RELIGIOUS NATURALISM TODAY

by Charley D. Hardwick

Abstract. Three questions are addressed. First, concerning the definition of naturalism, I accept the characterization by Rem Edwards (1972) but insist on a materialist or physicalist interpretation of these features. Second, the distinctive characteristic of my religious naturalism is an argument that although a theological position based on a physicalist ontology is *constrained* by physicalism, the ontology itself does not dictate theological content. Theological content can break free of ontology if this content is valuational rather than ontological. Such a valuational theism becomes possible when Rudolf Bultmann's and Fritz Buri's method of existentialist interpretation is wedded to Henry Nelson Wieman's naturalist conception of God. The knowledge of God in events of grace, therefore, is rooted in moments of creative transformation that are themselves always transformative. This approach makes possible a better approach to the problem of objectivity than Bultmann could achieve. Third, concerning the chief issues facing religious naturalism today, I argue that religious naturalists should more forthrightly confront the issue of ontological materialism and that the most pressing issue concerns thinking out more fully the religious or theological content to be ascribed to such a position after the nature of naturalism is resolved.

Keywords: consent to being; conservation of value; creative transformation; existentialist interpretation; existential self-understanding; final causality; God; "God"; "God exists"; materialism; myth; naturalism; naturalistic theology; ontological inventory; ontology; openness to the future; physicalism; problem of objectivity; teleology; valuational theism.

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In what follows I briefly address each of the topics presented to the panel: (1) Is the Stone-Hardwick-Edwards generic definition of religious naturalism adequate? (2) What are the distinctive characteristics of your own approach to religious naturalism? Or why do you not consider yourself a religious naturalist? (3) What are the chief issues or problems facing religious naturalism today?

Adequacy of the Stone-Hardwick-Edwards Definition

I see no reason to modify the six family-resemblance characteristics of naturalism that Rem Edwards presents in *Reason and Religion*, his introduction to the philosophy of religion (Edwards 1972, 133–41). Although one can dispute the fifth and sixth of these characteristics, as I have suggested in my own treatment of them in *Events of Grace*, the first four are a wonderfully concise articulation of the basic commitments of philosophical naturalism (Hardwick 1996, 5–6).[1] These first four features also have the virtue of identifying the precise metaphysical issues that have characterized the historical debates between naturalism and its alternatives. Finally, these features make clear the constraints under which a religious naturalist must work. These I have articulated in terms of the three theological denials that follow from these characteristics of naturalism: first, although a religious naturalist may find a place for God or the concept of God, this god cannot be personal; second, the religious naturalist must deny any form of cosmic teleology or metaphysical final causality; and third, he or she must deny any cosmically comprehensive conservation of value (see Hardwick 1996, 7–18). For the religious naturalist, the inevitability of death and loss cannot be evaded.

Characteristics of My Approach

In *Events of Grace* and in many other writings, I make clear that I am a religious naturalist. My attempt to do theology on this basis has three distinctive features.

First, my naturalism takes the form of classical Democritean materialism as this has been modified by developments in modern physics (for example, Democritus's "void" becomes "space-time"). This position is today called *physicalism*. I rely on John Post's elegant defense of a contemporary physicalist naturalism in *The Faces of Existence* (1987) for the philosophical basis of my own theological efforts. I adopt this austere form of naturalism because I want to be entirely clear about the constraints that naturalism places on theological and religious formulation. Many so-called religious naturalists, in my opinion, nostalgically try to smuggle something from the theist tradition into the metaphysical basis for their religious affirmations. Usually this takes the form of giving up God but then trying to salvage teleology or final causality. I believe, for instance, that this is

what Gordon Kaufman does in *In Face of Mystery* (1993). (I should say that, although I believe this book is philosophically weak, Kaufman presents some truly wonderful theology in it.) In any case, I want there to be no doubt about the constraints that naturalism places on theological formulation, so my naturalism takes the most austere, severe form possible.

The second distinctive element in my religious naturalism concerns how I can be religious or do theology on such an austere basis. The problem is initially identified by simply taking note that, for a physicalist, "God" cannot be found in the ontological inventory of what exists. Furthermore, I, at least, find nothing referentially significant in a religious sense about nature as a whole or nature in its parts. Certainly it can be objectively true that certain value terms apply to nature or the universe: beautiful, terrible, overwhelming, awesome, eerie, intriguing, astonishing, terrifying. But none of these terms or their references in nature has religious valence for me. My strategy has been explicitly to turn away from grounding a religious naturalism referentially in nature. My summary statement for this is to say that God—or the sacred, if you will—is not to be found in the ontological inventory of what exists.

My alternative strategy is to adopt the method of existentialist interpretation as derived from Rudolf Bultmann and Fritz Buri. An opening for a naturalistic theology comes in Bultmann's and Buri's claim that we should understand faith *exhaustively* as an existential self-understanding. Bultmann and Buri explicitly distinguish faith from worldviews (mythic or otherwise), from metaphysical entailments or references, and from any "anterior convictions" (Bultmann 1984b, 111–12) that might qualify its content (see Buri 1971a, b). In a crucial statement Bultmann says that "the real meaning of myth does not present an objective world picture but instead expresses our understanding of ourselves in our world," and he concludes that "myth seeks not to be interpreted in cosmological but in anthropological terms—or better, in existentialist terms" (Bultmann 1984a, 9). Thinkers such as Schubert Ogden (1966a, b) and John Macquarrie (1955) take Bultmann to be saying that myth expresses our understanding of ourselves, our world, and God, and this permits Ogden especially to interpret Bultmann's criticism of myth as a critique of its inadequate metaphysics, which may be replaced (as the content of faith) by a more adequate, less objectivistic metaphysics (Ogden 1966b).

In contrast, I argue that Bultmann's statement is entirely Heideggerian. When he speaks of "our understanding of ourselves in our world" he is presupposing Martin Heidegger's conception of both *Verstehen* and *being-in-the-world*, and this has nothing to do with a conceptual understanding of ourselves, and then of our world, and then, possibly, of God. Rather, Bultmann is speaking of understanding as a way of existing. A way of existing is given *with* or *in* a world, but *world* here is not a metaphysically represented world (that might include God) but simply the everyday world

of practical commerce (*Besorgen*) in which the care (*Sorge*) that defines our ordinary existing is concretely articulated (see Heidegger [1953] 1996, 49–56, 134–39, 178–83). There is, in other words, a legitimate interpretation of Bultmann's notion of faith as an existential self-understanding whereby faith is conceived entirely in terms of modes of existing, or, as Bultmann himself says, "anthropologically" (1984a, 9). Theology as existentialist interpretation then becomes, exhaustively, the description of possibilities of existing, and the Christian faith is understood as the offer of such a possibility. In this way, a very influential strand of contemporary theology can provide ample precedent for distinguishing faith or religious content entirely from all worldviews or metaphysical entailments, including physicalist ones. My religious naturalism is constrained by physicalism, but this is of no consequence—except as the constraint—because I do not seek religious content in the ontology. In contrast, taking faith or religion as an existential self-understanding, I am free to locate religious content in value, not ontology. I thus develop what I call a *valuational theism*.

The third distinctive element of my religious naturalism concerns how I render God. Although *God* does not refer (any more than rights, duties, values, or point masses need have ontological references), *God* or *God exists* can serve as a complex meta-expression for a form of life that is expressed as a theistic seeing-as. Here the notion of *events of grace* becomes crucial for my position. I argue that a phenomenologically transparent conception of sin is possible on existentialist terms (Hardwick 1996, 117–22, 142–44). Given bondage to a self-defeating order of life, events of grace are events of encounter that offer the possibility of a new self-understanding. Here I develop Henry Nelson Wieman's naturalistic notion of God as creative transformation to capture the reality of grace. Though *God* is not in the inventory of what exists, *God exists* can be conceived valuationally in terms of the source of good—if we conceive the source of good against the background of sin. *God exists,* or, interpreted now more concretely, the *love of God*, becomes an expression for a possibility of existence grounded in a moment of creative transformation.

I argue that such an existentially conceived notion of grace makes it possible to avoid the subjectivism of which the existentialist method is often accused. According to my account of sin and of grace, neither God nor the existential modes of consent to being and openness to the future is merely subjective or created arbitrarily by the human subject. The argument here corresponds exactly to Bultmann's own rejoinder to the charge of subjectivism (Bultmann 1984b, 110–14). Responding to this charge, he appeals to encounters of love or forgiveness. According to this analysis, although I cannot know or comprehend the reality of being loved or forgiven apart from my own existential responsiveness, neither my being loved nor my being forgiven is merely a creation of my own subjectivity.

Significantly, this rejoinder to the problem of subjectivism makes possible a better account of the problem of objectivity than Bultmann could

achieve in his own apparent classical theism. If we understand God's reality to be articulated in terms of moments of creative transformation (grace) realized as consent to being and openness to the future, then God exists or is real only in moments of transformation. Such moments—*faith* if you will—must be enacted ever anew precisely because they are transformative. In their reality as transformative, they cannot be held on to except in a moment of transformation. But this is precisely where God is known. God is known only insofar as we know God's reality, but God is real only in a moment of transformation that continually recedes behind our every effort to grasp it or hold on to it except in its transformative moment. God is therefore strictly nonobjective. God's being can be objectified neither metaphysically nor in the reality of faith. This does not mean, however, that God cannot be known. God's reality can be known in faith, but only in such a way that the reality of faith and of the knowledge of God given in it must be constantly renewed.

Chief Issues Facing Religious Naturalism

Of the problems facing religious naturalism today, I mention two.

First, religious naturalists must, I believe, confront the issue of materialism more forthrightly and competently. It amazes me how quickly so-called religious naturalists reject the most plausible rendering of naturalism today, which is its materialist or physicalist version. The arguments used to make this rejection are too facile and are usually seventy-five years out of date. There must be a much more forthright confrontation with the really remarkable philosophical progress that has been made in the last twenty years or so in articulating a fully modern version of materialism. Religious naturalists must come to see that the reductionist program when it is properly conceived—as it is, for instance, by Post (1987), who uses a physical *determination relation* to replace the old reductionist paradigm—cannot be dismissed because it presumptively eliminates some favored element of experience. Theologians and religious naturalists must come to see that, in contemporary terms, physical reduction, very broadly conceived, eliminates nothing from our experience or from history and culture. Post shows this decisively.[2] Without a more serious and philosophically competent treatment of the materialism issue within naturalism, religious naturalists risk simply nostalgically reintroducing terms from the very tradition the retreat from which led them into naturalism to start with.

Second, religious naturalists must seriously confront the question of how to develop a full-blown religious perspective on naturalist terms. This concerns the question of how to relate to a specific religious tradition. I am constantly reminded here of Santayana's dictum that "the attempt to speak without speaking any particular language is not more hopeless than the attempt to have a religion that shall be no religion in particular" (Santayana [1905] 1982, 5). Among religious naturalists, discussion almost

always centers on how to state what naturalism is. But that problem is only the beginning. The really interesting issues are theological ones, the questions that arise after one has decided on the version of one's naturalism. It is in this respect that Kaufman's *In Face of Mystery* is such a splendid achievement. Too many religious naturalists have nothing to say religiously—or only things to say that are very thin—because, having stated their naturalism, they think they must then reject their own religious traditions on the assumption that those traditions are essentially and necessarily antinaturalist. That may be so, but it is not self-evident. In any case, I want to claim that for religious naturalists the really interesting questions are the issues of theological and/or religious content that emerge on the far side of defending some version of naturalism.

NOTES

1. The first four features are: that only the world of nature is real; that nature is necessary in the sense of requiring no sufficient reason beyond itself to account for either its origin or its ontological ground; that nature as a whole may be understood without appeal to any kind of intelligence or purposive agency; and that all causes are natural causes, so that every natural event is itself a product of other natural events. The fifth and sixth of these family resemblances, which I argue are more problematic and are in any case unnecessary for the metaphysical definition of naturalism, are that natural science is the only sound method for establishing knowledge and that value is based solely on the interests and projects of human beings (see Hardwick 1996, 6, n. 4).
2. An example of a unusually competent treatment of these issues on the part of one who is not a physicalist is David Chalmers's struggle with the mind/body problem (Chalmers 1996).

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