

The novel addresses contemporary and timeless social and spiritual grievances to Christianity itself, not to some pasty American simulacrum of Christianity. Through Peck's literary artistic experimentation come questions about God and grace for which we have no vocabulary, no syllogisms, only stories. Such as this tiny story about Heike and her dog in the park, which may be the whole story after all.

[The dog] would not come, and she spent fifteen minutes chasing him around the dog park before she could snatch him by the collar. She sat down on the ground crossing her legs and pulling the dog's nose into her own as she rubbed the back of his head. "You are a bad dog." She said, rubbing his back vigorously with her hand. "A very bad dog." (154)

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## Experience with Religion, Experience with the Spirit

Matthew Wickman. *Life to the Whole Being: The Spiritual Memoir of a Literature Professor*. Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship at Brigham Young University, 2022. 227 pp. Paper: \$19.95. ISBN: 978-0-8425-0061-6.

*Reviewed by Madison U. Sowell*

Frankly, I am not sure why I was invited to review Matthew Wickman's *Life to the Whole Being*. It is not an opportunity that I sought or for which I volunteered. I have written very little on Mormon topics. My traditional area of scholarship has long been the Italian epic tradition and, more recently, the iconography of pre-twentieth-century ballet performers.

Notwithstanding these facts, what I do know is that I very much needed to read Professor Wickman's book, subtitled *The Spiritual Memoir of a Literature Professor*. And it was not simply because I was a literature professor myself for over forty years. Rather, I needed to ponder this self-proclaimed "spiritual memoir" because as a former young single adult ward bishop, mission president, missionary training center branch president, Young Men president, and current senior service missionary over addiction recovery programs in multiple stakes, I regularly counsel a host of surrogate sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, who are struggling spiritually, who have questions about Church policies and practices, not to mention Church history, and concerns about certain statements or (in)actions of this or that General Authority.

While searching for something practical, I did not want an authoritative guide with specific black-and-white answers to such thorny issues as (1) what to tell a beloved returned missionary who has been diagnosed with gender dysphoria; (2) what to say to a young father of five talented children who has chosen to separate himself and his family from the Church, which, from his viewpoint, discriminates against the LGBTQIA+ community; or (3) how to counsel the daughters of a friend who have reported to law enforcement their father's long-standing sexual abuse. Nevertheless, I have been longing for examples from articulate laypersons who could reveal through personal accounts how they have grappled with these or similar concerns while maintaining their own spiritual equilibrium and offering meaningful succor to those who carry heavy burdens as well as "those that mourn" (Mosiah 18:9).

In the soul-revealing memoir under review, I found an instructive and helpful example of why those of us who profess to be Saints would be wise to cultivate the Spirit more actively in our lives no matter where we stand vis-à-vis the above-mentioned issues. The answer to how we can help to ease our own or others' burdens relates directly to how much we instill the Spirit into *daily* (not just *occasional*) life and practice. To drive home this point, Wickman starts off by citing a favorite quotation from Parley P. Pratt regarding what the gift of the Holy Ghost

can mean metaphorically and emotionally, if not literally, to one who consistently makes use of it. In Pratt's estimation, the Spirit can prove "marrow to the bone, joy to the heart, light to the eyes, music to the ears, and *life to the whole being*" (19, my emphasis and the book's title).

The author pulls few punches when detailing his own arduous spiritual journey from reluctant missionary to angry young single adult (wondering, *inter alia*, when he would get married and worrying about his gay friends' place in the Church) and from excited new husband to middle-aged parent of a teenage daughter with chronic health challenges who has chosen an alternative lifestyle. In reflecting on his personal two-decade-long pilgrimage and "the breadth of spiritual experience and what it means to pursue a spiritual life" (14), the professor-cum-memoirist addresses the interrelationship of four topics: "spiritual experience, literature, religion, and memoir" (21) and offers a personal playbook for how to respond to challenging questions by relying on the Spirit. Not since reading Chieko Okazaki's books, in which she juxtaposed poignant scenes from her childhood and adolescence to citations of *Dialogue* alongside quotations of scriptures and General Authorities, have I found such a compelling *mélange* of personal stories, critiques of literary passages, and scriptural insights.

For Wickman, literature has long proven to be "the instrument of a spiritual odyssey" (25), and in this book he explores an impressive and diverse range of literary texts (from novelists Daniel Defoe, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Virginia Woolf to poets such as William Wordsworth, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Anya Krugovoy Silver). He eloquently argues that literature can "cultivate our sensitivity to spiritual things, opening us to new ways of thinking and feeling" (62). Great literary works bridge what the author calls "the gaps" that are a natural part of every life, such as the disparity "between the greatness of the gospel message and the mass indifference to it" (63). For Wickman, literature is "all about gaps—opening them, bridging them, learning to live with them" (105). Regarding these chasms, he argues, "A life of faith . . . involves recognizing, straddling, and sometime leaping across gaps that riddle our existence" (93).

While we acquire “small islands of understanding,” we are nevertheless “surrounded by oceans of unknown details and unimagined possibilities”; it is “the feelings of fullness we associate with spiritual experience [that] create virtual bridges across these expanses” (94). In brief, Wickman believes that “gaps” will remain part of our mortal existence and that we would do well, while earnestly striving and praying specifically for answers, to accept the fact that holes in our understanding will persist. Like Nephi, we shall never, at least in this life, “know the meaning of all things” (1 Nephi 11:17). That does not mean, however, that we should stop asking questions, even when God engages in “divine silence” (98). Rather, we should rely on the Spirit to carry us “across the deep of struggles great and small and of questions answered or still open” (212).

How, then, does organized religion fit into one’s quest for spiritual experience and enlightenment? The Church, Wickman readily acknowledges, “is an organizational marvel—a complex weave of ordinances, offices, doctrines, practices, activities, and responsibilities that knit together people from across the globe” (50). But he also admits, “Weekly church lessons are often led by amateur teachers with allergies to ambiguity . . . even when the topics of discussion invite nuance and uncertainty”; “Leaders of congregations are typically dedicated souls” but often lack the “professional training that might provide members with more adequate counseling, whether practical, psychological, or theological” (51). And yet, despite what he calls “the clunkiness of [his] religion,” he finds that “the ritual facets of [his] religion—those awkward sacrament meeting talks, those occasionally uncouth lessons, those callings and assignments nobody wants—seem to be the only constant things that bring the Spirit into [his] life”. He finds in “the repetitive force of religious observance . . . glimmering traces of the divine” (52). He adduces that the Spirit, if we are doing all we can to cultivate it, can touch us in any circumstance, even in a mundane sacrament meeting or an unnuanced Sunday School lesson. Another of Wickman’s main points is that it is crucial, especially when dealing with life’s incomprehensible ironies, not to give up but to rely even more on the Spirit.

Furthermore, when an answer to prayerful petitions is not immediately forthcoming, one may need to accept the possibility, per R. S. Thomas's poem "Kneeling," that "The meaning is in the waiting" (111).

Waiting, of course, requires an exercise of faith. It is often worrisome "to sit with contradiction and complexity" (187); we invariably prefer quick answers in place of perpetual silence, unless the answer is one we do not want. Wickman cites a moving example of waiting while praying for inspiration to respond to an older gentleman's despondent question about whether he was doing the right thing in attempting to return to Church activity after a fifty-year hiatus. When a specific parable of Jesus "burst into [his] mind" (170), Wickman shared it, even though he hardly knew the brother in question. A week later, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland expounded on the same parable in general conference. Through these two events, the older man realized he had found the answer to his query; he soon became a vital member of his ward and a great blessing to many who lived on the margins. Likewise, in Wickman's professional life, he prayed for years without an answer to know whether he should leave Brigham Young University for an ostensibly more prestigious appointment in Scotland. He records, "it would become clear to me later why I had needed to wait for an answer: there was still a missing piece of the puzzle I could not have foreseen, and I also needed time to reflect on my priorities so that when I had to make a difficult decision, I could do so with greater self-understanding" (173).

So why does a professing believer in Christ even need religion (meaning, in this case, a body of fellow believers)? In response, Wickman initially cites Dostoevsky: "religion [is needed] in part because of the saints we might encounter there" (187). Furthermore, if we look searchingly, every person reflects God's glory, "even those who are conflicted and confused and anguished and hurtful" (188), and yes, even those who are naïve (or unnuanced). In addition to providing key ordinances, religion, in short, "is the foundation of a spiritual life; it is the set of practices through which we pose—repeatedly, ritualistically—those

questions that are too big to answer. . . . Religion is the medium . . . through which I explore who I am and what I am becoming, what all people and things are becoming” (197). Moving, acting on spiritual promptings, changing direction, ameliorating ourselves, blessing others—these are the natural fruits of a lived religion.

And the specific role of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? While it fosters “spiritual and religious experiences” and “teachings and practices [that can] open minds and change hearts,” the gift of the Holy Spirit, conferred through a priesthood ordinance, is ultimately what “brings life to the whole being” (199). Over decades of spiritual struggles, emotional ups and downs, Wickman has concluded that “Church doctrines, ritual practices, and covenants lend shape, meaning, and purpose to . . . pulsations of spiritual experience” (204). But to receive answers to prayers more quickly, he has found that changing the questions can make a significant difference. Rather than asking “Is the Church true?” one might ask “In what ways will the Church bring me to Christ?” (207). Instead of angrily pleading “Why me?” or “Why this situation?” we might humbly substitute “What am I to learn from this challenge?” or “How can I use this test to bless someone else?”

I started this review by stating that I have been seeking something practical to help me respond to or ease the burdens of friends and mentees who are experiencing various crises of faith. In Wickman’s memoir I discovered not so much a manual with explicit instructions for how to deal with specific religious problems; instead, I found an inspirational example of someone who has wrestled—and in some cases continues to wrestle—with questions that many believers are pondering. While reading his account, I was struck by its honesty, by its refusal to shy away from challenging concerns in and out of the Church. I discovered someone who through poignant spiritual experiences has arrived not only at answers but also at peace in ambiguity. What is more important, I found someone who through inculcating the Spirit into his everyday life has remained deeply committed and engaged, both in the Church and in

his professional life as a humanist. I commend the Maxwell Institute for publishing a book that moves beyond apologetics to authentic memoir.

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