RELIGIOUS NATURALISM—WHERE DOES IT LEAD?

by Loyal Rue

Abstract. I respond to the four symposiasts who commented on my recent book *Religion Is Not About God* (2005)—religious studies scholars Donald Braxton and David Klemm, philosopher William Rottschaefer, and cognitive scientist Leslie Marsh. Various general and specific points relative to the nature of religion and the future of religion are either clarified or defended. Among the issues that receive attention are (1) the status and adequacy of my proposals for religious naturalism: Can it motivate wholeness, and is it finally a form of pantheism? (2) ritual practices, particularly those of Christianity, reinterpreted within the framework of religious naturalism; and (3) the adequacy of any naturalistic position to account for subjective properties of consciousness.

Keywords: Donald Braxton; David Klemm; Leslie Marsh; moral realism; pantheism; religious naturalism; William Rottschaefer

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The highest form of compliment we can pay to any author is to give a fair and careful reading to his or her work. In this respect my efforts in *Religion Is Not About God* have been heavily rewarded by the time and talents of William Rottschaefer, Don Braxton, David Klemm, and Leslie Marsh. They have my gratitude for taking this book seriously and for sharing their considered insights about it. I am also grateful to Philip Hefner, editor of *Zygon*, for inviting me to respond to the criticisms of these authors.

WILLIAM ROTTSCHAEFER

Rottschaefer argues that my defense of religious naturalism is compromised by two major problems. The first is that I have not sufficiently demonstrated that religious naturalism can provide for the motivational requisites for the achievement of personal wholeness and social coherence.

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This is because religious naturalists are presumed to be moral nonrealists, which suggests that whatever moral commitments these naturalists espouse will be too weak to command self-sacrifice when the chips are down. If moral values lack objective status, they will be regarded as optional, in which case they will lack the power to trump self-interest. Thus, the sort of religious naturalism I have advocated can become morally relevant only if naturalists engage in acts of self-deception—that is, only if they trick themselves into the belief that their moral values have objective status.

I concede that Rottschaefer's remarks are fair and pertinent. It would be inconsistent of me to fret about the negative moral consequences of creeping nonrealism and then to propose a solution that embraces nonrealism. However, I do not expect that many religious naturalists will turn out to be moral nonrealists, for reasons that Rottschaefer himself has made explicit. That is, our species has been endowed by the evolutionary process with certain cognitive and emotional competencies that constitute what many have called the moral intuitions. These competencies do not quit working their wonders in the event that individuals become disillusioned about the supernatural ground of moral values. Naturalists are capable of affection, sympathy, gratitude, fear, resentment, and hope, just like everyone else. And just like everyone else, naturalists will form attitudes, undertake goals and commitments, and entertain visions of the good life. Even further, most naturalists will pursue their goals on the assumption—in my view praiseworthy but ultimately unjustifiable—that human life is an objectively good thing. Moral realism of this sort is a default position, one of the endowments of our moral intuitions. It has its epistemic counterpart in naive realism about the external world. Most religious naturalists will tend to be naively realist about the ultimate goodness of the natural order, and from this basic attitude they will derive the imperative that the integrity of the natural order should be sustained. Sustainability, then, becomes the general moral principle that justifies near-term goals and stratagems.

There will, of course, be a minority of naturalists who find themselves at a loss to provide rational justification for the claim that the natural order, and human existence in particular, is ultimately a good thing, and that all rational agents are therefore duty-bound to make sacrifices for its sustainability. I concede that religious naturalists who are also moral nonrealists are likely to flag somewhat in their motivation, and if such circumstances were to persist we could not expect religious naturalism to amount to a robust moral tradition. But why should we expect moral nonrealism to be a stable—not to mention essential—condition among religious naturalists? Naturalists who are also nonrealists might be expected, rather, to find ways, as Rottschaefer has done, to overcome their hesitations about the objective value of sustaining human life and the integrity of the natural order. If they succeed, by self-set standards, they will become, ipso facto, moral realists.

There will be an even slighter minority who will remain stuck in what I agree is the maladaptive condition of chronic skepticism. It is difficult to say much with confidence about the moral psychology of this nonrealist remnant. Their motivation may be largely parasitic on the moral enthusiasm of others. They may attempt to defend their moral commitments on the basis of a shallow pragmatism. Others may confess to being Kierkegaardian-style ironists. But we may expect a majority of nonrealists to agree in their insistence that intellectual honesty is too high a price to pay for the psychological comfort of moral certitude.

In the second of Rottschaefer's criticisms, he presents a "formidable challenge" to what he sees as a "fatal flaw" in my proposals. He points out that my account of religion is based in part on the view that there are no objective values. I think I would have been happier if he had added the modifier *ultimate*. I certainly would not object to the term *objective values* in a limited context. For example, I would agree that oxygen is essential for the life of any human being and that human interests are therefore threatened by a deficiency of oxygen. In this context I would agree that oxygen is an objective value for humans who have an interest in living. If this is all that Rottschaefer is claiming for his moderate moral realism, I do not think we have much to disagree about. In any event, Rottschaefer goes on to explain that my nonrealist position is contingent on a misappropriation of the naturalistic fallacy, the claim that facts do not entail values. He believes that the naturalistic fallacy does not count decisively against the claim for objective moral values. Once he has disarmed the naturalistic fallacy, he goes on to make his case for a moderate form of moral realism.

Before giving my reasons for not being devastated by Rottschaefer's critique I want to express my admiration for it. His objections are very closely and cleverly reasoned, representing perhaps the most cogent version of moral reliabilism I have yet seen. Clever and coherent, indeed, but not quite persuasive.

I intend to be as clear as I can in my reply, although I realize that I am running the risk of oversimplification.

Let's begin with a very simple argument:

1. A high-fat diet increases the risk of fatal heart attack.

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2. Therefore, one ought not to eat a high-fat diet.

This argument violates the naturalistic fallacy. Premise (1) is a statement of factual information, and the conclusion (2) is an evaluative statement. Yet the argument purports to derive (2) from (1). But, as everybody agrees, we cannot validly derive (2) from (1) without first inserting a second (evaluative) premise, something like:

1b. Death from heart attack is a bad thing.

Now the conjunction of (1) and (1b) yields the conclusion (2) without fallacy.

I believe that one cannot show (1b) to be an objective value. It certainly will not suffice to maintain that "Death is bad" can be derived from "Life is good," for that would merely shift the focus of justification to "Life is good," which is no more objectively true than the claim that death is bad.

Rottschaefer believes it is possible to justify evaluative premises, like (1b), using factual premises. If this can be done, he can claim to have grounded value claims in factual claims. And doing this, of course, would amount to a demonstration of objective value. To accomplish this daunting task Rottschaefer argues from the position known as moral reliabilism, an ethical variant of epistemological reliabilism. Reliabilism is the view that we can justify a belief if it can be shown that the belief has been formed by a reliable process of belief formation. And, unless there is a compelling reason undermining the reliability of the belief formation process (called a "defeater"), we may accept the deliverances of the process (that is, the belief in question) as justified. The moral analogue is that an evaluative belief may be justified by showing how it results from a reliable value formation process that has no defeater. The argument proceeds to the claim that natural selection has endowed our species with a set of behavioral, motivational, and cognitive capabilities and that these capabilities have served us well in the past as reliable guides in the formation of human values. In the absence of a defeater, therefore, we may accept the deliverances of these competencies to be sufficiently justified to warrant the language of objective values.

There are a number of serious objections that reliabilists must be prepared to answer. One notorious problem for reliabilists is to give a coherent account of disagreements. If the deliverances of our belief-formation mechanisms include many and conflicting beliefs, how reliable can they be? How does it look when you believe "X" and I believe "not X," and we both attempt to justify our beliefs by calling on the same belief-formation process? This problem of pluralism is even more troublesome for ethical reliabilists than for epistemological reliabilists. Another problem follows from the observation that our belief- (and value-) formation mechanisms often deliver us into error—that is, these mechanisms are vulnerable to systemic and situational illusions. This problem, too, is more acute in the domain of ethics.

The pluralism problem and the illusion problem qualify as defeaters—that is, they constitute reasons for doubting the reliability of belief-formation mechanisms. They are, however, mild defeaters, which I am confident Rottschaefer is prepared to disarm. I therefore bypass these mild defeaters to focus on what I take to be a strong defeater.

One of the critical features of reliabilist theory is what I call the comparable-environment constraint. This principle stipulates that in order to be

considered reliable our belief- (or value-) formation mechanisms must be functioning in an environment that is similar to the environment for which they were designed. The more similarity, the greater reliability; and the less similarity, the less reliability. For example, your snow-making machine was designed to function in a cold climate, but it cannot be counted on to deliver reliable results in the tropics. My point is to suggest that the social environment in which the mechanisms underlying our moral intuitions were fashioned was sufficiently unlike our present social environment as to undermine our confidence in these mechanisms as reliable sources of moral truths. In other words, the radical discrepancy between the social environment of our design—the social ecology of closely related hunting/gathering bands—and the present social environment constitutes a strong defeater for Rottschaefer's reliabilist argument.

Evolutionary psychologists have argued that the discrepancy between the Pleistocene and the present creates reliability problems for our belief and value mechanisms across the board. Consider, for example, our food preference mechanisms. In the environment of our design the supply of salts, fats, and sweets was relatively spare, a condition that contributed to our inordinate preference for salty, fatty, and sweet foods. In the present environment, however, these inherited preferences tempt us to consume salts, fats, and sweets in maladaptive quantities. Our taste mechanisms are not reliable guides to a healthy diet in the present environment.

Parallel arguments may be applied in the domain of moral values. One may argue, for example, that the environment of our design would have favored traits for being suspicious, even hostile, toward strangers. Thus, it may be supposed, our value-formation mechanisms are very probably biased to deliver racist attitudes. Are racist attitudes therefore justified? Let us hope not. Additional troublesome biases include male dominance, rape, severe measures for deterrence, aggression, philandering, nepotism—all of which could be justified as objective values by an unmitigated form of ethical reliabilism. Rottschaefer is aware of all this, certainly, and this is why he gives us a highly moderated form of reliabilism. But, clearly, the more one is forced to qualify reliabilism in the face of defeaters, the less it continues to resemble reliabilism. And if all we are left with is a weak form of reliabilism, the naturalistic fallacy is in no serious danger of being disarmed.

DONALD BRAXTON

Rottschaefer and Donald Braxton have very different ideas about what to do with the argument of my book. Rottschaefer wants to drop the argument dead in its tracks, but Braxton wants to pick it up and carry it forward. The funny thing is that I found myself hoping they both would succeed. I do not hope that Rottschaefer will succeed in scuttling my

book, of course, but I do wish him success in persuading others that eco-friendly values are objective. I endorse his project because I sense that the people he talks to are probably the type not to commit to or defend certain values without first having the sort of sophisticated justification he can give them.

Braxton has something else in mind. He agrees with Rottschaefer on the importance of keying our goal hierarchies to the story of cosmic evolution, but his appeal extends beyond intellectual discourse to include the emotional relevance of institutional, ritual, aesthetic, and experiential strategies. Braxton takes it for granted that the phenomena of religious traditions can and should be naturalized, but he is not convinced that naturalizing religious traditions renders them ineffectual. In particular, he asks whether it is possible to naturalize Christianity without neutralizing it. In his own imagery, Braxton wants to explore the possibilities for growing a robust strain of religious naturalism on the soil of Christian tradition. He finds my proposals useful in creating a "design space" wherein to sketch out the prospects for a Christian naturalism. I use the term *Christian naturalism* (rather than "naturalistic Christianity") because I sense that Braxton is more firmly committed to the noun than to the adjective. The question is what Christianity has to offer naturalism, not what naturalism implies for Christianity. His critics in this venture will be found lurking in two blinds: one to attack him for advocating something less than Christian, and the other to attack him for promoting something more than naturalism—a tricky project.

Braxton gives us a few markers that will characterize any form of religious naturalism. Generally, religious naturalism will seek to "identify the conditions under which human beings flourish as natural participants in the evolutionary story" (p. 332). These conditions will serve as pointers to a cluster of adaptive virtues. Chief among these virtues will be what Braxton calls *mindfulness*, which he describes as a mode of disciplined attentiveness, combining meditation, introspection, and empirical investigation. Mindfulness is a kind of intentional skill set that sensitizes investigators to emergent phenomena in nature.

What, then, can one expect the Christian tradition to contribute to the depth and development of religious naturalism? How might Christianity inform the mindfulness of naturalists? Braxton suggests that the sacramental and sacrificial aspects of the tradition are most relevant. By tradition, the elements of the eucharist have been claimed to be "more than" mere bread and wine. For Braxton there is a suggestive parallel here to emergent properties in the natural order. Indeed, the power of symbols to effect human transformation is itself an emergent phenomenon. The link between sacraments and emergent phenomena is that both are regarded as transforming gifts arising from a relational encounter. As religious naturalists consider appropriate ritual practices they might take serious note of this link.

One of the historical strengths of Christianity has been its power to command sacrifices of self-interest in favor of doing God's will. For the naturalist this dynamic of self-sacrifice, dramatized in the passion of Christ, is understood in terms of the dynamics of social cooperation. Religious naturalists, mindful of threats to the earth's life support systems, should be able to resonate with the Christian emphasis on sacrifice. The parallel here is that Christians and naturalists alike are called to subordinate their own agendas for the sake of a greater good.

Braxton's proposal that religious naturalists would do well to examine the deep wisdom of sacramental and sacrificial behavior in Christian tradition is only part of the story. Other traditions have elements of deep wisdom as well, and exploring these parallels will be an equally important part of the groundwork for future forms of religious naturalism.

Now comes the tricky bit. Braxton clearly understands that the dynamics of sacrament and sacrifice in Christian ritual play on the evolved mechanisms of agent detection and the social emotions. What commands Christian piety in this regard is realism about supernatural entities and events. If these folk psychological features drop out of the picture—as they presumably do for nontheistic religious naturalists—what are the chances that anything like the piety characteristic of sacrament and sacrifice will find expression in religious naturalism? If realism about the personal God is what drives Christian piety, what is the naturalistic equivalent? Braxton appears tentative on this point, but he finally admits that religious naturalism probably will not work without some sort of "meta-entity" (p. 335) that might be minimally anthropomorphized to the point of becoming the functional equivalent to a supernatural deity. Perhaps Gaia will do.

I see nothing inherently wrong with Braxton's proposals. But if the question is what Christianity can offer to a religious naturalism that is keenly mindful of the radical urgency of our global environmental crisis, we might consider looking elsewhere. There is much that religious naturalists may glean from Christian tradition, but to my mind ritual practices fall pretty low on the list. In particular, it would behoove religious naturalists to take lessons in mindfulness from the Hebrew prophets and from Christian heretics. When I consider the finest hours of Christian history it strikes me that many of them can trace their inspiration to the prophetic tradition. Christianity at its best was always mindful of the delicate balance between the priestly and prophetic roles of the Christ figure. But consider the flaccid feel-good-ism that passes for Christianity in many of the churches of the twenty-first century. Woody Allen (*Hannah and Her Sisters*) said it best: "If Jesus came back today and saw what was being done in his name he'd never stop throwing up." In addition to asking what Christianity has to offer, we might learn as much by asking what Christianity *needs*. And what it needs more than anything is a strong dose of prophetic fury.

A good place to start, then, would be with a close reading of the prophets. The next lesson in mindfulness should come from a careful consideration of the most heroic heretics of the tradition. Given what we are up against, I'd say it is high time for heresy. The most important heretics, of course, were Jesus, St. Paul, and Martin Luther. What these radicals had in common was a deep conviction that the religious establishment of their day was fundamentally wrongheaded about salvation. The important lesson to take from these heretics is one of courage, not one of truth. Religious naturalists are deeply influenced by the epic of evolution and by the life sciences. Their worldview integrates an evolutionary cosmology with an ecocentric morality, rejecting what they take to be the wrongheadedness of dualistic cosmologies and anthropocentric moralities. Salvation, for religious naturalists, applies to natural systems and ecological communities, not to autonomous souls. The religious establishment simply has it wrong, and there is much at stake in correcting it. Religious naturalists need all the help they can get in effecting change in how people think about salvation. What splendid irony there is in the possibility that the proclamation of ecosalvation may be carried forward by a naturalistic mission that draws some of its inspiration from Jesus, Paul, and Luther!

DAVID KLEMM

Klemm provides a clear and insightful summary of the central arguments of the book and then raises three substantive issues to challenge the coherence of positions I have advocated. Along the way, he advances a brand of theological humanism that, he claims, avoids the difficulties encountered by scientific materialism and religious naturalism.

Klemm's first objection is that a consilient scientific materialism cannot solve the hard problem of explaining how the objective properties of matter can give rise to the subjective properties of consciousness. The phenomena of conscious experience, he suggests, are first-person realities that categorically escape the third-person perspective of scientific explanation. Klemm is quick to dismiss the implication that a rejection of scientific materialism commits him to an acceptance of mind/body dualism (which he also rejects). For Klemm, theological humanism provides a third way, somewhere between the deficiency of materialism and the incoherence of dualism. This third way involves an "enriched" concept of matter, a metaphysical picture that attributes both material (third-person) properties and "protomental" (first-person) properties to matter. Subjective reality (mind, consciousness, intentionality) is therefore pictured as a primary and irreducible characteristic of nature.

I quite agree with Klemm that scientific materialism cannot provide a compelling solution to the hard problem of showing how mind derives from matter. All the materialist can hope to do is identify the conditions

under which first-person (subjective) phenomena arise. But an identification of these conditions hardly qualifies as an explanation. However, the failure of science to account for the presumed derivation does not imply that the derivation is not a real one. There exists an abundance of evidence (neural correlates, for example) to suggest that mental phenomena are real properties emerging from the dynamics of matter, even though a complete explanatory account eludes us. For the moment, at least, it appears that we are left with the hard problem. To my way of thinking there remain three possible solutions:

1. Mental phenomena are metaphysically primary—that is, subjectivity is a fundamentally real and irreducible attribute of every entity in the universe (Klemm's panpsychist view).
2. Mental phenomena are completely reducible to material properties and are therefore ultimately not real (materialistic eliminativism).
3. Mental phenomena are both real and recent properties—that is, they emerge from the properties of neural matter but are not completely reducible to those properties.

I confess that I am drawn to the third possibility, although I concede that at the moment it is not demonstrably superior to the others. But along with this concession there comes my insistence that Klemm is sadly mistaken if he imagines that matters look any better for theological humanism. Metaphysical speculation rarely succeeds where scientific investigation fails, and we merely delude ourselves if we suppose that imagination amounts to explanation.

The second objection has to do with my expectations about the future, especially regarding the outcome of our present environmental crisis and its consequences for the future of religion. Klemm believes that I have expressed my (rather pessimistic) expectations with an unjustified sense of confidence. I am thankful for this criticism because it gives me an opportunity to be more explicit about my intentions in part three of the book.

To begin, I regret that I have given so careful a reader as Professor Klemm the impression of overconfidence. It was my intention to characterize my expectations as hunches rather than firm predictions or (God forbid) prophetic declarations. Furthermore, I tried to make clear my fervent hope that these dire expectations will not come to pass. A more serious problem is that I apparently have given the impression that pessimism about the future is somehow inherent in the perspective of religious naturalism. If this is the case, I apologize profusely to religious naturalists, the majority of whom do not share my grim expectations about the future.

If, in fact, religious naturalism entailed pessimism about the future, Klemm might be justified in presuming that his brand of theological humanism is a superior alternative because it "proceeds cautiously . . . with

some hope" (p. 363), whereas I have (apparently) proceeded confidently with none. But religious naturalism does *not* entail pessimism. Some religious naturalists (like me) are pessimistic, but most are not. In fact, they are just as likely to be as cautiously optimistic and hopeful as most theological humanists are. Theological humanism has no monopoly on good cheer. What's more, I suspect that if we looked around we might find a few pessimists among theological humanists as well. The point here is that temperament and ideology are probably more independent of one another than we educators and preachers would care to admit.

The most curious part of Klemm's second criticism is the claim that religious naturalism represents an extremist position, that it represents a kind of fundamentalism with respect to the role of nature. If this means that religious naturalism takes nature to be fundamental, then yes, of course, that seems to be the point. But if it means that religious naturalism is some sort of dogmatic position that is insensitive to the ambiguities of nature and history, the charge is regrettably misplaced. If Klemm seeks dogmatists to pair up with fundamentalists, he might turn to the likes of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Steven Weinberg, or Daniel Dennett. These folks think that religious naturalism is an oxymoron (just as Christian fundamentalists will see theological humanism as oxymoronic).

Finally, the claim that religious naturalism equates God with Nature is a tricky one, precisely because religious naturalists are even now debating this issue in a highly spirited manner. Some religious naturalists define themselves as pantheists, while others regard themselves as nontheists. It is a serious issue—perhaps not unlike the early Christian controversy over the identification of Jesus with God. That was not a simple matter, either.

Klemm's last objection, the theological question, left me somewhat confused. For one thing, I was surprised by his announcement that theological humanism is not human-centered. To my ears this suggests that it is therefore not humanism. Humans, Klemm says, are merely a part of life, which might suggest that he is really advancing a theologically informed version of naturalism, a sort of religious naturalism. But this is followed by the claim that theological humanism makes a stronger case (for the integrity of life) than does religious naturalism because it is "free to emphasize a whole range of issues pressing upon a beleaguered humanity living on an endangered planet" (p. 366). This left me wondering on what grounds Klemm is prepared to deny the same freedom to religious naturalism. He mentions the problems of "human injustice, the commercialization of art and loss of beauty, and the like" (p. 366) as if it were clear—which it isn't—that religious naturalism has no motives or intellectual resources to address these.

At the end of his article Klemm hands this in: "We need a norm higher than Nature, for we can conceive of Fascist or slave societies that can produce personal wholeness and social coherence while existing in harmony

with nature" (p. 366). It is easy to say something like this, but nothing but confusion follows when one actually tries to formulate such a conception. Totalitarian societies invariably undermine the conditions for personal wholeness in their obsession with social coherence. One may just as reasonably claim that Fascism and slavery are good for humans, while being consonant with God's will for the integrity of life.

Most confusing of all is Klemm's assertion that "humans have an innate awareness of the divine at all levels of their being." Our bodies are immediately "attuned to the real presence of God" (p. 366). I simply do not get this. If it is true, why doesn't Dawkins write books about this awareness? Is he insufficiently reflective? Are his God sensors clouded by sin (as Alvin Plantinga in his silliest moments has suggested)? Is he deluded? What makes this assertion especially confusing is that it follows a discussion that appears to reduce God to a symbol for "the principle of unity and wholeness in life." When we put these items together we gather the impression that human beings are immediately attuned to the real presence of a principle (that is, the unity and wholeness of life).

Does theological humanism advocate realism or instrumentalism with respect to the divine presence? If it is a realist position, it would appear to suffer from what Klemm has called hypertheism. But if it is an instrumentalist position, one has to ask whether it still qualifies as theology. I realize that Klemm favors some sort of third alternative that avoids both problems, but this third way has completely eluded me. In his defense, Klemm did not develop his theological perspective fully, leaving us to fill in several major gaps.

Leslie Marsh

Much of Marsh's essay is given to expository matters, about which I have little to say except that I find nothing objectionable in his observations and interpretations. Toward the end of his essay, however, Marsh raises issues pertinent to the environmentalist perspective of my book. Here we find the following: "If one accepts the thesis that the major religious traditions have . . . undervalued, sidelined, or even alienated humanity from the natural world . . . , a morally relevant response calls for a new mythic vision that is coextensive with naturalism. In effect, a religious naturalism can be the only response" (p. 351). On this point Marsh has taken the argument further than I had intended. I do not think that religious naturalism represents the *only* morally relevant response to the environmental crisis. I tried to make it clear that all the major traditions have sufficient resources—if they would exploit them—to support a robust environmental ethic. I have expressed my doubts, however, that these traditions can produce the necessary conditions for radical social change within a time frame that is relevant to preventing a global environmental catastrophe.

Thus, I expect a global holocaust toward the end of the present century. In the wake of this holocaust, I have suggested, religious naturalism will have a far greater appeal than any supernaturalist alternatives, precisely because it is nature-*centric* and not merely nature-*friendly*. The point is that while religious naturalism is not the *only* candidate for a post-holocaust religious orientation, it is the most likely.

I do not mean to imply, however, that religious naturalism has a built-in solution to the problem of moral justification. On this point Marsh brings us back to the problem Rottschaefer raised about integrating cosmology and morality. Religious naturalism needs a compelling root metaphor that can infuse the cosmos with value. In the book I did not take a strong position on the root metaphor of religious naturalism. That is, rather than taking a confessional stance (with, say, pantheism), I thought it best merely to call attention to certain indicators that a movement in the direction of a religious naturalist myth is already afoot.

The force of Marsh's essay is, I think, to suggest that a plausible religious naturalism will eventually gravitate toward pantheism. When Marsh identifies me as a pantheist he is not saying that I have explicitly declared a confessional stance as a pantheist but rather that I will have little choice about doing so if I expect to be consistent in advocating religious naturalism. He is forcing the point that any form of religious naturalism that is not explicitly pantheistic will be ill-equipped either to inspire an effective myth or to advance a robust environmental ethic. He may be correct about this, and his essay has moved me very close to the altar of pantheism.

But for the moment I hesitate to identify Nature with God. More to the point, I will continue to hesitate to identify religious naturalism with pantheism. I hesitate because there are religious naturalists out there in the world who persist in calling themselves nontheists (which presumably also means nonpantheists). Perhaps, as Marsh might insist, these individuals are just slow in working out the logic of religious naturalism. But maybe not.

I take pantheism to involve the assertion that everything that is is sacred, that being itself (or the ultimate source of being) is of intrinsic value, independent of our valuing it. It is my impression that some religious naturalists will have good reasons for not going so far. For example, a religious naturalist may insist that the concept of value makes no sense apart from living systems. Here the claim would be that prior to the emergence of life there was no value in being at all; the prebiotic universe was meaningless and absurd, radically value-neutral. The sacred, then, originates with life and vanishes without life. This brand of religious naturalism amounts to biotheism, not pantheism, and it has the advantage of being a more explicit form of theism than pantheism. It also strikes me that biotheism would be well equipped to articulate a robust environmental ethic.

If Marsh would accept this revision, his argument would be that any coherent form of religious naturalism would amount to either pantheism or biotheism. But the problem of nontheistic religious naturalists remains. Must we then view them as merely phobic about language? Perhaps they resolutely refuse to use any form of god-talk because they are wary of being misunderstood as traditional theists. Are nontheistic religious naturalists to be seen as cryptopantheists or cryptobiotheists who happen to suffer from a word-baggage phobia? Maybe. But there could be something else going on. I can imagine a religious naturalist rejecting theological labels because they seem to miss the point. A theist of *any* type appears to be advancing some sort of theory (thesis) about the nature or value of the extra-mental world. My imaginary religious naturalist insists on leaving the phenomena of nature and history unnamed and uninterpreted in the ultimate sense. Reality is ultimately mysterious—full stop! The point of being religious about nature has nothing to do with apprehending it but everything to do with responding to it. All of the emphasis is on the subjective element. A nontheistic religious naturalist may go wandering in the woods or scramble to keep up with scientific inquiry not because it helps her to glimpse the mind of God but simply because it blows her hair back and leaves her with a sense of being blessed. If we were to ask such a religious naturalist what her experience means, or what it reveals to her about ultimate reality, she may just smile at our failure to get the point. More to Marsh's point, if we were to ask for the ethical implications of her religious experience, we might get some form of noncognitive emotivism—the view that moral judgments are grounded in the emotional response of the subject, not in the qualities of the object.

A nontheistic religious naturalist might therefore insist that there is no "sacred" object (or even sacred system) but merely subjects who are capable of opening themselves to nature in ways that evoke a sense of blessedness and responsibility. Is such a mystical form of religious naturalism capable of generating a robust environmental ethic? If *robust* means explicit systematic justification, probably not. But if it means intense commitment to act, then why not?

I have attempted to define religion in terms of a narrative integration (mythos) of cosmos and ethos, a unified vocabulary that provides ultimate explanations for all facts and ultimate justifications for all values. I have also suggested that the alternative to having a widely shared myth is for humanity to default back to forms of social organization characteristic of the great apes. Marsh takes seriously the idea that a central or root metaphor (such as God or Logos) is necessary for the articulation and development of a viable myth. On this we agree. The question remains whether a nontheistic religious naturalism lends itself to mythopoesis. A mystical form of religious naturalism may simply abjure mythmaking as a misadventure of metaphysics. This is not to say that nature mysticism is an

inauthentic form of the religious life, but it does suggest that it will always be—as I think mysticism has always been—a sort of countercultural alternative to an explicit mythic tradition. Mysticism always finds its way into religious traditions, but it never actually spawns them. If this makes sense, one may come to see nontheistic religious naturalism as mildly parasitic on pantheism or biotheism.

It should be clear by now that for the moment I am content with being tentative about the emerging phenomenon of religious naturalism. It probably is the case, as Marsh suggests, that its most likely and coherent form will be pantheism. But, as helpful as such commentaries may be to the conversation, it seems premature to declare that religious naturalism is nothing but pantheism.

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