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Charley D. Hardwick

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PART I

Foundations for a naturalist Christian theology

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CHAPTER I

Prospects for a naturalist theology

In one of the most provocative statements in contemporary theology, Rudolf Bultmann supports his demythologizing proposal by maintaining that “there is nothing specifically Christian about the mythical view of the world (*Weltbild*)” (NTM, 16 [ET, 3]). This seems to deny that faith contains common *beliefs* shared *across* world views (but not themselves mythical) that it would be the task of theology to explicate.¹ If there is nothing specifically Christian about

¹ The ultimate test of this claim will turn on how Bultmann renders the notion of “God” *theologically*, but his conception of God is a nest of difficulties. He probably simply assumed some version of classical theism (cf., for example, his assertions about an “objectively” existing God in ZPE, 196, 198–199 [ET, 110, 113–114]). Nevertheless, this commitment is by no means certain. The uncertainty arises from his proscriptions against objectification. But Bultmann is hard to sort out on this issue also. Sometimes, though not always, he seems to assimilate the issue of objectification to the issue of “proof.” One can hold the objectively articulated content of an essentially existential meaning independently from one’s own existential involvement, thus, at a crucial moment, betraying its very meaning. This reflexive structure makes objectification formally analogous to a “proof” since one can also entertain a proof independently from any existential involvement. When one proves something which by its nature includes existential involvement, then no matter what its formal validity, it becomes reflexively incoherent. Something like this seems to be Bultmann’s meaning, and this makes it difficult to understand how he stands on the classical formulations of theism. (See ZPE, 196–206 [ET, 110–121] for examples of these mixed meanings.)

Though Bultmann may never have thought of himself other than as a personalistic theist, significantly, he almost always speaks of the “Word of God,” not of “God” as such. For example, he says: “faith is the answer to the proclaimed word of God’s grace,” or “that encounter with God’s word qualifies us whether we open ourselves to it or not is also known only by the faith . . .,” or faith is “the hearing of Scripture as the Word of God” (ZPE, ET, 114 [199–200]). Such locutions open the door for the existentialist position to be defended in this work.

On the objectification issue, Schubert Ogden is probably correct that because Bultmann accepted objectification of the structures of existence (which as actual are essentially non-objective), he cannot avoid accepting the possibility of objectification about God provided that God is non-objective in an analogous fashion (see, *CM*, 90–94). But this point is merely formal. It may show how we can objectify a personal God if there is one, but it does not of itself determine that the correlate of faith is such a personal God. We shall see that faith can equally well be rendered on naturalist terms. It may turn out, in other words, that a proper understanding of the witness of faith also requires demythologizing the notion of a personal God as well!

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the mythical world view, then it ought to follow that there is nothing specifically Christian about *any* world view. Bultmann suggests as much by distinguishing the content of faith from all *Weltanschauungen* because they tie faith to “anterior convictions” (ZPE, 197 [ET, 111–12]). Not a world view at all, faith, according to him, is an “existential self-understanding,” and his method of “existentialist interpretation” is a strategy designed to free faith from any such “creedal” preconditions. This view receives added weight from Bultmann’s statement that demythologizing is the “consistent application” of the doctrine of justification by faith “to the field of knowledge” (ZPE, ET, 122 [207]).

A straightforward reading of Bultmann’s statement implies that faith cannot be identified with *any* particular world view or metaphysics. Such an implication is radical, for it loosens the connection between faith and any specific metaphysical entailments. But it also means that the truth of faith may be compatible with metaphysical views it is commonly thought to preclude, if, *on independent grounds*, one has reason to adopt such views. This latter implication provides the opening wedge for this book.

The present essay is an effort in Christian theological reflection. Its boundaries are set entirely by the task of comprehending the Christian witness of faith theologically. It is distinctive, however, because it is undertaken from the point of view of philosophical naturalism. For reasons to be detailed in a moment, I believe a strong case can be made that theology should consider such a naturalist option more seriously than it has. This book argues that this option is more attractive than is usually thought.

If the content of faith is an existential self-understanding, then we are not constrained at the outset by *any* metaphysical preconditions. Undertaking such an effort from a naturalist point of view will not import them. I shall show in a moment that naturalism will not so much dictate what faith must say as constrain what it *cannot* say. It frames the theological task but does not define it in detail. Though theological propositions must be consistent with naturalism, naturalism alone will not prescribe their positive content. If, following Bultmann, faith requires no anterior “creedal” convictions, if it is not tied to any particular world view, and if *on entirely independent grounds* we are convinced that philosophical naturalism gives a true account of the world, then we may ask what the Christian confession looks like from this perspective. Having become convinced of the naturalistic view of

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the world, we need not conclude that the Christian witness of faith is mere illusion, either on naturalist or on Christian grounds. The task remains strictly theological, but the endeavor will be focused against the background of philosophical naturalism. This procedure is made possible by Bultmann's (and Fritz Buri's²) claims (a) that the content of the gospel is the offer of a new self-understanding (not a set of doctrines or beliefs) and (b) that the theological task is to explicate this self-understanding existentially (not to offer up doctrines suitable for belief). Following Bultmann and Buri, I shall argue that an existentialist account of faith can be rendered on naturalist grounds.

Because of this unusual juxtaposition of normally incompatible positions, the reader is invited to view this effort as an experiment in thought. I invite the reader to examine what can be accomplished if certain assumptions are made. The effort is to show the attractiveness of a theological option by exhibiting its fruitfulness. It seeks to demonstrate that viable and indeed powerful conceptions of both religion and Christianity are possible on naturalistic grounds.

In this first chapter, I shall sketch an argument supporting the appeal of a naturalist approach to theology and develop a preliminary case for its possibility by introducing Henry Nelson Wieman's naturalist conception of God. Wieman's thought will be important for the argument but only as modified in the direction of a more austere physicalist version of naturalism as recently defended by John Post in *The Faces of Existence: An Essay in Nonreductive Metaphysics*. These philosophical foundations will be discussed in the next chapter.

THE APPEAL OF A NATURALIST THEOLOGY

Philosophical naturalism may conveniently be introduced by contrasting it to classical supernaturalism. Broadly construed, supernaturalism has been the basis of most Western religious views. It asserts that the world of nature fails to exhaust the "real" because reality consists of nature and a superordinate reality that grounds the natural world and provides its end. Contrasting it to supernaturalism, Rem Edwards describes naturalism by six "family resemblances" each of which diverges from a parallel element in supernaturalism.³ These are: (1) that only the world of nature is real; (2) that nature is

² See, Buri, 1956, 1962, 1978. ³ See, *RR*, 133–141.

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necessary in the sense of requiring no sufficient reason beyond itself to account either for its origin or ontological ground; (3) that nature as a whole may be understood without appeal to any kind of intelligence or purposive agency; and (4) that all causes are natural causes so that every natural event is itself a product of other natural events.

Beyond these basic features two additional ones have characterized most naturalisms. These are: (5) that natural science is the only sound method for establishing knowledge, and (6) that value is based solely in the interests and projects of human beings, a position that historically associates naturalism with “humanism.” These features are more problematic than the first four and are, in any case, unnecessary for the basic metaphysical definition of naturalism.⁴

⁴ Though any naturalism will affirm the world view of natural science as the final adjudicator of truth in some sense, the discrediting of the “verificationist” conception of knowledge and meaning has left it unclear precisely how to construe this feature. Any claim to knowledge must be consistent with a conception of what is real derived from the natural sciences, especially physics, and with the horizons of truth that are set by that world view. But given our present limitations – both of the reality conditions established by the world view of natural science and of the methodological constraints imposed at the interfaces between those conditions and other realms of discourse – this affirmation is very “soft,” and it is difficult to specify how it could be operationalized so as to transform it from a vague “feature” into a criterion. Far from setting the rules for conceptual claims in other realms, it has mainly negative force, establishing what *cannot* be claimed or, more powerfully, *meant* (as e.g., in alchemy). In some realms, especially religion, this kind of cognitive constraint can be powerful indeed. But these constraints are already implicit enough in the first four features, derived as they are from the implications associated with the historical development of the natural sciences, to make the fifth feature largely redundant. All that need be recognized – though it is all too often ignored in religious studies and generally in the humanities – is that what can count as knowledge (and interpretation) today are decisively constrained by natural science.

(One of the more deleterious effects of Thomas Kuhn’s influential “perspectivist” notion of “paradigm shifts” in the history of science is to have created the belief among humanists that the world view of natural science can be ignored by their disciplines. That at least is the way Kuhn is too often used by humanists. After a hasty reference, it is surmised that Kuhn legitimates the notion that natural science imposes no cognitive constraints on disciplines outside the sciences (as one of any number of examples, see Winquist [1978], 1). Kuhn’s own careful qualifications of his position leave it unclear that he would license any of these uses to which his work is put, see Kuhn [1970].)

As for the association with humanism, naturalism at the outset simply leaves the question of the grounds of value open. Since it is almost impossible to separate humanism from axiological subjectivism, naturalists will take heart from recent philosophical discussions of value which give reason to believe that the Hume/Moore vise on these issues is about to be broken. (See, for instance, the almost causal way Thomas Nagel assumes the possibility of a naturalistic defense of value objectivity in Nagel (1986), 138–149. An even stronger physicalist defense is *FE*, esp. pp. 251–283. For a powerful theoretical ethics that grounds ethics in an objective conception of rationality and that must therefore challenge standard accounts of the naturalistic fallacy, see Reiman [1989].) There are also good *religious* reasons to challenge a humanist conception of value, and we shall see that a religious naturalism can ground value in God or objective nature as effectively as traditional theism. (From the standpoint of a naturalistic theism, Henry Nelson Wieman presented a number of powerful critiques of humanism [see, for instance, *SHG*, 9–16].)

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Supernaturalism must reject each of the first four defining features of naturalism, and historically, the debate between naturalism and supernaturalism has centered on these issues. Alone, however, this debate might be thought outdated and no longer terribly interesting. In contemporary theology it is widely agreed that classical supernaturalist theism is untenable both philosophically and religiously.⁵ It is commonly assumed, therefore, that the sole barrier to a truly contemporary theology lies in developing a revisionary metaphysical conception of God. The resources for such a project are drawn mainly either from Hegel or from the process thought of Whitehead and Hartshorne.⁶

It would be a mistake, however, to think that naturalism poses any less a challenge to revisionary theisms than to classical theism. Concerning the defining features of naturalism, classical and revisionary theisms share much more than they differ. If we assume, as I do in this book, that the world view of modernity is naturalist, then a revisionary theism must fail as effectively as classical supernaturalism to be adequate to the modern world, for no matter how successfully a revisionary theology reconceives God, it still shares far more important commonalities with classical theism.⁷ For purposes of discussion we can identify three broad commonalities shared by both forms of

⁵ This is even true of Langdon Gilkey. In Gilkey (1969), he sharply criticizes metaphysical theology, including process theology. But in Gilkey (1976), he accepts the process criticisms of classical theism and adopts a revisionary position very close to Whiteheadian views. See Gilkey (1969), 179–228, and Gilkey (1976), 226–299.

⁶ An example of the Hegelian influence is Küng (1985b) (see also Küng [1980]). The still implicit conception of God in the work of Paul Ricoeur would also seem to lie in this direction (see Ricoeur [1970], 459–483). Much transcendental theology still assumes classical theism (as Schubert Ogden [1971] shows with Lonergan), thus failing to touch the underlying metaphysical issues. When transcendental philosophy does acknowledge those issues, it has tended to pursue either the Hegelian or Whiteheadian lines already mentioned (see, e.g., Gilkey [1970], 35–64 and [1976] and Winqvist [1972]). The Whiteheadian line is widely represented in contemporary theology (see, e.g., Cobb [1965], Ogden [1963], and Ford [1978]). With the argument that because classical theism cannot truly affirm “this world,” it has no resources for dealing with “secularism,” Schubert Ogden has gone so far as to claim that the *only* fundamental issue confronting modern theology from the so-called “secular world” lies with the conception of God in classical theism (see *RG*, 1–20, 120–143). Ogden, of course, does not believe that all modern theological problems are solely metaphysical problems connected with a proper conception of God. In particular, he clearly sees the problem of mythology that any contemporary theology must address. But even here he closely associates its resolution with the revisionary theism upon which he insists. Cf. his “Myth and Truth” (*RG*, 99–119) and his well known discussions of analogy in relation to Bultmann’s demythologizing program (*CM*, 90–93, 146–164 and *RG*, 144–163 and 164–187). (From a somewhat different angle, cf. Ogden [1977].)

⁷ Because of these commonalities, “supernaturalism” is probably an inadequate term to draw out the deepest issues between naturalism and “non-naturalistic theisms,” and I shall cease hereafter to use it.

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theism: (1) that God is personal, (2) that some form of cosmic teleology is metaphysically true, and (3) that there is a cosmically comprehensible conservation of value.⁸ These affirmations are revealing because each requires the falsity of one or more of the basic features of naturalism, and their truth requires the truth of very deep alternative metaphysical positions. Stating these shared affirmations thus starkly permits the ambitiousness of their underlying metaphysical assumptions to stand forth, and, I hold, thereby betrays their fundamental implausibility. It is the implausibility of these affirmations that marks the untenability of both versions of theism, no matter how ambitious (and even “successful”) the revisionary efforts are. Let us take these affirmations in order.

The meaning of God’s personal nature has always been fraught with metaphysical difficulties, not least having to do with the related issues of analogical predication and symbolic uses of language. For our purposes, there is sufficient agreement on *what* is intended (if not on *how* to make it metaphysically comprehensible). Classically, the primary intent was to ascribe *intelligence* and *intentional agency* (will) to the supreme being. These seem to be the minimal *ontological* conditions for the remaining traits the tradition has wanted to ascribe to God. These latter are perhaps best captured by the notion of a “living God,” which is the content of the traditional idea of “Spirit.” To the extent that the content of “life” or “Spirit” goes beyond intelligence and will, it is captured traditionally by “metaphorical” predicates such as “wisdom,” “wrath,” and, most especially, “love” and by the divine activities and attributes entertained under “governance” and “providence.”⁹ Christianity’s deepest motive for affirming a personal God has been the idea that love belongs to God’s very essence, thus the desire to ascribe to God the same caring, concerned love for his creation and for the least of its creatures that characterize a loving parent.

The idea of God as “Spirit” and thus as living and personal receives a new accent in modern thought. With the rise of modern philosophy, and especially with German idealism, the notion of “Spirit” is associated with the intense exploration of “consciousness” in modern thought and particularly with the exploration of “reflective” and “reflexive

⁸ I arrive at this list by applying the following test. Ask of a classical or revisionary theology what beliefs are so fundamental that conviction of their falsity would require substantial alteration or abandonment of the entire position. These are the minimal, broad affirmations that pass this test in contemporary theology. Interestingly, this was not so much the case in the nineteenth century. See Gerrish (1978) for powerful analyses of positions taken on these and related issues by important nineteenth century thinkers. ⁹ See Owen (1971), 17–44.

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consciousness” in idealism.¹⁰ But “life” is as important as “consciousness.” That is, for a theism (or pantheism) along these lines, the basic model for both reality and a supreme being is organic.¹¹ Reality at the point of its utmost concreteness is not “dead matter” but organic life, infinitely rich and pulsating with depths of vitality entirely missed by the mere “surfaces” touched by the notion of “matter.” The richness and complexity of “consciousness” serve as the model for describing this organic vitality.¹² This connection between the modern notion of “Spirit” (as consciousness and self-consciousness) and ontological organicism makes evident an underlying continuity between process thought and German idealism. Even though the explicit development of the categories of “Spirit” is less prominent in the former, they share an ontological and cosmic organicism.

At the same time, process thought, especially Hartshorne and his followers, has developed the metaphysical resources necessary to cash out the notion of a loving supreme being. Process thinkers see that crucial to the notion of a loving God is not merely loving *intent* but loving *response* (and indeed, the capacity for *responsiveness* as such). This idea has been richly developed with the notion of God’s “consequent nature.”¹³ What is important is that where modern

¹⁰ See Taylor (1975), 51–196.

¹¹ For this reason, Goethe and the romantic poets are as important for this turn taken by a strand of modern thought as is the internal history of philosophy from Descartes through the idealists to Nietzsche (and perhaps Heidegger). See Abrams (1971).

¹² The preeminent instance is, of course, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, but the same metaphysical stance is at work in many others such as Fichte and both the early and late Schelling. Despite the weight given to the ontological concept of “existence” (in contrast to “consciousness”) in existentialist philosophy, the tie between “life” (an ontological “organicism”) and the depths of consciousness is still very close. This can be seen in the prominence given to “subjectivity” and, especially, “freedom.” This connection between “Spirit” and an ontological organicism also probably accounts for both the power and the anomalies in Tillich’s thought, which is otherwise so close to naturalism.

¹³ Process thinkers correctly emphasize God’s responsiveness, and they have made good arguments for its religious relevance. It is not so clear, however, that process thought is terribly cogent on the notion of divine intentional agency. Success here is certainly not achieved by Ogden’s “What Does It Mean to Say ‘God Acts in History?’” however successful this essay may be in elucidating God’s historical action. (On this latter score, a careful reading will show that it certainly does not achieve the notion of God’s *particular* action [see *RG*, 164–187].) Lewis Ford is one of the few process thinkers to devote explicit attention to this matter. He tries to conceptualize God’s loving intentional action with the idea that God provides eternal objects for the subjective aim of each emerging concrescence (see Ford [1978], 15–69). Though this seems to be the direction a process theology would have to take, it requires far more extensive development than Ford devotes to it. As it stands, it suffers from two shortcomings. Either it is metaphysically vacuous (at the point of loving intent) since God provides eternal objects for all concrescences. Or, when this provision is particularized (as Ford does [see, esp., Ford (1978), 55ff. for Jesus]) it quite woodenly *reads back* into cosmology an overly literal and somewhat religiously naive conception of Christianity’s constitutive “saving events.”

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thought has most powerfully contributed to the traditional concept of “Spirit,” it has had to rely on a very strong metaphysical notion of cosmic, certainly ontological, organicism. A very great deal is made to hinge on the plausibility of this notion.

The second affirmation is of a cosmic or final teleology informing the ongoing passage of the world. This idea is closely related to that of a personal God. Just as the idea of an intelligent being who can act intentionally (carry out purposes) lies behind the attributes of a personal God, so also must such actions not merely be possible within the world but the world must be conceived so that its actuality is truly the outcome of such action. This is even the case when, as in most modern efforts, a major role is reserved for human freedom, for the issue is much wider, is indeed cosmic in scope, than merely to fit human freedom into the world.¹⁴ Reality must be conceived so that divine activity within it is both possible and everywhere present. So, there is a close relationship between a personal God and a metaphysics which makes teleology possible and actual.

Connected with this issue is Christianity’s stake in eschatological conceptions. Indeed, theologically, eschatology focuses cosmic teleology. This is even true of providence, for within Christianity, the doctrine of providence is given shape by an eschatological frame, as can be seen in figures as diverse as Augustine and Moltmann. And of course, it is the eschatological frame of Christianity that has decisively shaped Western notions of history. What is crucial again, as with a personal God, is that both forms of theism rely theologically on a very strong metaphysical claim, namely, that a metaphysical account of what is real can and must include teleology at its very center, indeed a teleology grounded in the acts of a personal divinity.¹⁵ The metaphysical character of the theological claim is evident because the idea of

¹⁴ It is revealing, though also entirely predictable, that Ford, in order to ground his account of divine intentional activity regarding humanity, must attribute the course of evolution itself to God’s specific, quite particular provision (see Ford [1978], 56–63). On this basis, it is easy for him to formulate this same particularized activity culturally, historically, and religiously, especially in terms of a surprisingly orthodox (and parochial) conception of the election of Israel (see Ford [1978], 131ff.).

¹⁵ The important but as yet unpublished work of my colleague Phillip Scribner demonstrates that an account of teleological causality can be given on entirely naturalistic terms. Indeed, Scribner pulls this rabbit out of the hat of a strongly reductionist physicalism. What is important in Scribner’s path-breaking work, however, is that this causality is entirely mechanistic. In both classical and revisionary theism, in contrast, teleology must be seen as “intentional agency” in the widest sense. It must, if you will, be assimilated to “the point of view of the subject,” and this point of view must be conceived as having the widest and deepest metaphysical efficacy.

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“history” as a purposive or developmental process, decisively influenced by Christian eschatological sources, can be divorced from its cosmic background and given an entirely naturalistic account.¹⁶ In other words, Christian conceptions of history require a cosmic, eschatological background even if the historical development for which they have otherwise been important can be rendered apart from it.

The third affirmation concerns the conservation of value and is most easily seen theologically in views concerning “survival of death,” or in the way theologians discuss a final destiny for human beings and/or humanity beyond death. I have chosen a broad and loose term, the conservation of value, to characterize this affirmation because it is difficult to find another phrase that will fairly capture the issues at stake across the spectrum of theological views.¹⁷ The difficulties in finding an appropriate term are themselves revealing. Theologians speak today with altogether too little candor about precisely what it is that non-theologians can be expected to believe about death and what is beyond death, on issues of “personal resurrection,” “immortality,” “God’s eschatological promise,” or a “destiny beyond death.” At no other point in theological discussions today is it more common to find reference to tired, old formulas without theological elucidation. When theologians do discuss these issues, it is often difficult to figure out what is being affirmed – and denied.¹⁸

The hesitancy with which contemporary theologians affirm beliefs about “subjective immortality” is also revealing.¹⁹ Until about the

¹⁶ The “doctrine of progress” has, of course, been out of fashion for a long time. But apart from changes in fashion, important ethnographic, anthropological, archeological, and historical work since the 1930’s, when the “doctrine” began to lose its allure, make it quite clear that, in a broad sense and taking sufficiently large spans of time and geography into account, something like a “progressive,” or developmental, or structural view of human history is entirely plausible. Such a view can be developed without recourse to any notion of metaphysical teleology at all (see, e.g., Eisenstadt [1986]).

¹⁷ The only place I have found this phrase is in R. W. Hepburn’s “Questions about the Meaning of Life” (Klemke [1981], 209–227, at 209, 221–225), though he does not use it to identify quite the same set of issues as here.

¹⁸ See, for example, Gilkey (1976) 296 f. which is better than most. Gilkey speaks of “reunion” beyond death, and he insists that if death is final, then it is “ultimate” and therefore qualifies the ultimacy of our relation to the ultimate (not, to say the least, an entirely clear argument). But Gilkey makes it quite explicit that the final content of God’s love is to “triumph over the conditions of our finitude” (Gilkey [1976], 318).

¹⁹ It is often claimed that there is an essential difference between the Hebraic idea of resurrection and the Greek idea of immortality. This difference is located at two points: (1) unlike immortality, the resurrection faith envisages a renewal of the full psycho-physical identity of persons and thus includes their social existence. (2) Resurrection is not a natural, ontological condition (i.e., a *naturally* immortal soul) but is founded on the promise and gift of