BIOHISTORICAL NATURALISM AND THE SYMBOL "GOD"

by Gordon D. Kaufman

Abstract. This article has two parts, as the title suggests. The first sketches what I call *biohistorical naturalism*, a naturalistic position in which it is emphasized that the historicocultural development of our humanity, particularly our becoming linguistic/symbolical beings, is as central to our humanness as the biological evolutionary development that preceded (and continues to accompany) it. Apart from such a biohistorical emphasis (or its equivalent), naturalistic positions cannot give adequate accounts of human religiousness. The second part suggests that, although it would not be consistent with biohistorical naturalism to continue thinking of God in the traditional supernaturalistic way as "the Creator," it would be quite appropriate to understand God as the ongoing creativity (of truly novel realities) manifest in the long history of the universe, particularly in the evolution of life on Earth.

Keywords: biohistorical; creativity; evolution; God; historical development; metaphysical; mystery; naturalism; nature; religious naturalism; supernatural; symbolism.

I do not much like living in a box, especially if the specifications of the box are defined by others; but I am willing to use the word *naturalism* to describe my basic theological/philosophical approach if I am allowed to explain what I mean by that characterization. I am a kind of pragmatist and metaphysical agnostic: I don't think we humans are in a position to make apodictic judgments about the world in which we find ourselves. In order to act, however, we have to orient ourselves in life in some way, and this

Gordon D. Kaufman is Edward Mallinckrodt Jr. Professor of Divinity Emeritus at Harvard University Divinity School. His mailing address is 6 Longfellow Road, Cambridge, MA 02138; e-mail gordon_kaufman@harvard.edu. A version of this article was presented at the symposium "Religious Naturalism Today" during the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Denver, Colorado, November 2001.

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requires us to make judgments about how we should understand the world and ourselves in this day and age; but we do not need to make claims that these judgments present some kind of ultimate truth. Such claims, often made in our religions, all too frequently lead to great evils including bitter and brutal wars.

I characterize my theological and anthropological position as a form of naturalism (as opposed to so-called supernaturalisms), meaning by this simply that so far as I can see all human (and other) life is to be found within what we call nature, and the whole of human meaning and value, personality and spirituality, has emerged within the complex natural processes of life on Earth and is not induced from outside the natural order from some supernatural world or by some extranatural person-agent. I consider the basic evolutionary account of the development of the cosmos from the Big Bang onward, including the appearance of life on Earth (after many billions of years of cosmic evolution), to be the best thinking about these matters available to us at present. This is not a metaphysical claim, I want to emphasize; it is a claim grounded on contemporary scientific understandings and theories and subject to modifications as those theories and understandings themselves change.

Human Biohistorical Development

Given the evolutionary account of the cosmos and of the origins of human life, let us look briefly at some of the features of the later phases of the process through which humankind, as we know it today, emerged. It is important to note that human historical development, over many millennia, has been as indispensable to the creation of what we humans are today as were the biological evolutionary developments that preceded our appearance on planet Earth. Human biological nature has itself been shaped and informed by certain important historical developments, and the organism that finally emerged as human, as many have pointed out, is a cultural as well as a biological product (see, for example, Geertz 1973). It was, for example, the historical development of human enculturedness, as brain scientist Terrence Deacon (1997) has recently argued—especially the growth of symbolic behaviors (language) interconnected with the rest of culture—that helped bring about the evolution of our unusually large brains. And the order of human history, with its increasingly complex cultures, its diverse modes of social organization, and its exceedingly flexible and complex languages and behaviors, is the only context (so far as we know) within which beings with self-consciousness, with great imaginative powers and creativity, with freedom and responsible agency, have appeared. Thus, all the way down to the deepest layers of our distinctively *human* existence, we are not simply biological beings, animals; we are, as I like to put it, *biohistorical* beings.

These important biohistorical developments have transformed our relationship to the nature within which we emerged. As one rather obvious example of this point, consider the impact of the growth—over thousands of generations—of human awareness and knowledge of the natural world. In the cultures of modernity (and postmodernity) human knowledges have become increasingly comprehensive, detailed, and technologized, providing us with significant control over the physical and biological (as well as sociocultural and psychological) conditions of our existence. We human beings, and the further course of our history, are no longer completely at the disposal of the natural order and natural powers that brought us into being in the way we were as recently as ten millennia ago. Through our various symbolisms and knowledges, skills and technologies, we have gained a kind of power over the nature of which we are part unequaled (so far as we know) by any other form of life. And in consequence, for good or ill, we have utterly transformed the face of the earth and are beginning to push on into outer space, and we are becoming capable of altering the actual genetic makeup of future human generations. It is *qua* our development into beings shaped by historicocultural processes like these—in many respects humanly created, not simply natural biological, processes—that we humans have gained these increasing measures of control over the natural order as well as over the onward movement of history.

This understanding of the human is clearly a naturalistic one. It is, however, a *biohistorical* naturalism. In my view, reductionistic physicobiological naturalisms will not enable us to understand ourselves adequately or to fit ourselves appropriately into our ecological niche on planet Earth. A biohistorical understanding of human being has a better shot at enabling us to address these issues. It is for entirely practical reasons like this—not because I want to make metaphysical claims for this understanding—that I recommend the concept of biohistorical naturalism for your consideration.

It should be evident that this is not, as such, a specifically religious form of naturalism. But in giving a fundamental place, in its understanding of *Homo sapiens*, to human sociocultural activities and institutions—of which religion is one—it is in a good position to take up questions about human religiousness, though this will be but one of a range of cultural matters that must be considered. So-called religious naturalisms, it seems to me, must in fact presuppose something like the biohistorical naturalism I have been describing in order to get off the ground at all. I believe the Stone-Hardwick-Edwards description of religious naturalism, on which we were asked to comment, falls into this category, though it is somewhat rambling and uncertain with respect to the boundaries to be drawn. I present no argument here about religious naturalism as such or its boundaries, but I would like to make a few remarks about the way in which Western culture's major religious symbol, "God," can be treated in the conception of biohistorical naturalism that I have outlined.

God as Creativity

Movement in and through time, as traced through the long history of the universe and particularly through the evolution of life on Earth, appears often to result in unprecedented developments, including the appearance of new forms (new species), rather than the repetition of patterns that forever repeat themselves. This coming into being of the previously nonexistent, the new, the novel, through time—this *creativity*—is bound up with the very conception of the cosmos as an evolutionary one.[1] In my view those interested in the symbol "God" today have good reason to build on this idea of creativity (a descendant of the biblical idea of creation)—but they should not think of this creativity as lodged in a creator-agent, a concept no longer intelligible (in my opinion).[2] I am proposing here a change in the *grammar* (to use Wittgenstein's language) of our word "God."[3]

It would be a mistake to assume that creativity is to be thought of as a sort of *force* at work in the cosmos, bringing the new into being. That would presuppose that we know more about the emergence of new realities than we actually do. Creativity is profoundly mysterious, as the ancient phrase *creatio ex nihilo* emphasized; the coming into being of the truly new and novel—the totally unexpected, the unforeseeable—is not something that we humans are in a position to make sense of. "In each quantum jump," as Holmes Rolston (1999, 144) put it, "there is a little more of what was not there before, . . . where before there was nothing of that kind." The old unanswerable question, Why is there something, not nothing? reminds us that we really have no way of thinking about this issue. The word *creativity* is simply a name for this puzzle, not a solution to it. To regard creativity as a force suggests that we have a sort of (vague) knowledge of an existing something-or-other that brings the new into being, when in fact we do not. All we really see or understand is that new and novel realities do come into being. This is an amazing mystery, even though we may in certain cases, for example the evolution of life or human production of cultural artifacts, be able to specify some of the conditions without which it could not have happened. In a truly creative event there is always a surprising movement into the new or novel, a more coming from a less.[4]

Thinking of God as *creativity* draws us into a deeper sensitivity to God-as-mystery than did our religious traditions with their talk of God as *the Creator*. This latter concept seemed to imply that we knew there was a cosmic personlike, agentlike being who "decided" to do things like create the world or intervene in its internal processes, who set purposes and then brought about the realization of those purposes—as a potter or sculptor creates artifacts (Genesis 2), or as a poet or king brings order and reality into being through uttering words (Genesis 1). For us today the most foundational kind of creativity—preceding and underlying all other types—

is not that displayed in (quasi-human) purposive activity and the production of artifacts but that exemplified in the awe-inspiring evolution of the cosmos and of life. This is a profound mystery indeed; neither the Big Bang nor the evolutionary story dissolves it.

This mystery of the coming into being of the new in time—a matter of great importance to us human beings who often find ourselves facing profound, seemingly insoluble, existential and sociopolitical problems—has been associated with God at least as far back as Second Isaiah;[5] and I suggest that we continue that practice. Thinking of God in this way does not refer us to a something beyond the world of our experience, or to a particular something within the world. God (creativity) is utter mystery, not some kind of particular being or even being-itself (as Paul Tillich and others have argued). What we can see and know is that new and novel realities come into being in the course of temporal developments, but we do not see or know how or why that happens (though some of us may wish to propose hypotheses on that point). The symbol *God* here is thus not employed to remind us of some other world beyond this one that is our true home but to call our attention to the profound significance of the deeply mysterious creativity manifest in this world. The God-symbol is well worth keeping. Not only can it help keep us humble; thought of in the way I am proposing, it can continue to orient us to what is of greatest importance for us.

Does this outline of the biohistorical order in which we live, taken together with the significance of the symbol of God-as-creativity, qualify as a *religious* naturalism? I am uncertain about that, but in its understanding of both our humanity and our God-talk, it can, I believe, be properly regarded as a form of naturalism;[6] I commend it to you for your consideration.

Notes

1. As Terrence Deacon has observed, "an evolutionary process is an origination process. . . . Evolution is the author of its spontaneous creations" (1997, 458).

2. For my most recent reflection on these matters, see Kaufman 2001. Much fuller discussion will be found in my book, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Kaufman 1993, especially Part 4).

3. Counter to what some have suggested, Wittgenstein did not oppose grammatical innovations. He understood well that intellectual creativity is often a matter of introducing new concepts or new meanings, that is, making grammatical proposals. Thus, as Ray Monk points out (1990, 468), according to Wittgenstein "Freud did not discover the unconscious; rather, he introduced terms like 'unconscious thoughts' and 'unconscious motives' into our grammar of psychological description. Similarly, Georg Cantor . . . introduced a new meaning of the word 'infinite' such that it now makes sense to talk of a hierarchy of different infinities. The question to ask of such innovations is not whether these 'newly discovered' entities exist or not, but whether the additions they made to our vocabulary and the changes they have introduced to our grammar are useful or not."

4. Albert Einstein has said profoundly that "the eternal mystery of the world is its comprehensibility" (quoted in Heller 1997, 107). This mystery, however, presupposes the deeper, more

baffling mystery of creativity, the creativity of a 15 billion–year evolutionary process that in due course produced minds capable of entertaining and appreciating such mysteries as the one that particularly intrigued Einstein.

5. In the Bible God is not simply the originative creator of all things. Second Isaiah, for example, clearly links *God* with the *coming into being of the new in ongoing time* when he portrays Yahweh as saying, "I am about to do a new thing: now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? . . . From this time forward I make you hear new things, hidden things that you have not known. They are created now, not long ago; before today you have never heard of them, so that you could not say, 'I already knew them'" (Isaiah 43:19; 48:6f.). Moreover, this is a central theme in the New Testament. In Revelation 21 we read, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. . . . And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new'" (1, 5); and in 2 Corinthians 5, "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new. All this is from God" (vv. 17–18).

6. Perhaps as a somewhat "radical naturalism," as I suggest toward the end of my book, *In Face of Mystery* (Kaufman 1993, 458).

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