

# An Interview with Dr. James B. Wiggins

BY E. CRAIG HEIM

James B. Wiggins was an undergraduate and graduate professor in the Department of Religion at Syracuse University from 1963 to 2001. He was honored with appointment to the Eliphalet Remington Professorship in Religion in 1999, one of the two oldest chairs at the university, dating to 1871. He served as director of graduate studies from 1975 until 1980 and as chairperson of the department from 1980 until 2000.

From 1983 until 1992 he served as the executive director of the American Academy of Religion, the largest scholarly and professional organization in the field of the academic study of religion now comprised of more than 10,000 college, university and theological school professors, secondary school teachers and graduate students.

Wiggins has served on myriad boards and a host of not-for-profit organizations, including Hospice of Central New York, Onondaga Pastoral Counseling Center, Dolma Eco-Tours, North American Interfaith Network, Contact, InterReligious Council of Central NY and the Alliance of Communities Transforming Syracuse.

Wiggins is an author and retired United Methodist Church clergyman who hosted *Religion Matters* on public television. From 2002 until 2010 he served as the executive director of InterFaith Works of CNY.

## ***At Syracuse University, what insights were you trying to convey to students through your teaching and management roles?***

In many traditional religious communities, there is distinction between dogma and doctrine. It is asserted that dogmas are unchangeable. In some cases, it is admitted that doctrines may transform and change very slowly over long periods of time. I consider this an important distinction and wanted to challenge and enable each student to think critically; in some cases, beyond the religious framework they were brought up to believe.

In the course *Myth and Ritual in Christianity*, we wanted to challenge the assumption that mythology is false or a lie. We used many resources in that rescue operation. Alan Watts, Joseph Campbell and others have recognized that there are structures of experience and thought that are better expressed in narrative form, rather than logical syllogism. That process of discerning the difference between dogma, which is always in the form of syllogism of question-and-answer, and doctrine, which may best be conveyed in storytelling and metaphor, is important. These more expansive and imaginative forms of thinking and communication bring the resources we have as human beings to bear on the most complex topics of religion and spirituality.

The Department of Religion at Syracuse University has had a number of luminaries who have influenced thousands of students and millions of readers, like David L. Miller, Gabriel Vahanian, Huston Smith and others who brought insight and inspiration not only to students, but as a colleague and friend, to me. It was a wonderful time of learning—great experience.

## ***You spent a good deal of time with ideas like transcendence, God, sacred things and spirit. What are your thoughts regarding these important concepts now?***

I don't know... I used to know how to repeat what others, over many centuries of time, have said about these concepts. I can still do that, but I am much less interested in those formulations now. I

have come to the orientation that the primary reality for most of us is that we just live with these mysteries. We try to penetrate through intuition and intimation, and the result can be powerful and sustaining, but they remain irreducible Mystery.

We are constantly reconsidering our conjectures and hypotheses and we are learning more about how things are, rejecting past considerations that are deficient in favor of the best we know now. Too often, we get stuck in a way of thinking; believing that what we know is the final truth. My experience tells me that that may not be so, and we must operate through humility and modesty in our understanding of these far-reaching concepts. That was our approach at SU; create a forum of understanding that would lead our students to a life of questioning and learning.

***What line is drawn between the teachings we learn in institutions like churches, synagogues and mosques relative to the instruction we receive in schools and universities?***

Religious institutions cannot be perpetuated without identifiable references that characterize them relative to other faiths. They have become very judicious and insightful in affirming a particular way of being human. We talked about the distinction between dogma and doctrine, and in the same way, religious institutions represent a certain belief system and faith-based doctrine that explains and reflects them in a structured and distinct way. That institutional position does not change much.

In contrast, what characterizes a university precisely is its openness to central vision. Universities teach with questions. They promote inquiry and openness to ideas and differing points of view. They represent a learning that isn't confined to a certain ideology. There are many different ways of thinking, and critical thinking is just one. Mythological thinking is another, and all ways of thinking have value.

Many religious institutions are founded on appropriating forms and content of thinking that have been expressed previously, often by some of the greatest thinkers in history. People who participate in the dreams of the past are sharpened, focused and better able to address issues that arise. These institutions appropriate these stories as a way and example of being in the world. Thus, many find it enormously satisfying and fulfilling to be part of a community of believers. Others remain seekers, questers.

***You have spent a number of years with the interfaith movement locally and nationally. What promise do you see coming from this kind of coalition?***

I think what led me to move more explicitly in this direction was research and reflection for the last book I wrote, *In Praise of Religious Diversity*. Our experience of the observable world suggests empirically different understandings that seem greater than our commonality, and this is the impetus for much of the conflict we generate. It can be, on the other hand, the greatest gift and resource, providing us with the opportunity to see the world differently, and thereby expand our horizons.

Too often we think that our beliefs provide the one and only true understanding of the way things are. We know that some of the most horrendous instances of conflict and strife have come from those with the most enmity, and the result is often enmity projected into the world with violence and struggle.

So learning to regard our differences as socially constructed is an antidote to this hostility. Through vehicles like interfaith, we have a nonviolent approach to provide conflict resolution. Increasingly in my thinking, if I had the power to change it, I would refer to "multi-faith" rather than "interfaith". The reality we have now is multi-faith. The notion of interfaith, to some, carries the connotation of attempting to reduce all faith communities into only one religion. In contrast to that orientation, my experience, both nationally and locally and personally, is that this movement aspires to embrace

the humanness of diversity and works to establish respect and honor for the gift these differences provide.

One of the themes different faith communities do hold in common is humanity's need for compassion and its application in service. In some dictionaries, the first definition of compassion is "pity", so part of the work to be done is to rescue the notion of compassion by lifting up the empathy, sympathy, appreciation and affirmation that practicing compassion expresses. In this respect, the implications for service are really profound, and that is real promise and source of hope.

***What is the purpose of working with the concept of compassion at a community level, and what outcomes may follow?***

This is a learning process for me in exploring what is involved for any community to even consider itself a compassionate community. It started with a notion that we should be generating a new organization to facilitate this work; now we are evolving to an appreciation of a different notion, and that is to recognize the amazing array of works of compassion that already exists in many communities. To acknowledge that these acts of compassion are happening constantly, and by elevating the consciousness of a community to appreciate these good works, we will enable and hopefully inspire many others to do the same.

Seattle was the first chartered Compassionate City. They mapped and publicized, in an interesting metaphorical way, within a heart shape, the locations and identities of organizations that were engaged in compassionate work. Its purpose is not primarily to have new organizations begin to do this work, but to enable a whole community to appreciate and embrace and emulate examples of what is already being done, thereby growing it more. It has the potential to be a potent seed, and in a way that can promote something very healthy, something very fulfilling, even transforming.

It is the supposition also that compassion is something that can be taught and learned. It is the belief that compassion can displace the reactive ways people treat each other and recognize that there is inherent value in each human being. In this process, we mutually confirm the worth of each person. It deeply affirms the idea that every individual adds value to the community, each with special abilities and talents.

***In light of our theme this month of prayer and meditation, what do you have to say to the many people that believe these tools provide a path to what we all hope to find?***

That is another one of those profound mysteries to me. In the Christian tradition, St. Paul encouraged people to pray without ceasing. At a literal level that is impractical for most people, so what might it mean? I think our prayers grow through receptivity and an attitude of openness to the grace in which we live and move and have our being. We recognize that our prayers may not be answered in the ways they are uttered, so this requires an attitudinal acknowledgement that we finite, limited creatures are not in control. If praying is a disciplined practice that leads people to that recognition and acceptance of one's finitude, then it is impossible to engage too much in prayer.

It remains experientially the case that in so many practices, prayer and meditation are among the means to spiritual fulfillment and an expression of a felt connection to something greater than oneself. Meditation and contemplation are acts of prayer. They can open hearts and minds to the profound awareness and acceptance that one of the greatest prayers a human can ever utter is, "Thanks for whatever is and may befall."