



Meadville Lombard
Theological School

RESPONSE TO “THE MARKETING OF LIBERAL RELIGION”

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When David Bumbaugh speaks, I listen.

I don't always agree with him, but I always listen.

David---I now wish to make two claims:--

First, You are on the cutting edge of a major movement in liberal religious thinking, a movement which I have termed “Religious Naturalism.” Second, you are on this cutting edge because of your roots in two religious giants of our past, Henry Nelson Wieman and Kenneth Patton. Let me defend these two claims.

Religious naturalism as a movement is largely a 20th century movement, including George Santayana and John Dewey among the philosophers, and Henry Nelson Wieman among the theologians. UU's among this movement have included Frederick May Eliot, many of the Humanists, Clarence Skinner, Kenneth Patton, Ralph Burhoe (formerly at Meadville), two fine U-U's lay theologians or philosophers whose names should be more well known, Karl Peters and Donald Crosby, the traveling evangelists for this view Connie Barlow and Michael Dowd, and our own Sharon Welch. And above all, the most well known religious naturalist is Ursula Goodenough, author of *The Sacred Depths of Nature*.

As I define religious naturalism, it seeks to explore and encourage religious ways of responding to the world on a completely naturalistic basis without a supreme being or ground of being.

Religious naturalism is a term which I use. Whether or not all persons I describe as such would accept the term is another question, although many of them have told me that they are comfortable with the term.

But David, I find you not only a religious naturalist, I find you very much among a specific variety of religious naturalists who emphasize the inter-connected web of life and also the great cosmic epic of evolution from the Big Bang until now, or, as some term it, the Big Story. This is indeed the real growing edge of religious naturalism today and I find you right on the leading edge of this school of thought, right up with Ursula Goodenough, Michael Cavanaugh, Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, and Loyal Rue.

David, I am going to quote some of your words which I cannot match. “Universalists brought to merger an important, but unfinished theological concern, while Unitarians brought to merger a set of highly questionable marketing plans....In the years after consolidation the concern for marketing has triumphed.” Now, I spent my career in a declining industry---teaching philosophy, so I have never

rejected the need for marketing. But I have also learned that marketing is of no use unless you have a good product to market. An obvious implication of your remarks is that we have not spent enough time in product development.

“Our efforts at self-definition are grounded in no deep confession of faith, no significant meta-narrative....We have toyed with creating mega-churches by offering something called ‘theology-light seeker services.’ We have devised advertising programs structured around slogans like ‘The Uncommon Denomination’ and ‘The Church That Puts its Faith in You.’ (Parenthetically---I don’t know about the rest of you, but I have seen too much of the son-of-a-bitch in myself—call it a naturalized view of sin—to want anyone to put faith in me.) “Missing in all of this is any coherent theological foundation.” Yes, theology is hard work, it is intellectual work, and we Americans are uneasy about hard intellectual work. Why is a course in theology dreaded, often postponed until the last possible moment? However, if a religious leader thinks about what she or he does professionally, if there is an element of self-reflection, you are doing theology. The only question is whether it is done carefully and adequately. I myself identify with the humanist strand of our tradition. So perhaps “a-theology” is the term for what I am doing. But I accept Professor Bumbaugh’s term “theology” as I understand his usage. Any minister is going to have a theology. The only question is whether it is an adequate theology.

To get back to David Bumbaugh’s reflections, “What is so central to our identity that we must proclaim it, even at the risk of offending someone?” Or as I like to put it, “What separates the UU message from run-of-the mill New Age mediocrity?”

David---I have looked at your statement, complete with Liberty Clause, of our core principles, your updating of Channing’s Baltimore sermon, Gannett’s “Things Commonly Believed Among Us,” and the 1935 Universalists statement. Let me make some comments.

I have already mentioned your affirmation that “all living things are members of a single community.” I am reminded of the phrase of the religious naturalist Bernard Loomer, former Dean of the University of Chicago’s Divinity School as his thought matured. He spoke of “The Web of Life.” He closed his essay on “The Size of God” by referring to the world as an interconnected web.

Now I notice that you hang a lot on the word “sacred.” I suggest that this term has not only homiletical resonance but also theoretical importance in your thinking. As such it needs careful explication and analysis, tasks that are, however, not part of a compendium of belief such as you were composing. I, also, place great stock by the word “sacred” as I try to make my own awkward theology more understandable, even preachable. Howard Radest, the Ethical Culture leader, reminded me that in the human past the sacred was often the unapproachable, as in the Holy of Holies. So I definitely wish to affirm that any thing which we call sacred must definitely be open to rational, ethical and critical scrutiny.

You write that the Universe is reaching toward self-awareness in us, in us and perhaps elsewhere. This is a central point in the work of the naturalists Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme.

You speak of “the moral impulse” as “threaded through the universe itself.” I guess I am too much influenced by Spinoza to agree readily. I think we need to sit down over a beer or cup of coffee. I might have something to learn from you. Or maybe even vice versa. But it is an important topic.

You write that “in some curious way, we are located on the margins.” Now some of us middle-aged white males haven’t yet realized the significance of the fact that we are rapidly becoming a minority in our country, but Susan Thistlethwaite, a liberation theologian with unimpeachable credentials, insists that we all have one foot in privilege and one foot in the margin. Perhaps UU’s may one day realize that the whole country is not just waiting to discover that they are UU’s without knowing it. Have you looked at who own our motels or work in our restaurants or provide us with tech support?

You write, David, of “that larger vision of a world everywhere alive.” I hesitated when I read that, for I think that some of things uttered in the name of the Gaia hypothesis have been empirically questionable. I hesitated, that is, until I realized that I am an environmentalist willing to talk about the four-legged persons and the feathered people. After all, why should language be inelastic? Scientists are continually pushing the envelope of language. Why cannot convictional language, such as you are developing, also push the limits of language? A world everywhere alive. Why not?

I hope that my references to contemporary religious naturalist thinking, including Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, Ursula Goodenough, and Bernard Loomer, have established my first point, that you are at the cutting edge of a major movement in liberal religious thought. Now let me defend my second point, that your roots in the earlier religious naturalist Henry Nelson Wieman and Kenneth Patton give you the nourishment to be at this leading edge.

As for Wieman, the clue is your statement that the world contains a process “that transforms us as we cannot transform ourselves.” That is the central core of Wieman, namely that there is a creative process which transforms us towards the good in ways that our own efforts fail. It is a naturalistic version of the transforming grace of the Western religious tradition. It is naturalistic, rather than supernaturalistic, in that this re-creative process is completely within this world. It is understandable in psychological and sociological terms. It speaks of a process or processes within the world yet outside of ourselves that heal us and urge us forward. It is that note of powers not ourselves which was missing in the earlier humanists like John Dietrich and the drafters of the *Humanist Manifesto*.

It is what the Wieman scholar, Marvin Shaw, calls the theistic stance without the supernatural God. In fact you use the phrase “a kind of godless theism.” Others, like Shaw and Karl Peters, refer to a naturalistic theism. Indeed, as you affirm, it is a way of going beyond “the dreary debate between humanists and theists.” As I sometimes put it, once you recognize the reality of the creative process within the world, the question of whether you call this process “God” or not is secondary, important, but secondary.

Another root of your thought is Kenneth Patton. In *Man’s Hidden Search: An Inquiry into Naturalistic Mysticism*, Patton develops the theme of “being at home in the universe.” In his poetic language he writes, “The wind comforts him as fondly as his mother’s arms/ The sunlight is like his best friend’s recognizing laughter. A caterpillar crawling on the back of his hand is as rich and welcoming as his brother’s arms across his shoulders....The earth is his home and its creatures are his family” (54). Even

further, "When his earth becomes a part of the universe, man too becomes at home in the wider universe of which his planet is so humble a part. For the mind of man rides out and out into space, passing galaxy on galaxy....The man who has become at home in the universe is not stricken or subdued thus to discover himself and his home. He is exhilarated." (64)

Patton makes the religious dimension of this naturalism clear, using the category of naturalistic mysticism. "Mysticism is the means whereby men outreach themselves, extend themselves beyond previous confines, stretch the tent of their comprehension and observation to cover a larger plot of the universe." (98)

Patton finds a major cause for our difficulty with mysticism. "Our emotions, our traditions, our language, our habits of thought, have for centuries been accommodated to the two-storied world....Religion was primarily the staircase by which men could get upstairs....Mysticism has suffered, as has religion in general, by being regarded as strictly a business by which man related himself to the supernatural world and united his being with God's." (96) Patton's mystical naturalism will involve a striving "for a fuller realization of human togetherness, of man's unity with nature as a child of earth, and for the emotional significance of new knowledge and experience," even an introduction to the yearnings of our fellow creatures. (98) Patton asks whether this view is rich enough.

To one who believes in the two realms, an explanation of life and man in terms of one realm may seem meager and stultifying. The only answer is that expanse and splendor have little to do with the number of realms. One room can be larger than two smaller rooms together. In qualitative terms, the material realm may come to appear so abounding in variety, subtlety, beauty, depth, and mystery that it will include within it the qualities of existence and experience that once were thought to belong to a spiritual realm. (100)

In *A Religion For One World* Patton speaks of religion as involving an emotion of participating within, of kinship with nature and our fellow creatures. The emerging religion will celebrate the universe, centering on the specialized development called life. Hence it will be an impassioned affirmation, a celebration of life. (119, 125, 151)

David Bumbaugh has written of Patton, "It was he who taught a monotone rationalism how to sing; it was he who taught a stumble-footed humanism how to dance; it was he who cried, 'Look!' and taught our eyes to see the glory in the ordinary." I would add that it is David Bumbaugh who is calling a woolly spirituality back to its empirical and scientific anchor and who is teaching a monotonous humanism how to preach.

David, I find you located at the growing edge of contemporary religious thought, right up to date because of your immersion in the resources of precious generations. And that, my friend, is a significant place to be.