Emptiness in Your Life Can Help You Break Free From Addiction*, at first seems too narrow to be a contribution to the spiritual formation genre, until one realizes what is meant by "addiction."[18] For Williams, addiction is *the* human state; not just substances but processes and relationships too are forms of addiction, forms that everyone engages. Even political engagement is a form of addiction through a narcissistic fix: "A student joins a pro-gay or peace movement and feels powerful and important for the first time" (26). This may seem to be a judgment on a certain kind of politics, but that would be only a partial reading; even Williams' own position (as pastor) is included in the category of narcissistic addiction. As Williams states, quoting Gerald May, "to be human is to be addicted and to be addicted is to be in need of grace" (10).

Grace is required because the will that is lacking; Williams recasts the problem of addiction as an evangelical bromide: "We are in bondage, and sheer moral will cannot set us free" (10). The difference, though, is that this spiritual bondage is projected not as a Pauline existential

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[17] Nathan and Wilson 1995.

inability, but as a failure of quotidian self-management. Asking rhetorically if Romans 7:15–18 "sounds familiar," Williams answers that it does "if you have ever said, 'I'll never lie again.' 'This is my last drink.' 'I'll never have another cigarette.' 'I am going to get my weight down and keep it down.' 'I'm through with gossip.' 'I'll quit tomorrow'" (11).

For Williams, not even the born-again experience is strong enough to break this foundational state of addiction; as he states of his own teenage conversion, while Jesus "changed my heart, He didn't really change my inherited perception of reality" (16). Traditional twelve step programs, despite their Christian roots, are not enough either; these programs "may offer help at a given moment, but they don't address the bottom line." One instead needs to merge conversion and recovery, acknowledging not a vague "higher power" but rather making Jesus our twelve-step 'sponsor' as we go through a processual series of exercises to remake our lives as disciples (79, 125).

Wilson's *Mystically Wired* starts with a premise that stands in sharp contrast to William's claim of a universal addiction.[19] He states, "You are mystically wired. Yes, *you*. That is, you are adapted or designed to reach beyond the limits of the ingrown self to connect with the wonder of life beyond the self, including the life of God" (16). This book presents itself as a discussion of prayer techniques, but as the opening warrant of the book suggests, discussion of prayer techniques quickly shifts into a general regimen of affective self-regulation. This includes mastering techniques that allow for a phantasmatic experiential form of Biblical hermeneutics, and also learning practices that make one free of fear and worry and bathed in love.

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[18] Williams 2004a.

12 Steps to Jesus

'Synoptically' reading these two pairings of books (Williams' *12 Steps to Jesus* and *Signs, Wonders, and the Kingdom of God* on the one hand, Wilson's *Empowered Evangelicals* and *Mystically Wired* on the other) suggests that both are actualizations of the contemporary Neocharismatic diagram, recognizable yet differing textual instantiations of the abstract play of reflexive forces found in Charismatic religiosity. They are, in other words, reifications of what functions in practice as the proper means of, limitations to, and supernatural prostheses for the Charismatic will.

As we have already suggested, though, the specificities of the diagram's actualizations do as much work as the form of the diagram itself. Take Williams, as an example. For him, the base problem is an inability of the will to bring about the desired modifications in day-to-day activities. It is worth asking what it is that hinders the will, and how that hindering is conceived. This inability of the will has one of its loci in human biology, and particularly in genetics; as humans we "inherit genes infected by sin," resulting in "brains that are out of order" (34). This damage at the level of the brain is spelled out with a surprising degree of specificity. The gene-caused "broken delicate hormonal balance in our brains" results in too much dopamine ("which revs us up"), or too little serotonin ("which calms us down") (35).

This sin-stained folk-neurogenetics is not the only source of pain; quoting Drew Pinsky, the co-host of MTV's "Loveline," Williams describes the brain as a recording space for primal pain,

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[19] Wilson 2009.

an "original hurt around which everything else is structured" (35). Psychological and social traumas "landscape" our brain, in a way likened "to the seashore, landscaped by tides, winds and storms" (35). The brain is, in effect, a monument to psychic injury.

This exterior origination of trauma points to other spaces of will-denying recalcitrance. For instance, psychology as a social institution is doubly a source. First, Foucauldian pastoral social roles are seen not as ways to build a person's will, but instead as another instance of the will's collapse. Relying on Anne Wilson Schaef, Williams presents the claim "that all in the helping professions (i.e., psychologists, social workers, pastors, youth workers) are untreated codependents" (24). They are people "addicted to people," and hence in no better shape, and no more in control, than those that they would shepherd. This brings us to the second manner in which psychology as a social form appears in Williams' account. For pastoral language or standing is not denied: Williams' book is replete with thoughts voiced in this idiom, often articulated in a soft-psychoanalytic discussion of relationships with parents.

The psychological as institution is not the only form of social causation. Sin is considered not only a genetic transmission, but, following an Evangelical trope of a fallen humanity, a "generational" inheritance as well (44). What is striking is that this generational inheritance is presented not in terms of kinship, but rather in the language of positivistic social science. Generational sin becomes folded into discussions of the dynamics and distribution of abusive families, with the startling statement that "96 percent of us come from dysfunctional families in which such abuse has occurred" (though Williams quickly adds that, due to our fallen nature, it is "really 100 percent") (38). Hot on the heels of this comes more demographic claims, that "75

million of us are touched directly by the disease of alcoholism," that "60 percent of all women

and 50 percent of all men have an eating disorder," that "50 percent of all children today will

grow up in single-parent families that lack any permanent male influence," and even that

"eighty-two percent of all nurses are the oldest child of an alcoholic parent" (39). Williams

suggests that hazy-eyed affective familial ties might occlude these truths ("your love for your

parents need not protect you from the truth of their upbringing"), but he also suggests that this

social causation renders them blameless for being a part of this transmission ("they mostly

passed on to you what they had received from their parents. This will allow you have grace

towards them and towards yourself") (41).

This logic of a causal order foreclosing a free will is not limited to naturalistic explanations;

Williams states that while we are under the illusion of free will, we are "really out of control, or

under demonic control." The demonic should not be thought of as an independent force, though,

but rather as a supernatural supplement to naturalistic causation: "Our emotional shutdown and

our addictive cravings may be inherited, but they are reinforced by the spiritual oppression that

surrounds us" (47).

This claim is the essence of Williams' argument: that we are overdetermined in sin due to the

way that the spiritual, the social, the psychological and the neurological interlock. How to work

free of this? Williams states that it is "our genetic inheritance, craving brains, and dysfunctional

families" that require us to turn to something other than the "implied moralism and

oversimplification of personal responsibility" that he sees as emblematic of the traditional

twelve-step program in the first place (120). However, this interrogation of the limits of personal

responsibility does not suggest that personal responsibility, and a concomitant capacity to act, does not exist at all. We are "morally responsible to be Christians" and thus *capable* of being Christian as well, even if that capacity is circumscribed by sin (43). This moral responsibility and this capacity of will point out something particular in Williams' account of religious volition. While there are errors and infelicities in religiosity, as there are in the psychological, the genetic, and the social, the damage that religious choice gives is not the result of an inoperative will, but rather one that operates too well. Unlike the causal language of addiction and fixation, where we are blameless due to our inability to rectify it on our own, the choice of other religious orientations, or as Williams puts it, other idols, is blameworthy. While the obligation to worship is compulsory—everyone will worship something, Williams tells us, and even religion is to some degree something that one must quit—it is also the one space where one can make a choice that overrides other forms of causation by asking Jesus to undo them.

In fact, the pivotal moment in the book occurs when Williams' prose slips into a mode that can only be considered that of prayer: "I ask Jesus to quiet my cravings, reorder my brain and settle me in His peace" (66). This is where the fungible nature of these frameworks transforms into a hierarchical one, as each moment of correction is a supernatural reordering of the natural. Jesus "rewires" the brain, restores the "biochemical balance," and heals the "abuse, assault, judgment and losses that have imprinted us" (81, 90). In each of these operations the healing is supernatural, sometimes in ways that seem to violate the cognitive categories of cause and effect that give structure to the world. Williams notes the "timeless" aspect of some pain, where in the moment of its reactivation "we also may find ourselves right back in the place of abuse." He takes this metaphorical description of the vividness of trauma and both literalizes and resolves it

by stating that "since Jesus is the eternal Son, He lives out side of time. He can move back into our past through the power of the Spirit and set us free form our protective fears and the pain they mask" (82).

Mystically Wired

This shape—a religious will implores an eternal other to re-order, or even re-write, malignant genetic, neurological, social wills—should not be too striking; it is just a pure distillation of a sensibility where the divine must by force be unnatural, unphysical, unsocial, and unpsychological in order to at once be recognized as truly other, and to have promise of an effect greater that what might be offered by immanent, naturalistic forces. However, this juxtaposing of the immanent and the transcendent is not the only mode of description that is adequate to the Charismatic diagram. Recall that in Wilson, in contrast to a brain that needs to be 'rewired,' we have a brain that is 'mystically wired' from the beginning. In fact, if one is to counterpoise Wilson and Williams, what stands out most is that Wilson inverts Williams almost completely, repeatedly taking what is "spirit" in Williams and either recasting it in the register of the neurological or psychological, or alternately marking the spirit as that which resists the will, rather than what either houses or supplements it.

For example, Williams situates the spirit as a realm that is either empty or disabled. Wilson states that we are "mystically challenged," a condition that alienates us from fully experiencing God. The problem, though, is not being held back by material substrates, but rather a refusal to rely upon them; as Wilson says, the crux of the difficulty lies in the supposition that "we think we're suppose to do our praying with something we're unsure of: our 'spirit.'" A sign that prayer

is presumed to be performed with some other unnatural capacity is indicated both in the amount

of effort that is imagined as necessary ("I use to think that connecting with God in prayer either

required enormous effort or none at all"), as well as the alterity that marked its arrival ("I grew

up thinking that spiritual experience was something that came crashing in form another planet,

another world, another order of being"). But this is not the phenomenological experience of

prayer, or at least not its quotidian one: "When we pray, it feel like our brain is doing the praying

when it ought to be something other than our brain doing the praying" (15).

For Wilson, this observation is half-right. It is correct in situating actually-existing prayer in

the brain, but incorrect in the presumption that it should ideally be occurring somewhere else

instead. We are told that not only is this view of the brain as the proper medium of prayer

biblical, but that it is empirical, too: "Scientists, radiologists, and neurologists have been taking

the praying brain seriously of late," identifying "real shifts" in that organ (3, 4). This is taken by

Wilson not as an unmasking of prayer as a mere biological process, but rather an endorsement of

its reality. As he says, in his emphasis, "*At least I'm not making this up*" (4).

This presentation (though not reduction) of prayer as neurological has implications. This

makes prayer, even the kind of subject-devolving prayer of mystics, part of a common biological

inheritance; the fixing of proper intent in worship is reliant on the utilization of "mirror neurons,"

and Christian compassion is tied up to endorphins (82, 100). Even Paul's admonition to "not

conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your

mind" is presented as presaging the cognitive scientific claim regarding neural plasticity (183–

84).

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For Wilson, this neurological foundation suggests that powerful and effective prayer is not the result of spiritual athleticism, or technical expertise, but simply learning the relatively easy processes for awakening these aspects of our neurobiology: as he says, advertising the ease of calming the self and promoting a feeling of gratitude: "Not rocket science, neuroscience" (94). This should not be taken as a form of prayer unrecognizable to the Vineyard, though. Their visionary, experientially-charged form of prayer is easily identified in Wilson's account of almost floridly imagistic prayer experiences. He recalls an encounter so real to him that he felt as if he accessed "a different order of place," when, during prayer, he suddenly found himself "standing in the cave before a campfire with Jesus of Nazareth near me" (34). During this experience, Jesus announces to Wilson the (then unknown) pregnancy of a church member; this is a prophetic experience that could easily serve as an exemplar of Charismatic Vineyard practice.

Nor does this neurological grounding prevent another important Vineyard thematic from coming to the fore: God is still about that which confounds prediction. Wilson states that prayer is frightening because it opens up the possibility for the unexpected; God may confront you with an unforeseen summons, something that challenges "our attachment to control and our unwillingness to give it up" (36). Even the peculiar Vineyard affective palette of rejecting overly performative Pentecostal styles of prayer, and rather reaching emotional peaks through an intensification of self-reflexive monitoring, is endorsed. Wilson adopts Vineyard founder Wimber's relaxed, though introspective self-presentation as an almost biofeedback-based

imperative to "'dial down' rather than 'dial up'" and avoid things such as "energetic verbal prayer" (145).

Perhaps most importantly for purposes of identifying this as another actualization of the Charismatic diagram, we are still dealing with alterity: "Prayer . . .is what the brain does or wants to do to transcend the boundaries of the self, to sense a connection with what lies beyond the praying self'" (6). Prayer, even when articulated in a code borrowed from neurology, is still about reaching out to something that is at the end truly other. However, even this otherness is folded into the physical world. To ground the soul in the physical processes, Wilson relies on the fact that the Hebrew and Greek words that are glossed in English as Spirit also refer to "Breath" (138). Most notably, in what is explicitly marked as a purely speculative moment, Wilson does the new-physics equivalent of locating the site of heaven in the Ptolemaic cosmos: God, he suggests, is situated in some string-theory-like supplemental dimension standing at right angles to our familiar three, affecting the world through quantum flux (53, 56). "However transcendent God may be, he is also intimately and immediately immanent . . . . The fact that we are material beings doesn't present an obstacle to God mixing it up with our hundred of billion of brain neurons . . . Our fleshy, pulsating, electrically charged brains" (19, 20).

This may seem to be a break from the pattern we saw with Williams, in which one discourse is set against another to isolate certain strata of the person as possessing or hindering the will, or conveying the will of another. A neurological framing is given such predominance that it seems to subsume or overwrite other framings, rather than be merely juxtaposed with them. Recall the idea of the "spiritual," which is presented as one-half actually natural, and one-half category

error. If everything is "neurological," then there is no privileged place to site the will. However, in Wilson as in Williams, there is a supplement to this system in the phenomenological world of common sense, where one is incapable of the kind of transformative work because of an alienation from the neurological, and a presumption that "supernatural" means *unnatural*. The person is not identical with the brain, but the brain is rather something that runs a bit orthogonal to the person; the brain is referred to in the possessive, it enjoys capacities for prayer that the person does not, and its function is opaque to interrogation through mere introspection. And more than anything else, the brain has a will, more on the order of Nietzsche or Schopenhauer, to bring things to completion, a will that the psychologized person lacks. Instead of Williams' sequence, which ran *Religious Will* □ *Eternal God* □ *Recalcitrant Neuro-socio-genetic Wills*, we have a different sequence for Wilson: *Neurological Will* □ *Immanent God* □ *Recalcitrant Psychological Will*.

Conclusion: Speed, Ontology, and Politics

Having laid these two actualizations side by side, we can ask what differences they make. The first is that at the level of imaging practice, Williams and Wilson have two different visions of the *speed* of the processes. In Williams, where God is of an entirely different ontological order, the in-breaking has immediate results: memories are healed in one coup, demon-enhanced addictions have their power and their hold syphoned off in one deliverance. For Wilson, where it is a matter of activating immanent latencies, a kind of neurological archaeology, there is more of a sense of a slowing down. The subjective sense of thoughts decelerates, and renewal works through a cognitive habituation, and only rarely has the punctuality of a sudden encounter.[20] This

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[20] Ibid., 145.

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emphasis on stretches rather than moments also resonates with a break from a larger *événementiel* logic of a specifically Christian, specifically protestant rupture. For Williams, there is a sense, though never stated outright, that proper religiosity is circumscribed to a particularly protestant-flavoured mode, but for Wilson there is a sense that all of Christian history is recoupable; his adoption of scheduled regimens of prayer is a gesture towards forms of Christian exercise that either precede the reformation, or, in the case of Jesuit spiritual exercises, post-date it but follow the 'wrong' path.[21] There are gestures to an outside of Christianity; echoing a recent trope authored by American evangelicals who wish to distance themselves from contemporary Western secular culture, Wilson tells us that Christianity is an "Eastern Religion" that was only later adopted by the West, where "its spirituality was overlaid with a dry-as-toast rationalism that squeezed out most of the music and the mysticism" (29).

Returning to the question that began this conversation, though, the most striking difference lies in the politics that emerge from these tracings. Here, we are not speaking about partisan electoral politics (though of course this may have resonances with that kind of analysis) but instead the differential sense of what kind of possibilities for collective wilful human action that are opened up by these paths; in short, a sense of what can be desired.

Williams' politics, suffused with a sharp ontological divide and a punctuated vision of history, is a politics of an exceptional break with the current order, what James Hunter might call the 'neo-Anabaptist' position.[22] The world, or, as Williams calls it, the "world-system", is of whole cloth under the control of Satan, as he says in another work; he likens the world to

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[21] Ibid., 163.

Auschwitz, a total institution built purely for destruction.[23] It's for this reason that taking up Jesus is seen a challenge to "all other earthly kingdoms," including that of "money and material security," and even "idolatrous family controls."[24] Even religion itself is something that will be broken with Jesus' reign. This is a politics of denial, in which all existing forms are lacking, and only a highly personalized and improvised form of belonging, a sincere belonging, is acceptable,[25] when supplemented by a not unrelated pietism; and while this pietism can be the engine of the sort of ameliorative, small-scale social projects that characterizes much of Evangelical philanthropy, it is not grounds for a politics in itself.

The politics inherent in Wilson is different. Rather than a denial of this world, it is an actualization of potentials that already lay latent in it, suggesting a processual *reclamation* of the world. Under this logic, it is not that things are fallen, but that things which may seem initially antithetical to Christian practice have the potential to be seen, in a process of startling realization, to be simpatico with it; this is what causes Wilson to take up the startling position of endorsing Charles Darwin, at least as a human being. "[C]urious, careful to give credit to others, patient with critics, respectful of Christian faith, zealous for life in all its diverse expressions—a kind, considerate human begin of staggering observational genius," this ratification at least implicitly seems to bleeds over into Darwin's substantive thought (and tellingly, Wilson is part of a consortium of Evangelical pastors and climate scientists who promote dialogue on the issue of climate change).

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[22] Hunter 2010.
[23] Williams 2004b: 9.
[24] Williams 2004a: 95, 97.

The other side of this ontology of surprising reclamations (as opposed to startling intervention) is that since one never knows how something may appear to be assimilable to a "Kingdom logic," the kind of sharp denunciations that are much a part of other Evangelical discourses become foreclosed. In the book co-written with Rich Nathan, "culture wars" are abjured, as participation in them preclude someone "in a position of significant influence and power in your city" from "immediately" turning to you for "support and prayer and spiritual counsel," or hearing "the Mind of God."[26] This openness goes even to variations of gender that seem to go beyond the Evangelical/Pentecostal pale: faced with a woman who confides to Wilson that she was born male, and subsequently underwent gender reassignment surgery, he acknowledges that many of his co-religionists would consider her "outside the boundaries of holiness," someone who must "repent," but Wilson felt that prayer-led discernment rather commanded him "to accept the person before me as she presents herself to me." While "Christians are perceived as people who want to change other people, rather than people who have been summoned to love other people," his contra-orthodox choice is predetermined because he wishes to rather be "a disciple who is willing to follow where the master leads, even if it makes your faith community nervous."[27] (Since this essay has been written, Ken Wilson has come forward with an essay calling for the Vineyard to re-examine the place of lesbian and gay believers and to keep the question open, arguing for a third way in which anxieties about homosexuality held by many members would be acknowledged, while still allowing the church

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[25] Keane 2007.
[26] Nathan and Wilson 1995: 203.
[27] Wilson 2009: 171–72.

to be a place where neither a renunciation of either homosexual orientation nor associated practices would be a prerequisite for participation in the community).[28]

Such strikingly different formulations raise the question of causation: what accounts for such varying instantiations? There are some (perhaps too easy) answers: Williams was a Presbyterian graduate of the Princeton theological seminary who came of age in the mid-sixties, and was closely engaged with the burgeoning Los Angeles "Jesus People"; Wilson, an autodidact, was a trailing member of that group Williams mentored, coming simultaneously into faith, adulthood, and fatherhood in the Upper Midwest during the seventies. The desire for an articulable difference from previous generations, the drive to mark a new instantiation of Evangelical thought in order to signpost a break from the past, could be a convincing account, if one wants to take the leap that Wilson is in some kind of unstated dialogue with a kind of religiosity that Williams represents. Wilson does seem to endorse an 'Emergent' Evangelicalism, a movement seeped in critical theory that presents itself as purposefully anti-foundational, and, more to the point, anti-modern;[29] his book bears a forward by Emergent standard-bearer Phyllis Tickle. Contrast this with Williams' denunciation of 'post-modernity' as a relativism that is incompatible with the Truth of the Gospel.

But such a reading obscures as much as it illuminates. Both Wilson and Williams are old Vineyard hands, with ties to one another (for instance, Williams has ties with the Ohio Vineyard church run by Wilson's sometime collaborator, Rich Nathan). What is most obscured by reading Wilson as representing a later development of Charismatic thought is that both Wilson and

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[28] Wilson 2014.

Williams are coeval. They are coeval not just in the sense that *Mystically Wired* and *Twelve Steps* were published roughly contemporaneously with one another, but in the sense that the kinds of differing religiosities expressed by these books are both on-going streams of practice, and while neither can be said to have captured the American Evangelical landscape, neither are moribund, either. And even if one were to eclipse the other, either in adherents or in prestige, these different ways to trace the Neocharismatic diagram would still haunt as virtual alternatives, ready to be summoned up from the practices that they are actualizations of.

This is worth attending because other Evangelically-informed segments of American Christianity are also shifting away from a previous alignment with the American political right. As Marcia Pally has described it, increasing numbers of evangelicals are "moving toward an anti-militarist, anti-consumerist focus on poverty relief, environmental protection, and immigration reform, and on coalition-building and more issue-by-issue policy assessment."[30] The degree to which this change has occurred, and how deep it goes, is still under debate, though; as James Bielo has asked, "[d]o electoral politics and other shifting forms of activism amount to fundamental change, or merely changing patterns of action?"[31]

But what such debates miss is that the question is not one of change or continuity, but rather one of a *difference in repetition*. The question of constancy versus transformation is misplaced, as it is not a binary opposition ("conservative" versus "progressive") but rather different individuations of the same relation of forces. And there is no reason to think that these are the

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[29] Bielo 2011.
[30] Pally 2013.
[31] Bielo 2013.

only ways that the diagram can be actualized, as indicated by the constant summoning up of other transient actualizations as a part of the day-to-day prayer practice discussed in the first portion of this essay.

In some ways, then, despite changes in political inclinations, nothing has changed at all—and in other ways, there is the very real possibility of perhaps inexhaustible change to come. While neither iteration is a more 'true' realization of the abstract diagram, Wilson's actualization is overly marked by its imbrication in a wider social and material world, and opens up the possibility of metonymic crawls from the external concepts that are invoked to other ideas, other virtuosities. There is no knowing what this sort of expansiveness might lead to; it could end up being so open as to effectively erase itself from having any specificity, as has happened in some liberal protestantisms.[32] But there is also the possibility that, choosing to encounter the world rather than abstain from it, and with an openness to not just transcendent alterity, but immanent difference as well, this particular vision might break the diagram that gives it its contours, and inaugurate a truly new form of religiosity, and a new collectivity of people who might answer its call.[33]

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[32] King 2012.
[33] Cf. Barber 2011.

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