

# Power and Goodness of the Object of the Religious Attitude: Axiological Determinacy and Ambiguity in Recent Religious Naturalism

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*Thus the term “God” is used, not simply to designate the collection of disparate cosmic powers that have produced us, but to focus our attention and commitment to this process.*

*Why continue to use the ancient term? “Why not just speak of ‘cosmic and historical forces’ working toward humanization and ecological order?” The answer in part lies in the need to connect ourselves with the historical past in order to see our place in the trajectory moving into the future.*

In his study of recent religious naturalism, the physicist theologian Willem Drees of the University of Leiden points out the tension between those (like Ralph Burhoe) for whom the object of religious orientation is morally ambivalent and those, (like Charley Hardwick and myself) for whom it is a term of positive value only.<sup>1</sup>

This tension within religious naturalism received classic form in the exchanges between Henry Nelson Wieman and William Bernhardt as the distinction between the power and goodness of God or whether God is a term of selection or a term for a concrete, hence ambiguous, actuality. Bernard Loomer in *The Size of God* opted for the latter.<sup>2</sup> The issue also surfaces in Bernard Meland’s writings.<sup>3</sup> In slightly different form the dispute separated George Santayana and John Dewey, and was an echo of the differences, outside the boundaries of naturalism, between Jonathan Edwards or Samuel Hopkins and William Ellery Channing, and earlier between Baruch Spinoza and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and between Thomas Aquinas and William of Occam.

The purpose of this article is to trace, in roughly chronological order, the current form of this dispute in the writings of Jerome Stone, Gordon Kaufman, and Charley Hardwick,<sup>4</sup> who conceive of an axiologically determinate object of religious orientation (one that is in some sense creative of the good), and Charles Milligan, William Dean, Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry and Donald Crosby, who opt for the moral ambiguity of the religious ultimate (one in some sense creative of both and evil, at least from a human perspective). In addition the movement of Sharon Welch between these views and the subtlety of the stance of Karl Peters will be discussed. The article will conclude with a possible resolution of this tension.

***The Axiologically Determinate Object of Religious Orientation—The Author’s Perspective***

The writer holds that many events have what could be called a sacred aspect. He is not referring to a being, a separate mind or spirit. He is saying that some things, like justice and human dignity, and the creativity of the natural world, are sacred. This vision is very pluralistic. What degree of unity there is to this plurality he is reluctant to say.

He has elaborated a technical definition in his book, *The Minimalist Vision of Transcendence*. *The transcendent, in his terminology, refers to norms and creative powers which are relatively or situationally transcendent*, that is, transcendent to a specific situation yet naturalistically conceived as immanent within the world. A common element in the paradigm cases of religion seems to be what he terms an orientation to transcendence. There is also a polarity of norms and of creative power(s). Within the limits of his naturalistic outlook the transcendent dimension of norms and powers is understood as a collection of continually compelling norms and situation transcending creative powers. They are “relatively transcendent” to norms and situations within the world, yet are within the world as relevant possibilities and realities beyond a situation as perceived. To illustrate this, the search for the norms of truth or justice means to reach for possibilities relatively transcendent to present attainments and yet relevant to our efforts. Truth and justice remain continually compelling norms no matter how far we come. Likewise openness to the healing or restorative powers of medicine or pedagogy means a readiness to receive creative and recreative powers relatively transcendent to our present situation and yet located within the world beyond our limited present. This is a philosophy urging openness to norms and resources, which are beyond our narrowly perceived present, yet are not resident in a different realm.<sup>5</sup>

Recently Stone has articulated a simplified version of this minimalism in a theory of the sacred: 1) as a quality of events or processes of overriding importance, 2) not within our control, and 3) to be treated with respect.<sup>6</sup> As a counterpoint to this, Stone insists, as a resistance to fanaticism, that the sacred is not to be isolated from questioning, criticism, or rational and empirical inquiry.

### ***The Axiologically Determinate Object of Religious Orientation—Gordon Kaufman***

Gordon Kaufman has been moving into a religious naturalist position in recent writings, particularly *In Face of Mystery*, chapters 19-22, although he does not use that term.<sup>7</sup> Kaufman’s analysis of the term “God” is that it refers to that which produces and leads us to a fuller human existence and at the same time, that which relativizes all our projects, accomplishments and values. In short, God is that which humanizes and relativizes. Although this symbol is a construction of disciplined imagination for which we are responsible, it refers to a reality which is “neither a simple fantasy of ours nor something that we can manipulate or control, make or remake as we choose; God is a reality genuinely distinct from us and all our imaginings, that which—quite apart from our own doing—has given us our being as humans and continues to nurture and sustain us.”<sup>8</sup>

In place of the personal-agential model for divine creativity, Kaufman develops a model based on the serendipity of the long cosmic and historical process, referring to the surprising, unforeseen and unexpected results of a process, results which are not always happy or fortunate. Although he seems to find history to be the area most suggestive of serendipity, by analogous extension he finds it a fruitful concept to apply to both

biological and cosmological processes.<sup>9</sup> This cosmic serendipity has “trajectories,” series of events which, building on each other, seem in retrospect to take a certain direction. These trajectories move in many “directions,” humanity being one of them. “Thus the appearance of human modes of being in the world would be properly regarded not as a metaphysical surd but rather as grounded in the ultimate nature of things, in the ultimate mystery.”<sup>10</sup>

This complex notion of trajectories of serendipitous creativity provides an overall vision which gives significant, but not dominant place, to human life within the cosmic and biological processes. This can provide an orientation encouraging people to take responsible roles, a ground of hope (though not certainty), which can help motivate people to devote their lives to bringing about a more humane world.<sup>11</sup>

On this view the symbol “god” refers us not to a particular existent being within or beyond the world, but rather to that trajectory of cosmic and historical forces which, having emerged out of the ultimate mystery of things, is moving us toward a more truly humane and ecologically responsible mode of existence: it is *that* to which I commit myself; it is that which I will serve with my life.<sup>12</sup>

Thus the term “God” is used, not simply to designate the collection of disparate cosmic powers that have produced us, but to focus our attention and commitment to this process. At this point there are parallels to Henry Nelson Wieman and to Shailer Mathews.<sup>13</sup>

Why continue to use the ancient term? “Why not just speak of ‘cosmic and historical forces’ working toward humanization and ecological order?” The answer in part lies in the need to connect ourselves with the historical past in order to see our place in the trajectory moving into the future.

In focusing our attention and devotion with the aid of this symbol... we make clear (both to ourselves and to others) that we do not regard ourselves as a generation basically disconnected from our forbears... rather as participants in an ongoing history and community...

The idea of “cosmic and historical forces” working toward humanization and ecological responsibility... is much too abstract and intellectual to be able to generate universal interest and support. To commit ourselves to *God*, however, is to express just such a stance and loyalty by means of a symbol which is capable of drawing together and unifying persons of differing degrees of sophistication in all walks of life.<sup>14</sup>

In addition the term focuses our attention on the gradually increasing unity and directness of the specific cosmic trajectory toward humaneness.

“God,” as a proper name... focuses our minds so they will grasp as significantly unified and of existential import to us what we might otherwise take to be simply diverse processes and powers.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup>

In a passage reminiscent of George Burman Foster, Kaufman writes that:

bringing “God” into our considerations here does not commit us to the existence of some additional *being* (either in the world or beyond the world) from which these evolutionary forces proceed, any more than selfhood (for example) commits us to an individual “something” alongside the body... Rather, what we are doing by employing the name “God” is attending to the significance (for us human beings) of the *unity* and *direction* which gradually developed in this particular evolutionary-historical trajectory... “God” (with its accent on that which grounds our humanness) is the principle word available in our language for focusing our minds on this growing unity of *directedness toward the human*.<sup>17</sup>

Implicated in this notion of serendipitous creativity is a transcendent point of criticism which challenges our standards and dreams. It is important that religious naturalism has this principle of criticism and prophetic protest.

What is needed is a nonreified version of the normative, a version according which it is never expected that life will perfectly conform to the ideal—there will always be room for criticism and further transformation... but at the same time it is not held that the perfect or ideal “exists” somehow or somewhere “outside” or “beyond” the world.<sup>18</sup>

Recently Kaufman has been willing to use the term naturalism to describe his approach, although he would prefer the qualifier “biohistorical” to “religious.”<sup>19</sup>

### ***The Axiologically Determinate Object of Religious Orientation —Charley Hardwick***

Charley Hardwick’s *Events of Grace* is a tightly argued explication of a Christian theology of grace within a rigorous naturalism that asserts that only physical entities exist.<sup>20</sup>

Drawing on the philosopher Rem Edwards, Hardwick finds four basic features in naturalism which theologians today should affirm. These are: (1) that only the world of nature is real; (2) that this world requires no sufficient reason beyond itself to account for its origin; (3) that nature as a whole is understandable without appeal to any kind of intelligence or purposive agent; and, (4) that all causes are natural causes so that every natural event is itself a product of other natural events.<sup>21</sup> Hardwick adds that two additional features which most naturalisms have included are problematic and not essential to naturalism. These are that natural science is the only reliable method for achieving knowledge, and that value is based solely on the interests of human beings.

Hardwick indicates the implications of naturalism for religious thinking. He holds that both classical and revisionary theisms generally have three things in common: (1) that God is personal, (2) that some form of cosmic teleology is true, and (3) that there is a cosmic conservation of value.<sup>22</sup> On Hardwick's view a naturalist theology, roughly what I have called religious naturalism, requires a reconception of religion including the denial of these three theses.

Hardwick starts his reconception with a vigorous affirmation of "physicalism," based on the philosopher John Post. "Loosely, physicalism asserts that only the basic objects known by mathematical physics exist and that everything at a higher or more complex level can occur only if there is a corresponding occurrence at the level of physics." Technically, the "determination relation" means that all domains are unified by "the basic physical entities" or physical unifiers.<sup>23</sup> This physicalism is the consequence of our scientific understanding and a honest theology must face up to it.

One consequence of physicalism for Hardwick is the determination of truth and value. "All truth is determined by physical truth."<sup>24</sup> Further, the physical realm determines the truth about values and thus provides for the objectivity of values.

Three further claims supposedly flow from physicalism. These are that 1) all properties and states of things are really physical properties and states, 2) domains and discourses other than that of physical entities (sentience, intentions, consciousness, persons, culture, etc.) are finally an illusion, and 3) physics can explain everything.<sup>25</sup>

Hardwick (and Post) reject these reductive implications. Post states this point by stating: "nothing but mathematical-physical entities exist yet not everything is nothing but a mathematical-physical thing."<sup>26</sup> This is a pluralist physicalism which recognizes a variety of domains and discourses, including God and theology. It grants explanatory and semantic autonomy among the domains. Nonphysical things, specifically emergent properties, are real, though there are corresponding occurrences at the level of physics.

For Hardwick the heart of the Christian life is God's gift of faith as openness to the future and liberation from inauthentic to authentic existence. In traditional terms, this is a Pauline-Lutheran-Bultmannian view. How does Hardwick meld his naturalism and this view of the Christian life? How does he explain this "born-again" naturalism? The answer is in his view of God.

For the naturalist Hardwick, entities should not be multiplied. Hence God cannot be an entity, and God-language is non-referential. Yet we can affirm "God exists." God-language must be cognitive, capable of truth or falsity, even though non-referential. This is possible, because assertions about God rest upon assertions about value, which, since the truth about values is physically determined, can be true or false, and hence God-language is capable of truth and falsity. "God exists" is a meta-assertion, which for Hardwick does not mean a statement about a system of assertions, but a non-referential assertion, a statement which expresses the theistic valuational stance. This is buttressed by his reading of Wieman in which God is a valuational, not an ontological, term. "God exists" articulates a "seeing-as," specifically, it expresses the gift of openness to the future. The Christian valuational stance is openness to the future, the move from bondage to liberation, transformation from inauthentic to authentic existence. "God" means the giftedness of this move, that this transformation is not of ourselves but comes to us. God language is not required for this transformation, but does provide the best account of it. This is, in short, a "twice born naturalism."

We now move to the second set of writers who opt for the ambiguity of the object of religion.

***The Axiologically Indeterminate Object of Religious Orientation—Charles Milligan***

Charles Milligan, professor emeritus of philosophy of religion at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, has been an advocate of a Whiteheadian neo-pantheism emphasizing individuation, distinctiveness, and change. Milligan, drawing especially on his mentor William Bernhardt, clearly advocates the ambiguity of the object of religious orientation. “Naturalistic pantheism does not soften the brutal fact of the moral ambiguity of the universe or the frequent injustices which befall multitudes of human beings.”<sup>27</sup>

For Milligan moral values are not to be deduced from a concept of God. What needs to be called into question is the assumption that a satisfactory God must provide authority for the ethical good... *Some* significant ethical guidance and human applicability can be drawn from... nature... For example... cheat on the data and the value of the experiment has been destroyed... On the other hand, there are moral qualities and principles to which nature is indifferent. Chief among these are justice and compassion... Whatever concept you have of God, it is undeniable that the sun shines and the rain falls (or drought befalls) the just and the unjust with sublime indifference.<sup>28</sup>

What must be realized, according to Milligan, is that worship does not determine one’s moral judgment. “Far more characteristically, the God or gods have been that which evoke the sense of majesty, awesome wonder, the splendor of beauty and mystery.”<sup>29</sup>

Part of the problem is speaking of nature in the abstract. There are respects in which nature is plainly supportive of human life and values—that we are here speaks to that. There are other ways in which nature is destructive of human life and values, as the existence of disease demonstrates. And then there are other matters in which nature is morally ambiguous. Poison the earth... and... there will be suffering and death.<sup>30</sup>

Shall we lapse into self-indulgence or destructiveness since we worship the morally ambiguous whole? No. “Any people’s worship does not seem uniformly and consistently to culminate in passionate pursuit of peace, daily practice of love, and exercise of impartial justice... Is it not all too clear that the task of sorting out and systematizing ethical claims is a human task?”<sup>31</sup>

***The Axiologically Indeterminate Object of Religious Orientation—William Dean***

We turn now to three examples of current religious naturalists for whom the object of religious orientation is morally ambiguous, is indeterminate axiologically.

William Dean argues in *The Religious Critic in American Culture*, that the sacred is a convention, composed of images carried by the spiritual culture of a people, of what is ultimately important.<sup>32</sup> Although it is constantly subject to reinterpretation, it also influences a people's interpretations. As such, it is partially independent of a people's interpretation. It has a life of its own. This independence is seen in that the effects of a sacred convention exceed what is predictable by reference to the images which contribute to that convention. The sacred, like any socially constructed reality, can turn back on the society and act in ways that were not intended. The sacred, then, is a living tradition about what is ultimately significant, is constantly reinterpreted, is completely historical, and is partially independent of its society.

Such a convention is not a mere projection, first because it has effects upon its society, and second, because it works in ways that cannot be strictly predicted. The sacredness of the sacred depends both on its partial independence and on the fact that it involves what is ultimately important, responding to a people's deepest questions and suggesting ultimately important answers. God is such a sacred convention within the life of the American public.

Although it is subject to continual reinterpretation and its effects are unpredictable, a sacred convention is conservative in its own way, since it stands in a line of past conventions. Any convention is tied with a fairly short leash to its previous interpretations.

As a public construction in a chain of interpretations, a sacred convention is neither objective nor subjective, but is formed by an objective public past interacting with current subjective creativity but reducible to neither. To illustrate this Dean refers to the American Constitution which, as a convention, is not reducible either to a written document nor to the interpretations of the Supreme Court. Likewise God, as a sacred convention, is a social construction with a reality of its own, with unpredictable effects upon the society within which it operates.

Dean is quite clear that the sacred is morally ambiguous.<sup>33</sup> Our images of ultimacy are morally ambiguous. And since the sacred as a convention is both affected by and affects those images, it follows that the sacred is probably ambiguous. Further, the misery of human histories provides an adequate, if inconclusive, reason for believing that the sacred is implicated in that misery. This affirmation denies that the idea of moral perfection is a deep wisdom. Also language about the divine is an attempt to describe what is, to respond to the whole of reality, rather than to call for what ought to be. To make this affirmation is to follow Martin Luther, John Calvin, Paul Tillich, William Bernhardt, Bernard Loomer, Elie Wiesel, Fred Sontag, and John K. Roth, rather than Whitehead, Wieman, Hartshorne, David Griffin or Jerome Stone.

Dean gives richness to this affirmation of the morally ambiguous character of the sacred by a discussion of Biblical material, drawing on James Crenshaw and Judith Plaskow, by contrasting John Dewey and Bernard Loomer, and by a discussion of American sports. Indeed, "in professional sports lies one of the last public places in America where the brutality of everyday life is ritually dramatized."<sup>34</sup> In his latest book, Dean elaborates further on the relationship between sports and American spiritual culture as exemplifying the ambiguity of the sacred.<sup>35</sup> (In the conclusion to this fine analysis of

American culture, Dean elaborates on “the irony of atheism,” ironical because atheism fully pursued can lead to an opening to a glimpse of the sacred. In this section Dean may depart from the limits of religious naturalism as I have drawn them. This should not detract from the importance of his insights).

***The Axiologically Indeterminate Object of Religious Orientation—  
Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme***

World religions scholar Thomas Berry and physicist Brian Swimme have been collaborating on articulating a narrative world view informed by the major results of scientific cosmology, evolutionary biology, and human history. This world narrative sees our ecological crisis as necessitating an appreciative yet critical transformation of the modern Western outlook. Combining a careful use of precisely worded empirical generalizations and poetic metaphor, this world narrative seeks to reconnect religious insights and scientific discoveries. Indeed, this universal creative process is sacred and, should the divine be regarded as transcendent, the universe itself should be seen as the primary revelation of the divine.

One guiding thread in this approach is the thrust to restore, in a contemporary fashion, some degree of the lost intimacy between humans and the rest of the world. This thread is part of a wider thread that articulates the interconnectedness, with perhaps varying degrees of relevance and intimacy, of all parts of the universe.

Another thread is that an evolving yet relatively consistent scientific picture, based on disciplines including astrophysics, quantum theory, evolutionary biology, archaeology, and history, shows that the entire universe is a history, which can be narrated. The grasp of the significance of this irreversible, temporal dimension is a new element in human understanding, even though it has roots in the Abrahamic outlooks. This is why narrative is crucial for Berry and Swimme. The cosmic scale of this unites us with the mythic stance of primal peoples at the same time as its scientific underpinnings provide a new element in the history of worldviews and helps prevent naïve romanticism. This narrative, cosmic yet inclusive of each person, helps bridge scientific inquiry and religious wisdoms. The universality of this cosmic epic also opens the way to inter-cultural conversation.

When the threads of historicity and of interconnectedness are woven together, what is perhaps the nodal point of this tapestry is discovered, namely that humans are an integral part of the ongoing universe-process, indeed, humans are the universe-process become self-conscious. Hence they can say that “the mathematical formulations of the scientists are the way in which the multiform universe deepens its self-understanding.”<sup>36</sup>

Berry and Swimme are self-consciously willing to use emotionally charged language, such as “instant by instant the universe creates itself as a bonded community.” From the perspective of the dominant worldview that we now need to outgrow, they claim, such language was derided as an anthropomorphic stain. “The anthropomorphic language was abandoned in favor of mechanomorphic language,” in order to abandon wishful thinking and establish contact with the essence of things. Besides, given the processive-relational nature of things, to know carbon we need to know what it can do in the right contexts. We can refer to carbon as the “thinking element” or “the element of life,” abandoning univocal for analogical language.<sup>37</sup>

This epic narrative is close to a Whiteheadian approach, differing in emphasis partly by its self-conscious melding of current science and the world's wisdom traditions, by its construction of a single grand narrative with room for local traditions, and by its reference to the sacredness of the creative process and its evolving products.

Berry's background as a Chardin scholar shows in the controversial concept of the "interiority" or "subjectivity" of things.

Things emerge with an inner capacity for self-manifestation. Even an atom posses a quantum of radical spontaneity. In later developments in the universe this minimal dimension of spontaneity grows until it becomes a dominant fact of behavior, as in the life of the gray whale.<sup>38</sup>

The integrity of the universe must be respected, so we must not think of consciousness as a radical departure, its possibility is latent from the beginning and its actuality is dimly present in many life forms. This emphasis on the interiority of things provides the basis for a feeling of intimacy or communion with both the universe at large and with all the many things within it. Indeed, this intimacy is not only for humans, but for all beings. Rather than a collection of objects, the universe is a communion of subjects.

Although Berry and Swimme do not use our term "axiological ambiguity," their treatment of the role of destruction in the universe clearly sets them in the camp of those who see the object of religious orientation to be inclusive of good and evil.

Violence and destruction are dimensions of the universe. They are present at every level of existence: the elemental, the geological, the organic, and the human .We even find it difficult to determine when violence is simply destructive or when violence is linked to creativity... Yet it is out of such violence—even in some mating cycles and in some processes of nurturance—that the stupendous variety displays its beauty throughout the planetary system.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, three pervasive features of existence are the roots of violence and destruction: the resistance of matter, the need for energy, and the tendency of things to fulfill their nature.

Many of the inventions of the natural world arose out of beings meeting constraints of the universe with creative responses... The violence associated with the hawk starving to death or the vole being consumed are intrinsically tied to the creativity of each. The beauty of their response arises from an inherently difficult situation.<sup>40</sup>

With the rise of self-reflective consciousness, "life understands that it is precious and liable to destruction." Out of this fear humans devote themselves to eliminating violence and destruction.

The determination to dominate the universe so that all insecurity, limitation, destruction, and threat of destruction could be eliminated eventuated in racism,

militarism, sexism, and anthropocentrism, dysfunctional maneuvers of the human species in its quest to deal with what it regarded as the unacceptable aspects of the universe.<sup>41</sup>

Swimme and Berry conclude this treatment with a nuanced reflection on the necessity of legitimate sacrifice which justifies neither cruelty nor masochism. Indeed our esteem for heroes and those who sacrifice comfort, wealth or prestigious work for the betterment of the Earth community, reveals our “recognition that the individuals who act this way make clear a sacred dimension of existence.”<sup>42</sup>

### ***The Axiologically Indeterminate Object of Religious Orientation—Donald Crosby***

In *A Religion of Nature* Donald Crosby has developed a viewpoint in which nature is both metaphysically and religiously ultimate. He starts by asserting three theses: 1) nature is religiously ultimate, 2) nature is metaphysically ultimate in that it is self-sustaining and requires no explanation for its existence beyond itself, and 3) humans are “at home” in the universe and our moral and religious responsibilities extend to one another, to the human community, and to the whole of nature.<sup>43</sup>

In Part One of *A Religion of Nature* Crosby develops a sophisticated process-relational conception of nature, drawing heavily on William James and Whitehead. By means of this he is able to address many of the standard objections to naturalism which are based on a nineteenth century mechanistic conception of nature.

After developing his conception of nature, Crosby proceeds to clarify and justify his assertion that nature is religiously ultimate. He does this by articulating a complex theory of the functions of a “religious object,” that is, “the fundamental focus of thought and practice in a particular religious system or outlook.”<sup>44</sup> The six functions of a religious object are uniqueness, primacy, pervasiveness in relation to everything else, rightness in the sense of defining the goal as well as a standard for human existence, permanence in the face of declining health and impending death, and hiddenness, in the sense of being a source of mystery and awe and something which can only be spoken of elliptically. Crosby then goes on to show how nature fulfills each of these six functions and thus is the appropriate religious object.

Flesh can be put on Crosby’s conception by noting how he responds to six standard objections to a view like his. The first three objections, that nature is wasteful, cruel, and indifferent to humans, he classifies as moral objections. His approach can be seen by examining his answer to the second objection, that nature is cruel.

Crosby first notes that to speak of the cruelty of nature is a category mistake, to treat nature anthropomorphically. But we must face the fact that pain, suffering, and death are serious disvalues.

In my account, good and evil interfuse in nature and constitute its axiological ambiguity... The system of nature that makes these wide-scale intrinsic evils necessary is *to that extent* an evil system... It is partly good but also partly evil. It contains rampant disvalues as well as rampant values.<sup>45</sup>

This also means that we cannot base our moral outlook on nature as a whole.

Crosby's response to the third objection, the alleged indifference of nature, is similar. He points out first, that the objection is a category mistake, since nature itself is not personal and thus could not be indifferent. Then we realize that, along with apparent indifference, nature can have redemptive significance for humans, that it can "rejuvenate, inspire and redeem" us.<sup>46</sup>

The next two objections to the view of nature as religiously ultimate, that nature is not personal and that it is contingent, Crosby calls metaphysical objections. His response to the first, that nature is not intentional, has no conscious awareness, is multiple. 1) Just because we would like for something to be true, does not make it so. 2) The advantage of realizing that the religious ultimate is not personal is that there is no need for theodicy. 3) While there is no purpose of nature as a whole, there is purpose in nature in humans and some animals. 4) Many religious outlooks do not include personality in their religious ultimate. 5) The objection seems presumptuous and hubristic. 6) In religions with a personal deity prayers of petition have the theoretical difficulty of God's partiality and of violating the principle of parsimony. On the other hand, it is "possible to express gratitude, trust, and personal resolve in meditations upon nature."<sup>47</sup>

Crosby's response to the objection that nature is contingent is also complex. 1) All questions about nature as self-existent apply also to God. Where did God come from? If God is self-caused, why cannot nature be? 2) While it is legitimate to seek for explanations of things within nature, we need not think that we need an explanation for nature as a whole. 3) It is possible to think of nature as existing necessarily, provided we think of it as *natura naturans* rather than as *nature naturata*. 4) Nature as a metaphysical and religious ultimate has the advantage of being open to scientific investigation. Thus it is a more plausible candidate for the given to which all explanations appeal than a vague and elusive spirit.

The final objection to nature as a religious ultimate is practical. The religion of nature has no organization, tradition, ritual, symbols or practice. Crosby's response is that there is already potential material in existing religious traditions from which a religion of nature can draw in developing beliefs, evocations and practices appropriate to itself.

What Crosby calls his "final set" of reasons for according religious ultimacy to nature is that nature, while not itself good, is the principal source of good for all its creatures. Specifically, nature has produced the beauty and sublimity of the physical universe, through biological evolution it is the source, sustainer, and restorer of life, it is the ultimate source of human life and the specific goods of human history, and nature has evolved humans so as to implant in them a yearning for the attainment and preservation of good. Thus, "we have no need of God, gods animating spirits...nor do we need to pine for another life... Nature itself, when we rightly conceive of it and comprehend our role within it, can provide ample context and support for finding purpose, value, and meaning in our lives."<sup>48</sup>

### ***Two Special Cases—Karl Peters and Sharon Welch***

We conclude our survey of the issue of the axiological determinacy or ambiguity in the object of religious orientation by reference to one thinker who seems to span the gap and one who has moved across the gap between these two views.

What Karl Peters, co-editor of *Zygon*, calls serendipitous creativity is a two-part process: the recurrence of variations in cosmic, biological, and human history and the selection of some of these variations to continue.<sup>49</sup> In short, God is the creative process which is made up of a set of interactions that create variations plus a set of interactions that preserve some of them. Following Ralph Wendell Burhoe, God is the twofold process of innovation and selection in cosmic, cultural and personal evolution. This means that cosmic and biological evolution and individual life can be thought of in Taoist fashion as a dance or conversation where no one leads and there is no goal but where each mutually influences the others. The pay-off is participation in the dance itself.

What this means is that for Peters, if I read him correctly, the creative process in Darwinian fashion selects for creative innovation and survival, and is in this sense axiologically determinate, but in the process is destructive of what does not survive and in this sense is axiologically ambiguous. On this reading, for Peters it is a matter of perspective. From the viewpoint of the total process selection is for the good. From the viewpoint of anything left behind in the process, selection will appear evil.<sup>50</sup>

Sharon Welch is one thinker who has made a fundamental shift on our issue. When she wrote the first edition of *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* in the 1980's she clearly took the view of the axiologically determinate character of the object of religious orientation.

Grace is not the manifestation of the divine in our lives, the gift of a separate or foundational being... grace is all there is or need be of the divine.<sup>51</sup>

Here Welch is clear on the connection between the divine and worthiness of worship.

Divinity then connotes a quality of relationships, lives, events, and natural processes that are worthy of worship, that provide orientation, focus, and guidance to our lives.<sup>52</sup>

Divinity, or grace, is the resilient, fragile, healing power of finitude itself... The divinity of these forces does not lie in their absolute power but in the quality of life they enable... We who are feminist theologians find much that is divine—work for justice, love, creativity itself, the web of life, joy, and beauty, innumerable states and qualities of acting are divine. By naming joy as divine, we affirm that these aspects of human existence are worthy of worship.<sup>53</sup>

However, by the time she wrote *Sweet Dreams in America* Welch has moved toward a sense of the ambiguity of the divine.

The solace and challenge of belonging to a community, the joy and challenge of finding a purpose in life, may seem unambiguously good... Nothing could be further from the truth. Religious experience, while most certainly real and

compelling, is fundamentally amoral. Belonging to a religious group, feeling connected to other people and to the sacred, can as easily fuel campaigns of genocide and coercion as movements of compassion and social transformation. Slave owners and abolitionists, participants in the Civil Rights movement and members of the Ku Klux Klan, alike drew comfort and challenge from their religious beliefs and their participation in religious communities.<sup>54</sup>

For Welch this calls, not for a denial of ethics and spirituality, but for irony.

Is it possible to hold together a recognition of the power and value of spirituality without denying its intrinsic dangers? To do so requires developing an ironic spirituality, one fueled by audacity and an appreciation of the perverse contradictions of life.<sup>55</sup>

It also calls for a critical humanism, for an analysis of the actual effects of concrete actions.

Ecstatic religious experience... is... fundamentally amoral. That is, the experience of transcendence is not foundational. It is an experience of creativity, connection, and energy that is as likely to be evoked by the Religious Right and by the Klan as by politically progressive religious groups. The sense of religious ecstasy in each is the same: the sense of being energized, of being connected with forces outside oneself... I argue that we need a critical humanism to check our claims about deity, about the good, and that the check to fanaticism is not religious but political, a critical examination of the actual impact on people of a community's constructions of good, order, truth, and power.<sup>56</sup>

## ***Conclusion***

So now what? Shall we say that we have here two different approaches to the religious object, shall we finally prefer one as more adequate, or shall we be left with a yin-yang alternation?

The answer, I believe, is to recognize the complex nature of the religious orientation. There is, simply put, a difference between the moral and what we could call "the transmoral" attitudes and corresponding to these a difference between the moral and the transmoral aspects of the object of religious devotion. There is a time for moral inspiration and dedication and a time for the recognition of the transmoral aspects of the universe, which call for such attitudes as consent and resignation. We need at times to hear the call of righteousness and at other times to yield and surrender, to relate in awe and wonder. It may take more wisdom than we have to know the difference, which is why this is a matter of risk and courage, sailing between the Scylla of fanaticism and the Charybdis of aimlessness.

Put another way, a healthy religious life should strive for complementarity, to balance moral earnestness with adoration, humility, and a covenant with mystery, to use Goodenough's term. In that case, my emphasis in *The Minimalist Vision of*

*Transcendence* on relative transcendence as referring to constructive forces and ideals needs to be enriched by the balanced view of Karl Peters.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps we need to be inspired by the elements of constructive goodness we select for devotion and also to humble ourselves in awe before the power of the entire creative process.

## Notes

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1. Willem B. Drees, "Thick Naturalism: Comments on *Zygon*, 2000" *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*, 35, 2000, p. 858
  2. Bernard Loomer, "The Size of God," in "The Size of God: The Theology of Bernard Loomer in Context," ed. by William Dean and Larry Axel. *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*. 8 (1987), pp. 20-51. Simultaneously published Macon, GA, Mercer University Press.
  3. Tyron Inbody has an excellent treatment of Meland on this issue. See Tyron Inbody, *The Constructive Theology of Bernard Meland: Postliberal Empirical Realism*, Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1995, pp. 189-192.
  4. Drees, *ibid.*
  5. Jerome A. Stone *The Minimalist Vision of Transcendence*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1992, pp. 9-20.
  6. Jerome A. Stone, "What is Religious Naturalism?," --- "What is Religious Naturalism?," *Journal of Liberal Religion*, Vol. 2, www.Meadville.edu; republished with addendum in *religious humanism*, XXXV, Winter/Spring 2001; see also Jerome A. Stone, "Is Nature Enough?," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*, 38, December 2003, pp. 783-800 and "Religious Naturalism and the Religion-Science Dialogue: A Minimalist View," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*, 37, June 2002.
  7. Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1993; "Biohistorical Naturalism and the Symbol 'God'," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*, 38, March 2003, pp. 95-100.
  8. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*, pp. 316-317.
  9. *Ibid.*, pp. 268, 274, 279.
  10. *Ibid.*, p. 284.
  11. *Ibid.*, p. 294.
  12. *Ibid.*, pp. 347-348.
  13. For a treatment of Mathews on this point, see Jerome A. Stone, *The Minimalist Vision of Transcendence*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1992, p. 52.
  14. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*, p. 348.
  15. Kaufman, *Ibid.*

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16. Kaufman, "Biohistorical Naturalism and the Symbol 'God'," p. 99.
  17. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*, p. 349.
  18. *Ibid.*, p. 327.
  19. Kaufman, "Biohistorical Naturalism and the Symbol 'God,'" pp. 97, 99.
  20. Charley D. Hardwick, *Events of Grace: Naturalism, Existentialism and Theology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. My exposition is drawn from my "Charley Hardwick's Dichotomies: God-language, Determination, and the Subject-Object Dichotomy," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 17, Sept. 1996, pp. 279-293. I have criticisms of Hardwick in this article. This entire issue is devoted to expositions and critiques of Harwick and his replies. In this issue Harley Chapman makes the important point that for Hardwick mystery plays no significant role. His concern is to develop a logical and cogent exposition of a grace-based naturalism, demystifying theological inquiry as much as possible. J. Harley Chapman, "Critical Reflections on Absurdity, Ultimate Explanation and Mystery in Hardwick's *Events of Grace*," pp. 265-278
  21. Charley Hardwick, *Events of Grace: Naturalism, Existentialism and Theology*, 5-6; adapted from Rem Edwards, *Reason in Religion: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, New York, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1972, pp.133-141.
  22. Hardwick, *Events of Grace*, pp. 7-8.
  23. John Post, *The Faces of Existence: An Essay in Non-reductive Metaphysics*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1987, p. 159.
  24. *Ibid.*, p. 196.
  25. *Ibid.*, pp. 162-163.
  26. *Ibid.*, p. 195.
  27. Charles S. Milligan, "The Philosophical Venture: A Personal Account," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, 1991, p. 134; see also "The Eco-Religious Case for Naturalistic Pantheism" in Donald A. Crosby and Charley D. Hardwick, eds, *Religious Experience and Ecological Responsibility*, New York, Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1996, pp. 235-256; "The Pantheistic Motif in American Religious Thought," Peter Freese, ed. *Religion and Philosophy in the United States of America*, Essen, Verlag die Blaue Eule, 1987, Vol. II, pp. 583-602.
  28. Milligan, "The Philosophical Venture," pp. 135-136.
  29. *Ibid.*, p. 136.
  30. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
  31. *Ibid.*, p. 137-138.
  32. William Dean, *The Religious Critic in American Culture*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1994, pp. 133-139.
  33. *Ibid.*, pp. 140-148.

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34. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
35. William Dean, *The American Spiritual Culture: and the Invention of Jazz, Football and the Movies*, New York, Continuum, 2002, pp. 148-171. The note of ambiguity is definitely present in this book. See especially chapter 3.
36. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era—A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos*, San Francisco, Harper Collins Publishers, 1992, p. 40.
37. Swimme and Berry, *The Universe Story*, 35-36; Brian Swimme, *The Universe is a Green Dragon: A Cosmic Creation Story*, Santa Fe, Bear & Company, 1984, pp. 64-66, 77-79.
38. Swimme and Berry, *The Universe Story*, pp. 75-76. See also pp. 71-72.
39. Swimme and Berry, *The Universe Story*, p. 51; See also Swimme, *The Universe is a Green Dragon*, pp. 70-82.
40. Swimme and Berry, *The Universe Story*, p. 56.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
43. Donald A. Crosby, *A Religion of Nature*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2002, xi; see also Donald A. Crosby, "Naturism as a Form of Religious Naturalism," *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science* 38, March 2003, pp. 117-120; Donald A. Crosby, "Transcendence and Immanence in a Religion of Nature," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 24, September 2003, pp. 245-259.
44. Crosby, *A Religion of Nature*, p. 180.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
49. Karl Peters, *Dancing with the Sacred: Evolution, Ecology, and God*, Harrisburg, Trinity Press International, 2002.
50. Ursula Goodenough probably comes out close to Peters at this point. See her *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1998.
51. Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, revised edition, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2000, 175.
52. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, p. 176.
53. *Ibid.*, pp. 178-179.
54. Sharon D. Welch, *Sweet Dreams in America: Making Ethics and Spirituality Work*, New York, Routledge, 1999), p. 127.

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55. Welch, *Sweet Dreams in America*, p. 128.

56. *Ibid.*, xxii

57. Stone, *The Minimalist Vision of Transcendence*, pp. 10-17.