

THEOLOGICAL NATURALISM AND THE NATURE OF RELIGION: ON NOT BEGGING THE QUESTION

by Charley D. Hardwick

Abstract. Too many theologies beg the question about the nature of religion by building metaphysically substantive assumptions into its description. Typically these assumptions are: the object of religious devotion must be both absolute and personal, final causality must be true, and there must be a cosmic conservation of value. Theological naturalism, exemplified in the thought of Henry Nelson Wieman, articulates an entirely formal, yet not substantively empty, conception of religion which does not beg these questions and which is consequently more descriptively adequate to the nature of religion. It cannot therefore be assumed, without begging the question, that religious adequacy requires the metaphysical falsity of philosophical naturalism.

Keywords: contemporary theology; definitions of religion; demythologizing; empirical theology; naturalism; Henry Nelson Wieman.

Given the contemporary theological situation, it seems evident that there would be significant advantages in undertaking Christian theology on a naturalist basis. The most obvious of these would be entirely to circumvent the conflict between science and religion that has so pervasively defined modern theological reflection. It also seems evident that, because important elements in his philosophy of religion provide the foundations for such an undertaking, the thought of Henry Nelson Wieman deserves renewed attention within contemporary theology. My goal in this essay is to clear a space in which such a proposal—the possibility of a naturalist theology—might be opened for discussion. One among a number of reasons why it might be worthwhile to do this is the almost unanimous agreement within twentieth-century theology

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about the inherent incompatibility of naturalism and Christianity. Indeed the taken-for-granted sway of this position is at least one reason for the rapid eclipse of Wieman's influence.

My strategy will be to use Wieman's formalist conception of God to raise the issue of how we should conceive religion. Thereby I want to ask whether the anti-naturalism in so much contemporary theology begs the question about a theologically adequate understanding of human religiosity. It follows that if we do not beg the question, then we must consider the theological possibilities of naturalism.

DEMYTHOLOGIZING AND THE CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGICAL SITUATION

Let us begin by assuming that broadly speaking the contemporary theological agenda continues to be set by Rudolf Bultmann's demythologizing proposal. The problem with theological anti-naturalism becomes evident if we think out some of the implications of Bultmann's program.

Bultmann's demythologizing proposal has become pervasive in postwar theology not because he said something entirely new but because he voiced with great incisiveness what everyone knew and had known for a long time and then set out a powerful alternative for addressing the issue. Bultmann argued that the New Testament message was couched in mythological language that presupposes an entire mythological world view. This world view has become unbelievable as a result of the scientific world view that has pervaded modern understanding since the seventeenth century. Bultmann therefore proposed that, if there is any truth at all to the Christian message, the language of the New Testament must be demythologized—hence, the “demythologizing proposal.”

Something like demythologizing had, of course, been the common currency of the entire liberal tradition of theology in the nineteenth century. Bultmann's analysis was made fresh however by his positive proposal for completing what might otherwise be construed as the merely negative task of demythologizing. This positive side he termed “existentialist interpretation.” His agenda for theology thus called for demythologizing the New Testament gospel and interpreting it existentially.

In the nineteenth century, “demythologizing” programs had usually been versions of a “kernel and husk” approach. One sought the “kernel” of truth within a “husk” of outdated conceptuality which was then dismissed as worn out. This kernel was identified either as a set of beliefs or as some sort of moral program (usually based on the example or the teachings of Jesus); in either case, what the theologian sought

and what he asked the believer to accept as the essence of faith was either a set of metaphysical beliefs or a set of moral propositions that could be entertained neutrally. Faith consisted of either believing them or trying to live according to them.

Basing his analysis on the results of contemporary New Testament scholarship, in which he himself had played a leading role, Bultmann in contrast insisted that the central thrust of the New Testament consisted in a message of salvation. The technical scholarly term for this salvation message is *kerygma*, which simply means the earliest recoverable content of the primitive Christian preaching. Modern scholarship had discovered that the entire New Testament must be understood as the expression of a worshipping community the center of which was an eschatological message of salvation. Historical accuracy to the kind of documentary evidence the New Testament offers requires this approach. But this means that early Christianity must be understood in terms of the *kerygma*. Rather than a set of truths toward which one can take a neutral stance, for instance, a world view or a theory about a dying and rising god, this gospel message was the offer of a new life which at one and the same time called one's old life under judgment and provided the conditions of new life. Thus, the task of demythologizing is to *interpret* this kerygmatic word (and the mythological language used to express it), not to separate a truthful essence from an outdated husk which is to be discarded. The issue is whether an interpretation of the salvation message requires the mythological language in which *then* it was couched.

Bultmann answers this question by proposing the method of existentialist interpretation. Apart from whatever world view it contains, the purpose of myth, Bultmann claims, is to express an understanding of human existence in the world, and it does this even if its mythological form is ultimately inadequate for this function. One of the tasks of philosophy, according to Bultmann, is to work out an adequate understanding of the structures of human existence. Because these structures will be both presupposed and expressed by any mythological language, such a philosophical analysis can serve to interpret the genuine content of a message couched in the language of a mythological world view. Bultmann and many who follow him claim that such an adequate understanding of human existence has been achieved in existential philosophy, especially in the early work of Martin Heidegger. Hence, Bultmann's claim is that the Christian message of salvation, the *kerygma*, can be interpreted nonmythologically by a method of existentialist interpretation.

According to this philosophical analysis, the structures of human being are defined by an open yet finite thrust into a future for which

each person must assume responsibility in each moment. *Existence* is a technical term for this structure. According to existential analysis, then, human beings are not constituted by a given nature that can be defined in advance but become who and what they are in the process of constituting themselves in the light of an open future that is always circumscribed by death. The point is that "existence" is made up of these structures. It is not merely that there is an unknown future in front of each of us but that our very being is constituted right now by the not yet of this future. "Existence" then is never a given, something all made up; rather it is a constant process of actualization. In this sense, each of us is constantly confronted by a set of decisions by which we can win or lose ourselves, our "natures."

MUST LIMITS BE SET TO DEMYTHOLOGIZING?

These are the broad outlines of the philosophical analysis of existence which Bultmann claims is the basis for accurately interpreting the intent of any mythology and with which he demythologizes the New Testament. The initial discussion of Bultmann's proposal within the theological community centered on the question whether the Christ event sets a limit on demythologizing. This question arose because within the New Testament the kerygma is stated as the event of Christ, as God's decisive act in the specific events of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth who received the title of Christ. Bultmann is quite ambiguous, even contradictory, on this issue. Such thinkers as Fritz Buri, Schubert Ogden, and Van Harvey on the so-called "left wing" in this debate took the position that no such limit could be justified, that the Christ-event itself must be demythologized (Buri 1952; Ogden 1961; Harvey 1964; 1966, 164-203). In my estimation, their position on the Christological issue is the only adequate resolution of the problem. Today, however, we must ask whether it is not pervasively assumed throughout contemporary theology that the demythologizing program requires, after all, a limit on demythologizing of quite a different sort.

As we have seen, Bultmann sets out from the question whether the claim of the Christian kerygma (or the truth of the Christian witness of faith) is dependent upon the mythological world view of the New Testament. He gives a negative answer to this question partly because of the nature of myth, which we examined above, but also because of the nature of the kerygma (or because of the specific kind of claim the Christian gospel makes). The kerygma, that is, refers not to a propositional truth which can be entertained dispassionately but to an *event* of God's action, namely the offer of God's love; and the claim is that this event occurs once again in and through the event of its being pro-

claimed. In this sense, the “event” of the kerygma is always a contemporary event. For this reason, in his demythologizing, Bultmann unhesitatingly adopts the New Testament eschatological language and asserts that the kerygmatic event is always an “eschatological occurrence.” A major consequence of this understanding of the kerygma is entirely to set aside the idea that the truth of the Christian gospel somehow has to do with entertaining the belief that certain events of the past happened in a certain way or not. The truth question here is not about the truth of certain propositions but whether, given an appropriate understanding of human existence, it is or is not true that events of a certain sort occur, events that offer newness of life and may be understood as “God’s action.”

Bultmann has affirmed that the kerygma is not dependent on the New Testament mythological world view. From this understanding of the kerygma, it also follows that the proclamation of the gospel (or the witness of faith) is not dependent upon any particular world view.¹ Furthermore, throughout his writings Bultmann makes clear that the issue is not merely the mythological world view but any conception of the world that would determine in advance the “eschatological occurrence” of God’s act in the event of faith.² The problem of myth has priority in the demythologizing proposal only because that is the language of the New Testament. This independence of the kerygma from any *particular* intellectual preconditions is what Bultmann means by his claim that demythologizing represents the consistent application of the doctrine of justification by faith alone without the works of the law to the field of knowledge (Bultmann 1984, 122; cf., *ibid.*, 55, 57-58).

This raises a very tricky set of questions having to do with the conceptual content of the kerygma. In particular, it raises the negative question of whether there are any world views (or metaphysical beliefs) that are inherently incompatible with the kerygma. Bultmann himself seems to make at least one such assumption in his analysis of Gnosticism in contrast to the existential structure of faith. His position here presumes that the kerygma could not be true if the world were such that existential freedom in the sense of the capacity to assume responsibility for one’s existence were metaphysically impossible. Consequently, the “decision of faith” that is demanded by the kerygma as kerygma implies that no such world view (or metaphysics) can be true (Bultmann 1984, 19-20; 1967, 196-208). Furthermore, the task of theology to provide a reflective analysis of faith must ultimately require stating the metaphysical conditions for the truth of the claim that the kerygma makes. It seems, therefore, that the “truth” of the kerygma cannot entirely be separated from those conceptual contents that would validate its truth.

Nevertheless, Bultmann seems to be saying that, at the outset at least, the Christian is not required *first* to accept *any particular* set of beliefs about *the ultimate metaphysical composition* of the world in order to respond to, and indeed to understand, God's offer of love in the kerygma. This implies as well that the Christian is not required to wait until the philosophers can settle which theoretical view of the world is the correct one and indeed that the "truth" of the kerygma is in some sense independent of a resolution of this issue. Bultmann implies as much when he asserts that "the real point of myth is not to give an objective world picture" but rather to express "how we human beings understand ourselves in our world" and then develops his proposal for the theological method of "existentialist interpretation" (Bultmann 1984, 9). Thus, the first criterion for the conceptual content of the kerygma must be existential and not metaphysical. It would seem to follow that we cannot rule out any metaphysical position in advance provided it can support an adequate existentialist interpretation of the kerygma. On the other hand, if we assume that the kerygma as kerygma already includes certain metaphysical affirmations so that those are built into it from the outset, then we are, after all, placing another kind of limit on demythologizing to begin with. It is, to be sure, a different limit from that identified at the Christological level and rejected by the "left wing" in the debate, but it is a limit nevertheless, and it is a very strong one.

BEGGING THE QUESTION ABOUT THE NATURE OF RELIGION

Once the theological task is focused in this way by Bultmann's demythologizing program, then it becomes evident, I believe, that a very great deal of contemporary theology does beg the question about the nature of religion; it begs the question that existentialist interpretation raises by building into the kerygma from the outset certain broad metaphysical preconceptions. By this I mean that an operative assumption throughout much of contemporary theology is that a theologically adequate conception of religion requires the affirmation of one or more of the following beliefs: first, that God is personal, second, that some form of final causality is true, and, third, that there is a conservation of value. I identify this assumption as an anti-naturalist bias in contemporary theology because, broadly speaking, naturalism is the collective term for those philosophical positions that deny all of these affirmations together.

Such a loose, but for our purposes adequate, conception of naturalism is made evident by Rem Edwards's description of naturalism in terms of six family resemblances in his book *Reason and Religion*. These family resemblances are: first, that only nature exists, second, that

nature as a whole is nonpersonal (which means that its order is neither a result of intelligence nor produced by intentional agency), third, that nature as a whole, including its basic constituents, is necessary in the sense of requiring no ground beyond itself to account either for its being or its intelligibility (i.e., its sufficient reason), fourth, that all natural events—which is to say, all events—have causes that are themselves natural events, fifth, that the scientific method is the only legitimate rational method for discovering truth, and, sixth, that value is humanistic in nature, grounded entirely and alone in the human activity of valuation, because no cosmic basis or sanction of value is either possible or necessary (Edwards 1972, 133-40).³

Here what is important about naturalism are three negative implications that follow from these features. The first is the denial that the ontological referent of “God,” if there be one, is personal. The second is the denial of final causality in all its forms; this is the denial that there is any kind of force other than efficient causality, thus that there is any kind of independent “force” that operates either from the future (a teleological force, or a “lure”) or from the whole (an emergent force). The third is the denial that value is conserved (except over limited cosmic epochs). The first two together imply that there is no naturalistic basis for intelligence or purpose in reality as a whole. The implication of the last one is that the problem of “purpose” and “value” cannot be resolved by some kind of cosmic conservation of value.

Part of the point I want to make in this paper is that we do beg the question that Bultmann’s conception of the kerygma raises if we assume the anti-naturalist position from the outset on the conditions of an adequate existentialist interpretation. This alone is sufficient to justify the possibility of a naturalist theology. But I want to propose more than merely the bare possibility of such a theology as the basis for the demythologizing program. More important is that there are many reasons within the contemporary theological situation justifying the attractiveness of such a theology. These have to do with either the general implausibility, or at least the severe difficulties, involved in defending the three affirmations in question within the situation of contemporary philosophy.

Obviously these claims cannot be demonstrated here. Yet surely no theologian today would deny that the very meaning of the claim that God is personal, as well as the warrants for the claims about final causality and the conservation of value, are among the most difficult positions to certify within the conditions of the understanding of the world generally intelligible to modern knowledge. This is all the more so if one is prepared to grant that the world view of natural science may indeed have metaphysical and ontological implications. Grant that

relativity theory and quantum mechanics have exploded the Newtonian world view and left indeterminate their own ontological interpretation. It is still very difficult to see how theologians can take any comfort from this situation. Certainly it cannot be construed as making the three anti-naturalist propositions somehow plausible once again. In other words, there is sufficient reason to include these propositions within the world view that Bultmann calls *erledigt*, finished, to make attractive the possibility of a naturalist theology. This possibility is all I want to claim here, *the possibility*, namely, *that we are not required from the outset to deny the truth of the Christian kerygma if on other grounds we come to believe that there is no personal God, no final causality, and no conservation of value.*

A NATURALIST CONCEPTION OF RELIGION

This is the context in which the naturalism of Henry Nelson Wieman becomes theologically interesting, for not only did Wieman develop a naturalistic philosophy of religion that self-consciously agreed with the naturalistic implications I have mentioned; he also went some way toward showing how a powerful Christian theology could be rendered on this basis. Here, however, rather than concentrating on his theology *per se*, I want to focus more narrowly on the understanding of religion that does not beg the question on the issues I have raised. Here I shall quote at length from the opening of his first book, *Religious Experience and Scientific Method* of 1926, a passage justly famous as one of the most powerful conceptions of "God" and religion in contemporary thought.

Whatever else the word God may mean, it is a term used to designate that Something upon which human life is most dependent for its security, welfare and increasing abundance. That there is such a Something cannot be doubted. The mere fact that human life happens, and continues to happen, proves that this Something, however unknown, does certainly exist. . . . The word God, taken with its very minimum meaning, is the name for this Something of supreme value. God may be much more than this, but he is certainly this by definition. In this sense, with this minimum meaning, God cannot be denied. His existence is absolutely certain. He is simply that which is supremely significant in all the universe for human living, however known or unknown he may be. Of course this statement concerning God proves nothing about his character, except that he is the most beneficent object in the universe for human beings. He is certainly the object of supreme value. Nothing is implied by this definition concerning personality in God; but neither is personality denied. In fact, personality is by no means a clear and simple term. But two things are made certain: his existence and the supremacy of his value over all others, if we measure value in terms of human need (Wieman 1926, 9-10).

The power of this passage has, of course, long been recognized within contemporary theology. But since I am using it in a somewhat fresh context, let me draw attention to several of its implications for

theological construction. First, although Wieman is here defining God, he might equally as well have been defining religion (and indeed, in its actual context in *Religious Experience and Scientific Method*, this was what Wieman was doing). "Religion," in whatever of its particular positive forms, is the human attempt to relate to, to define, and to understand the object of supreme value (or the source of value).⁴ As an understanding of both God and religion, the most important contribution of this statement is its formality. There is no commitment as such to naturalism, but it also remains neutral on the question. Wieman mentions the personal character of God not to endorse the notion but rather to make exactly the point I am trying to emphasize, namely, that what is at issue with both God and religion can be raised independently of resolving this question. And of course, Wieman's own position that personal ontological referents to God are incoherent was clear from the beginning and became even more explicitly formulated in his later work (cf., e.g., Wieman 1946, 266-68). In other words, the formality of the understanding of God permits a conception of religion that does not require us to build a metaphysics into it from the outset.

Second, although the definition of God is formal, it is not empty. It makes it possible to say in a potentially powerful way that *whatever* metaphysical conception of the world is true will necessarily include a reference to "God." Furthermore, third, it also formulates the issue in such a way that "God," in whatever metaphysical conception, will have a "real" (as opposed to "ideal") referent. This "God," that is, must be an actuality capable of "doing" something (since it is an actuality that by definition *has* done something)—rather than, as in Dewey's naturalistic conception of God, merely being the unity of ideal value at the human level. These two points together mean, in turn, that the formal understanding of religion that is implicit here also need not be vacuous but can have real hermeneutical possibilities for interpreting specific religious traditions.

NATURALISM AND THE CENTRAL THEOLOGICAL ELEMENTS

Once we are liberated from having to build into our understanding of religion the affirmations of a personal God, or final causality, or the conservation of value, then we can raise the questions about these affirmations afresh and on their own terms. Indeed, I believe that these issues are the as yet unarticulated agenda of the demythologizing controversy.⁵ The issues they raise are vexing not merely because they are so complex but also because they impinge on the deepest, most difficult, and most controversial problems in modern philosophy. They are also deeply implicated in the assumptions of much religious piety. Nevertheless, despite the tangled character of the issues, we can

make some brief observations about how these affirmations are ordered at just the border where the theological and philosophical issues touch. This border is the point at which we try to formulate what question we are asking when we consider whether the deepest nature of religion can be appropriately conceived on naturalist terms. When we ask this question as part of the prolegomena to theology, then we can place the relevant affirmations in some order. Of the three, for instance, it seems evident that the conservation of value is the least crucial and the one most dependent on the position we take on the other two. It is not at all empirically evident that the nature of religion requires the conservation of value (although it would seem to require devotion to a supreme value), nor is the conservation of value itself a primary metaphysical affirmation. Of the three it is most dependent on a whole series of prior metaphysical conditions.⁶

Significantly, I believe we must say the same thing about the affirmation of a personal God. Twentieth-century neo-orthodox theology gave rise to a resurgence of a straightforward affirmation of a personal God in contemporary theology. But these claims are, on the whole, asserted rather naively by, for instance, Emil Brunner or by others who adopt a probably superficial interpretation of Martin Buber.⁷ When "God's personal nature" is examined with some philosophical sophistication, it turns out to be extremely difficult to clarify in any way that preserves what the affirmation seems to want to say. Either the affirmation turns out to refer to the *relationship* to God—a justification for the continued religious usage of personal language about God that even a naturalist like Wieman is perfectly prepared to accept (cf., e.g., Wieman 1946, 265-68)—or it is analyzed as somehow *symbolic*. But it is doubtful that such symbolic meanings are finally any improvement on the scholastic discussions whereby all the important personal attributions were relegated to a secondary, "poetic" or "metaphoric" status. Certainly contemporary theology has not succeeded in showing how the notion of symbol is any better.⁸ This means that the resurgence of personal attributions to God in contemporary theology, at least within neo-orthodoxy generally, disguises major unresolved theological tensions between the language of piety and the language of understanding. It follows that a naturalistic theology that affirms an actual God but denies that God is personal is not really in any weaker position than those theologies generally that defend a personal God but cannot clarify the meaning of this claim in any significant way that would affect the relevance of the disagreement between them on this issue. Certainly a naturalist theology would have no trouble defending personal symbolic attributions to God; they can easily have a place, indeed an important place, in such a theology. What is denied is the ontological referent.

The question of a personal God would affect the disagreement between naturalists and anti-naturalists at one point, however. This would occur insofar as the meaning of "God's personality" reduces to the functional equivalent of attributing intelligence and purpose to God. In other words, the affirmation of a personal God finally hinges on (though it is not exhausted by) the metaphysical affirmation of final causality. What seems to be at stake is the belief that the very nature of religion, or at the least, the very nature of Biblical faith, requires the affirmation of cosmic and therefore metaphysical meaning and purpose (cf., e.g., Gilkey 1976, 295-300). To put it crudely (but nevertheless aptly) such meaning and purpose is achieved through the affirmation of an "ultimate ground"⁹ that is itself purposeful (and therefore intelligent, that is, rational). But in order to make good on this assumption, some form of metaphysical final causality must be not merely intelligible but also true.¹⁰ Thus, when we order the three affirmations in question, the claim to final causality receives priority in setting the contemporary theological agenda. The claims to the conservation of value and the personal nature of the divine turn on the metaphysical intelligibility of final causality.

I take this conclusion to be significant for two reasons. In the first place, it helps to heighten the theological attractiveness of naturalism, for surely it is clear that there is no basis within the world view of natural science for any cosmic notion of teleology or final causality, and a naturalistic theology would permit us to prosecute the theological task without either begging that question or having to fight it out at the outset. But second, it also permits us to locate much more explicitly exactly what the issue is in the nest of problems I have attempted to identify. At issue, that is, in the possibility of a naturalist theology is finally the question whether the meaning of human life as this is presented by the promise and the demand of the Christian kerygma requires grounding in an ultimate cosmic purpose. Or, stated in the fully rounded way that includes all three affirmations, it is the question whether human meaning must be grounded in a personal God who is the cosmic agent of a conservation of value (that, by the way, includes human purposes and values). This is the issue that is finally at stake over the priority of final causality.

As I have already stated, at the theological level this question is to be answered not by prior metaphysical commitments but by the criterion of an adequate existentialist interpretation. Thus the real issue becomes whether something like Wieman's formal conception of God and religion can be developed into an adequate existentialist interpretation of the Christian understanding of faith and unfaith on entirely naturalist terms.

When the question is put in this way, rather than already assuming a metaphysical response, then it seems obvious that Wieman's work contains rich possibilities for a naturalistically grounded existentialist interpretation. I conclude by simply mentioning three of these elements. First, Wieman's mature distinction between creative good and created good permits an analysis of the human situation before God that conforms rather exactly to an existentialist interpretation of the Pauline dialectic of faith and unfaith. At issue in faith, that is, is not belief in the truth of certain propositions but trust in the ultimate source of our existence. Unfaith becomes the equivalent of sin, and is the involuted turning in upon self which follows ultimately from mistrust in the conditions of life. Faith, in contrast, becomes trust in the source of value in life which, on Wieman's terms, means trust in the processes by which value is continuously recreated anew in our lives. In this sense, faith in God has the exact existential form that Bultmann terms "openness to the future." Second, Wieman can understand the fundamental religious problem finally as the problem of worship, as devotion to the one true God. This means that he can understand the religious problem at its deepest level as the problem of idolatry, thus in direct conformity with the main strand of the prophetic Christian tradition. This conception of the human problem as finally the problem of idolatry can, of course, be rendered precisely within the terms of the Pauline dialectic of faith and unfaith, as indeed Bultmann does (cf. Bultmann 1984, pp. 10-15).

Finally, Wieman's notion of God's action as creative transformation has rich potential for interpreting the meaning of grace, for developing a Christology, indeed a Christology of the incarnation, and for giving content to the kerygmatic offer of "God's love." Grace becomes the actual processes in experience through which creativity, the enhancement of value, occurs. Since within Wieman's naturalism such experiences always have a prior dimension of *undergoing*, they may appropriately be understood in terms of the traditional language of grace. The unfinished theological task then becomes to do a precise phenomenology of such experiences. On these terms, "the Christ" may be understood as the actual historical structure in and through which the process of creative transformation has become transmissible in something more than an intermittent fashion.¹¹ In this sense, Wieman's "Christ" exactly conforms to Bultmann's understanding of the kerygma as "eschatological occurrence." It is not that God's gracious action, creative transformation, occurs only in the kerygma or within the Christian cultural tradition but that in the kerygma there is an understanding of God's action that permits it to occur again and again. The task of a naturalist theology is the same as the theological task

perennially, to give a careful reflective statement of how this action is possible. At just this point, Wieman's thought offers a readily intelligible solution to what is surely the central issue of modern theology, namely, the problem of God's action in the world, and it does so within the broad boundaries of efficient causality.

NOTES

1. Bultmann implies this by speaking of elements in the mythological world view as "finished," that is, as outdated; if this is the case with the mythological world view, then the same thing can, in principle, occur with any other world view (cf. Bultmann 1984, 4-5; compare, also, Bultmann 1984, 3, which Ogden translates as "a thing of the past" with Bultmann et al. 1961, 3, which Fuller translates as "obsolete"). Furthermore, Bultmann says there is nothing particularly Christian about "the" mythological world picture. I assume this implies that the same may be said about *any* world picture.

2. Cf. Bultmann 1984, 54-60. Bultmann seems explicitly to reject the possibility of a naturalist theology when, in this context, he says: "The new self-understanding has to prove its newness over against the old self-understanding, even as Paul does this in Phil. 3:3ff. To be sure, this new self-understanding can be present in an unreflective form. But it is constantly in danger of slipping back into a natural self-understanding, whether legalistic, naturalistic, or idealistic" (1984, 57). However, Bultmann here is responding to *any* "system" or "systematic understanding" (including any theologically anti-naturalist one) that would reduce the *event* of the occurrence of God's action in faith (as *event* and *act* or *decision*), which is the "eschatological occurrence," to something objective outside of the act of faith itself, either an event of the past or an idea in a philosophical or theological system. Admittedly, Bultmann seems to believe that such a reduction would be an inherent deficiency of any naturalism as such. But here he is simply mistaken. On this crucial point, a naturalistic philosophical foundation is in exactly the same position as the "philosophy of existence" that Bultmann endorses as providing the hermeneutical framework for his "existentialist interpretation." A "naturalism" stands under exactly the same criteria as any philosophical framework that provides the foundations for theological understanding: first, does it provide an adequate understanding of human existence as existence, and, second, does it provide an adequate grasp of the historicity of both faith and God's "eschatological occurrence"? Does it, that is, permit them to be understood as *events* and does it permit the implications of this to be stated theologically? We ought not rule out from the outset that a philosophical position cannot meet these criteria simply because it is naturalistic.

3. For the present purposes, the last two of these, the claims grounding knowledge in scientific method and grounding value in a humanistic axiology, can be set aside. The first may be set aside because generally it was based on a philosophy of science, positivism and the deductive-nomological method, which is itself undergoing extensive philosophical review today in the best philosophy of science, and the second because Wieman's naturalistic critique of humanism effectively demonstrates that naturalism need not require such an axiology.

4. Strictly speaking this is a formal and empirically testable understanding of religion which applies, as it should, across the history of religions. Systematically, Wieman made clear his own commitment to the Western, Biblical "God." He believed that this commitment was defensible on grounds of adequacy. Perhaps his clearest statement occurs in the opening pages of *The Source of Human Good* where he draws a distinction between a Jewish Christian and a Greek Christian tradition in the West and then proceeds: "The Jewish tradition declares that the sovereign good works creatively in history. While this ruling creativity is said to have form, the importance of it lies in its creative potentialities and not in its form. The Greek tradition, on the other hand, declares that the sovereign good is essentially a system of Forms or a Supreme Form. The one tradition gives supreme authority to the creative event, the other to the Form. Our interpretation follows the Jewish tradition in giving priority to the creative event" (Wieman 1946, 7).

5. By rejecting that the demythologizing program requires another kind of limit on demythologizing and seeing this question as the central issue in theology today, I am making exactly the same point, and for identical reasons, that Schubert Ogden makes at the beginning of his influential "The Reality of God" where he says that "the reality of God has now become the central theological problem" (Ogden 1966, 1). The way I am attempting to formulate the conditions for the possibility of resolving the issue is of course quite different from Ogden.

6. Schubert Ogden has affirmed the integral character of the conservation of value for an understanding of religion most powerfully in contemporary theology, but he really does not so much defend the claim as assume it, with the assumption, namely, that the most commonplace moral decision or affirmation of value assumes that such acts and affirmations have an unconditioned significance which Ogden believes is granted solely by the conservation of value. The role of the conservation of value in his thought is thus a good example of the peculiar kind of question begging which I am trying to use in this paper as a way of calling attention to certain neglected opportunities in contemporary theology. Ogden can readily make assumptions about the conservation of value because his very formulation of the nature of religion is at least to some extent dependent on a metaphysical view to which he is already committed and which not merely makes possible but is importantly constituted by the conservation of value (cf. Ogden 1966, 21-43). This view, of course, is that of Charles Hartshorne, and the same position has been pervasive in his thought. Observe, for instance, the following statement in reference to William James in his recent book, *Creativity in American Philosophy*: "Deity must not only surely survive, but also must survive mindful of our having existed and able to preserve *forever* the value we have achieved. Whittle away at these requirements, and you might as well adopt atheism and be done with it, so far as James's initial problem is concerned. It is strange that James did not see this. His was the pathos of blanket empiricism. All the trouble comes, he thought, from trying to find truth a priori" (Hartshorne 1984, 53-54). The position I am trying to develop here, of course, must deny the claims Ogden and Hartshorne are making. True, one way to ground value is by grounding it in unconditioned or absolute value. But it is difficult to comprehend why the necessity for such grounding should be regarded as self-evident, difficult, that is, to see why it *must* be the case that the values realized in my life now somehow lose their value now unless they persist forever. Note, for instance, Thomas Nagel: "[E]ven if what we did now *were* going to matter in a million years, how could that keep our present concerns from being absurd? If their mattering now is not enough to accomplish that, how would it help if they mattered a million years from now?" (Nagel 1979, 11). Wieman's own response, with particular respect to death, was that the belief that religion (or the "value of value") requires some kind of conservation of value actually represents an obstacle to the dominance of creativity and thus in fact undermines rather than supports devotion to God. Cf. Wieman's reflections on death in his response to the essay by Danial Day Williams in *The Empirical Theology of Henry Nelson Wieman* (Wieman 1963, 106-9).

7. It is not at all evident, that is, that Buber's analysis on its own terms can *justify* metaphysical claims about God's being. Therefore, if Buber's thought has any validity at all, it should probably be interpreted phenomenologically and thus entirely restricted to the *epoché* (Husserl's "bracketing").

8. It is revealing, given the general rejection of classical theism in so much contemporary theology, that only classical theism seems prepared not only to make but to carry through the strong metaphysical claim that God is personal. This is generally taken to be strictly (though analogically) required by the affirmation of God's *spiritual* nature (cf. Owen 1971, 42-44). Especially noteworthy is Owen's careful analysis of the incoherence of the attempt to explain God's personality by claiming that God is not less than personal (as for instance Tillich attempts).

9. Symptomatic of the extent to which contemporary theology is not merely informed but defined by the demythologizing debate as well as the critique of classical theism, it is noteworthy that when we try to define the issue here we can no longer resort to the language of "Creation" and of a "Creator God" which is natural to the Christian tradition. The significance of this for my purposes here is simply that it is evidence that,

when contemporary theology is pushed at the points of both its underlying assumptions and its boundaries, it is already half way to naturalism.

10. Both John Cobb and Maurice Wiles, each in quite different ways, have explicitly recognized that this is crucially at issue in "the conditions for the possibility" of contemporary theology. They are to be praised for this though neither of their attempts at solution inspire much confidence (Cobb 1975, 101-16; 1975, 63-81; Wiles 1982, 17-30).

11. The Christ for Wieman must be a *structure* of creative transformation. One immediately sees that such a structure must have a self-transcending (or infinitely reflexive) form: it must be a structure *the structure of which* continually requires its own transformation. In this sense it is similar to Tillich's argument for the absoluteness in principle of Christianity in terms of the Cross as a symbol which continually denies its own particularity. It is also similar to his "Protestant principle." What Wieman's thought adds to these ideas is the notion of an actual historical structure that embodies precisely this self-transcending feature—without, however, as in all world-denying religions, requiring a denial of its actual occurrence in historical particularity (cf. Wieman 1946, 39-44, 268-79).

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