

Religious Naturalism Today

The Rebirth of a Forgotten Alternative

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Chapter Six

Other Current Religious Naturalists

Robert Corrington

Professor of Philosophical Theology at Drew University, Robert Corrington is the author of a number of significant works developing what he calls an "ecstatic naturalism." He draws on a rich metaphysical tradition including Schopenhauer, Schelling, C. S. Peirce, and Justus Buchler and also on current hermeneutical theory, including Kristeva. Corrington departs from much postmodern hermeneutics by following Peirce in anchoring the semiotic relation within the natural world. For example, bacteria interpret their environment for food and toxins. Sign interpretation does not require consciousness. Like that of Robert Neville, this is a theory that embeds humans as language users firmly within that natural, physical world.

Corrington is a metaphysician in that he develops a set of categories by which to see the fullness of the world as we can experience and know it, to see life and to see it whole. His religious outlook, especially as developed in *Nature's Religion*, is one part of his total outlook, definitely not an afterthought, but more of a capstone. His religious outlook, which is explicitly post-Christian, is a metaphysics without God, resting on a rhythm alternating between ecstatic encounters with the sacred and intervals of what could be called recuperation, culminating in "the eros of spirit." Of special note is that he wishes to cleanse the religious life from anthropocentrism as far as possible, to eschew false consolation and to avoid fanaticism. (In his first major statement of his position, *Ecstatic Naturalism*, he had a concept of God, which he later rejected [Corrington 1994]. See *Nature's Religion*, xvii. The Introduction and first chapter of

his earlier book are recommended as background for his philosophical theology. See also Corrington, 2007.)

His vocabulary is carefully thought through, deeply informed by both the history of Western metaphysics and psychoanalytic theory, and requires careful reading. It is rich, evocative, and rewarding.

Basic to Corrington's thought is his notion of "the ontological difference" between *nature naturing* (*natura naturans*) and *nature natured* (*natura naturata*). Nature is the most general idea of all. "Nature per se cannot be conceived in any but the *most* elliptical way. . . . In the barest sense, nature is the availability of orders, as well as the 'sum' of the orders themselves. Nature has no location, that is, it is not *in* anything. It is the nonlocated location within which all container relations obtain, as well as the innumerable relations that are *not* container relations, such as laws" (Corrington 1997, 3, italics in original). *Natura naturans* might be thought of as the world as productive of everything and *natura naturata* as the attained and emerging orders of the world. This distinction is basic to Spinoza and was developed in a distinctive way by Heidegger. However, before Spinoza "this distinction emerges in the twelfth century Latin tradition," although "it is as old as thought itself" (Corrington 1997, 4).

While it might be argued that the idea of *natura naturans* is ontologically distinct and superior, and thus falling outside our working definition of naturalism, I prefer to take Corrington's explicit statements as well as the general tenor of his thought to include him within this history of religious naturalism. According to him, naturalists must reject the notions of providence and theodicy, and "there can be no principle of sufficient reason to explain the existence of the world" (Corrington 1997, 30).

Corrington's naturalism is similar to that of Spinoza, Bernhardt, and Crosby in that there is an austerity to his outlook. The recognition that humans occupy a minor and vulnerable place in the grand scheme of things is central to his outlook.

In many senses, ecstatic naturalism insists on a rich universe of signs and objects. . . . But when it comes to the final object of religious semiosis, a kind of holy minimalism enters into that framework, a minimalism that struggles to protect the human process from importing personal predicates where, for good or ill, they simply do not obtain. Once one has made the primary move of rejecting the concepts of providence and theodicy, as all naturalists must, it follows that no honest naturalism can

then somehow discover that the universe was created to be congenial to human desire. (Corrington 1997, 58)

In explicating Corrington in detail we can follow the major divisions of *Nature's Religion*. First there is the concept of "sacred folds." This is a metaphor for especially meaningful events, ones that are "thick" or "folded back," what in religious studies we have come to call "hierophanies," although they need not be manifestations of personal deities (Corrington 1997, 23). The "form-shattering momentum" of nature's sacred folds enters into "the region of ultimacy" (Corrington 1997, 56). In an interesting semantic move, Corrington explicitly rejects the term "atheism," equating this with the "absurd claim that there can be no power that we might call divine (or, sacred in an extrahuman sense) within nature" (Corrington 1997, 38).

Nature's sacred folds . . . have no collective integrity, nor do they embody a common teleological pattern. They obtain prior to the divide between good and evil precisely because they unfold their power without any regard whatsoever for the desires and needs of the human process. As epiphanies of power they represent those uncanny moments in which nature, for whatever reason, folds back upon itself to achieve a dimension of enhanced semiotic scope and density. The increase in semiotic scope is manifest in the ability of the fold to enter into many intersecting transference fields simultaneously, while the increase in semiotic density is manifest in the dramatic enhancement of projective and counterprojective meaning that hovers around the fold. The human process cannot help but be caught up in these manic swirls of energy and meaning. . . . The image of manic power . . . signal(s) that any encounter with nature's folds would accelerate and heat up the human process with material that might be too strong to integrate." (Corrington 1997, 61-62)

This image of the manic power of these hierophanies overheating the human process will lead us to the recuperative value of "intervals," which we treat below.

These sacred folds are inexplicable and have no governing logic. "We cannot say why nature has epiphanies of power. By the same token we cannot isolate some alleged principle of unity that would bring all of nature's folds under some governing logic or schema. There is a sense in

which we encounter an ultimate form of irrationality when we become exposed to nature's folds" (Corrington 1997, 29).

Now the image shifts. The fold becomes "an overwhelming wave that comes crashing into finite structures." The wave itself has no self-awareness. "No one would say that the wave is conscious of its power or that it is a person who looks toward specific agents or structures as it expends its energy" (Corrington 1997, 29). To use colloquial language, the wave does not have it in for me. The intrusion of nature's sacred folds into our lives follows no rhyme or reason. "They are simply there like grand presences that come and go as our species makes its fitful way toward probable extinction" (Corrington, 1997, 58).

However, humans project human-like qualities on the waves. When humans encounter the wave, "strong unconscious complexes are activated that are compelled to see the wave *as* something other than what it is." We are inclined to see the wave "as a unique locus of power and meaning for our tribe, or as a message-laden epiphany that holds a specific revelation" (Corrington 1997, 29, italics in original). The sacred folds are magnets for human projections.

The destructive possibilities of these projections are extremely dangerous in Corrington's eyes. Rushing too quickly to divinize the folds of nature "has had disastrous social and political consequences . . . turning the adherents of one fold, or fold-cluster, against another." The folds have a power to "pull forth projections, thereby magnifying them, thus giving them their own divine status. It is as if you were to take something dangerous and dramatically amplify its power." Corrington is quite strong in his language. "For example, the failure to deal with one's contrasexual dimension could turn into a massive patriarchal projection, supported by a fold that is divinized, that in turn could generate violence" (Corrington 1997, 32). One of Corrington's illustrations is the Battle of Blood River in 1838 when the Afrikaners defeated the Zulus, "thus showing their election from god to control the southern part of Africa." There can develop a system of competing epiphanies, with sign systems jealous of each other. "Thus the three gods of Western monotheisms remain at war with each other" (Corrington 1997, 44).

Note that Corrington does not say that the sacred folds are projections, but that they attract projections. The type of austere philosophical theology that Corrington advocates does not take a totalizing Feuerbach-like approach. If an approach based on psychoanalysis deconstructs the totality of the gods and goddesses that have emerged in human history, a better approach would be open to the possibility that "it is possible to become permeable to something that is not a human projection, even if it extremely difficult to find out what that something is. What

psychoanalysis provides, and it is absolutely indispensable, is a constant reminder that in almost all cases we will create a god or goddess of our own making, and that this transference object will come to dominate the psyche even though it is partially a product of that very psyche (in consort with the relevant fold(s) of nature)" (Corrington 1997, 36). The numinous powers fill finite selves with content that is both dangerous and transforming. "For some, self-divinization is the result, which has often produced horrendous social and political consequences. For others the shattering of form may produce a crippling affective or thought disorder" (Corrington 1997, 42).

Thus Corrington does not *reduce* nature's folds to human projection. "Folds have power in themselves, regardless of how they are colored by the human process" (Corrington 1997, 35). Put in a pithy statement, "Folds exist and projections exist and they find each other" (Corrington 1997, 55).

We have seen that Corrington uses the terms "divine" and "sacred" in describing these folds. But he holds that it is important to strip away these projections. "There is something like a divine power within the orders of nature." However, this power is not supernatural. "It is a momentum within nature that has a compelling presence. However, in the process of working past and through projections and transference relations, one traditional trait after another drops away." The "witch" burnings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries attest to "the blind ferocity of projections to assault the personal and social orders." Unconsciousness is a sin. To put it strongly, "unconsciousness can lead to a violent overturning of form, measure, and justice" (Corrington 1997, 38-39).

The second major concept Corrington employs is that of "intervals" between the sacred folds. The term comes from an older medical vocabulary that indicated the calmer periods between the paroxysms of a fever. The manic power of sacred folds could heat up the human process so that it cannot achieve integration. In these intervals of decompression the human organism can recover its equilibrium and become open to life-transforming goals. These periods of recovery provide space for the probing and assimilation of the material absorbed from the sacred folds. One thing that can happen is a humbling process, when the self realizes that the "all-powerful sacred fold is in fact a circumscribed and finite event that stands over and against other events that do not honor its claims to ultimacy." In these rare moments "religious self-consciousness can become free from a demonic temptation toward divinized origins, while giving content to the goals that seem to come so effortlessly out of the decompression in the world" (Corrington 1997, 69-70). These are religious goals, that is, goals "which live in and out of the infinite"

(Corrington 1997, 75). "The transformation of finite instrumental goals into the infinite goals of religion takes place through the opening power of the interval as it frees the self from the intense semiotic noise that comes to it from those sacred folds that threaten to envelop it" (Corrington 1997, 84). This period of decompression allows the self to make judicious choices, but they are not merely instrumental choices, for they are done in the light of the self's glimpse of the infinite. The loss of the manic psychic inflation can turn to mourning, irony, betrayal, rage, or a sense of liberation. However, if the self can hold itself open in courage and insight, it can return in a transformed way to the lost object. Otherwise, the epiphany may return with greater power and shatter the boundaries of the ego. We cannot domesticate the religious powers of nature. But with "insight, luck, natural convergence, and natural grace, we can enter into a religious sphere that does not destroy the very creatures who intensify it with their abjected desires" (Corrington 1997, 96).

The third concept is that of "the unruly ground." Corrington challenges the romantic notion of nature as a great nurturing mother, "forgetting that the image of the web is derived from a creature who uses it primary [*sic*] as a finally-tuned killing machine" (Corrington 1997, 97). The unruly ground both enables and destroys without intentionality or consciousness awareness. The unruly ground can be understood through analogy with a churning sea that is indifferent to whatever may occur below its surface, yet which also furnishes nourishment to its creatures. "What does this unruly ground provide? Everything whatsoever . . . both actualities and possibilities, goods and absences, life and death, space/time and things in space/time" (Corrington 1997, 102). Given this fecundity, finite sign users will select-out regnant features for emphasis. Another image which Corrington uses is that of the continual spawning of the constituents of *nature nutured*. This image suggests an ejection and we, and everything else, are orphans or foundlings. "On the deepest level, the world itself is a foundling, an eject that has no direct link to the inaugurating and unruly ground" (Corrington 1997, 119).

This is a nontheistic conception of grace. "So we have providingness but no provider, natural grace but no bestower of grace, sheer availability but no intentionality, and a seed bed for consciousness with no consciousness in the seed bed." From particular instances of consciousness, a universal conscious intentional agent is projected. "From finite instances of purpose, evident in only a few of the orders of the world, a kind of grand purpose is read into the unruly ground" (Corrington 1997, 103). In another of his striking images he writes, "The sheer providingness of nature . . . could no more bestow love than could the water coursing through the gills of a fish" (Corrington 1997, 136). This notion of grace without a bestower results in a mixed attitude. "For the

ecstatic naturalist, stoicism, which makes the most sense when applied to a material substrate of some kind, must be augmented by a kind of fitful *jouissance* that appears whenever the unruly ground somehow breaks into the world in specific ways." These "primary experiences" include both "various forms of shipwreck or boundary situations," but also "moments of high creativity, sexual connection and release, a sudden illumination and expansion of a meaning horizon, and a rapturous sense of the sublime" (Corrington 1997, 104-105). It does not require superior strength to be open to the intermittent grace. "The correlation between providingness and natural grace provides the self with the courage to enter into what puts its deepest self-portrayal at risk" Providingness, despite its roots in the unruly ground, has a quiet presence. There are "no apocalyptic dramas . . . only the endless quiet availability of orders. Providingness is not a sustaining and conscious agent to whom the self can turn" (Corrington 1997, 131). Nevertheless, providingness provides an ontological courage. The self cannot expect from the unruly ground some ally in negotiating through life. "It cannot answer a petition or be quickened by prayer. . . . Strictly speaking, there is no it that could be addressed." Instead, "providingness can only make available a type of healing and transformation that is far more subtle than most that we desire" (Corrington 1997, 132). This is a very minimalist theory of grace indeed, but I am in agreement with Corrington that this minimal, purged of illusion, can be very real.

The last concept is that of "spirit's eros." There is a sadness in the face of recognition of our status as foundlings, but this sadness can give way to an ecstatic transformation, an eros toward the sacred. "If the utter indifference of nature to human need makes us melancholy, the transformative prospects emergent from the spirit bring us into the erotic embrace of something that transcends all other orders" (Corrington 1997, 3).

We must strip anthropomorphic categories from this concept as much as possible. "It is impossible to *fully* remove anthropocentric and anthropomorphic categories from philosophical theology. We are always left with some measure of the human in a fundamental perspective." Nevertheless, "whenever it seems compelling to use a human trait at a key juncture in the framework, every effort must be spent to assure that it is rendered as generically as possible. We will see that this final qualification applies to the ways in which the concept of eros will be reconstructed" (Corrington 1997, 136-137). Indeed, parallel to the way Corrington embeds signs in nature, the spirit, and its eros, are embedded in the how or way of nature.

Although when we reduce the anthropomorphic language to a minimum, we can say that eros is not a conscious agent, its central

characteristic is movement and transformation. It is a longing, desire, drive, without intentionality. (Corrington 1997, 136–137). Summarizing several pages, he writes that “Spirit’s eros is thus the posttemporal, transordinal, lack generated, infinity evoking, connecting, and differentiating momentum that lies deeply within the transference field (of the human order).” The Greek experience witnesses to the often “ferocious power of this field of relation manifest in both pathology and creativity.” The final step probes into “that from which and through which eros comes. Eros is the outer circumference of the even more elusive spirit; it is its how under the conditions of finitude” (Corrington 1997, 159). This last, put differently, states that spirit is the heart of eros.

Following in the long tradition from St. Paul to Josiah Royce, spirit is the great interpreter. “This spirit-interpreter intersects with the human community whenever that community is called upon to interpret and ramify signs of great complexity and depth.” Signs, especially religious ones, have “traces and potentialities that conscious agents will always fail to exhaust. The spirit does not add new signs to this mixture, nor does it have an antecedent interpretive code that could somehow be accessed.” The spirit does not furnish “a semiotic blueprint for life” and does not “provide an absolute barrier against nonbeing. It is not a body of signs waiting to be decoded, perhaps in some liminal state of consciousness. It cannot give the individual or community a road map of the future.” What the spirit can do is to open up “interpretive prospects without providing an actual interpretation. As an open or opening infinite, the spirit provides the connective tissue between and among signs, and opens up each relevant sign so that the sign’s own inner momentum can become less hindered.” This means that the spirit “has no internal semiotic content. It does not hold at its heart great life secrets. It is much more akin to the opening power of water as it washes away barriers to understanding” (Corrington 1997, 160–161).

As a final word, part of the significance of Corrington’s work in relation to the story of religious naturalism can be seen in his appraisal of John Dewey’s *A Common Faith*. The brunt of this appraisal, somewhat echoing Santayana, is that Dewey “utterly fails to probe into the depth dimension of nature’s epiphanies and decompressions, while providing a kind of ersatz comfort to those humanisms that refuse to look into the ways in which the ontological difference enters into the human process.” Dewey’s “stress is always on how the human process can unify its instrumental and aesthetic nature.” For Dewey religious ideals function as Kantian regulative principles which unify human life. However, they do not “connect the self to the depth-dimension of nature nor do they acknowledge the extrahuman (but not extranatural) powers that enter into

the human process." Dewey's descriptive naturalism seems to ride "on the surfaces of *nature natured* while being simultaneously oblivious to the transference field and the pulsations of *nature naturing*. His humanistic religion is no religion at all." Corrington grants that for Dewey the world is a mixture of the precarious and the stable, but this doesn't get to the heart of the matter: the world is "a realm in which many overwhelming powers can enter into and transform (or even destroy) human life" (Corrington 1997, 76–77, italics in original).

I would suggest that this is a deficient religion, rather than no religion at all. My appraisal of Dewey is similar to that of Corrington but, as might be expected, not as harsh (Stone 1992, 202–207). Even within a naturalistic framework we can speak of occasional transformation by powers not of our own making. At this point Wieman is a better guide than Dewey.

Additional Writers

LARRY AXEL. An able historian of Chicago naturalism and a major figure in the American Journal of Theology and Philosophy and Highlands Institute for American Religious and Philosophical Thought, Larry Axel was developing Bernard Meland's elementalism at his untimely death. Readers will want to explore his "Reshaping the Task of Theology" and "Religious Creaturalism and a New Agenda for Theology" (Axel 1987 and Axel 1989).

DAVID BUMBAUGH. Unitarian Universalist minister, now Professor of Ministry at Meadville/Lombard Theological School, has been arguing for a *humanist* theology of reverence. He says we are called to reverence before "this miraculous world of our everyday experience, . . . a world in which neither god nor humanity is at the center; in which the center is the void, the ever fecund matrix out of which being emerges." He writes also of "a deep reverent, mystical sense of being an integral part of a sacred and holy reality which is the interdependent web of being." Further, "we are called to define the *religious* and *spiritual* dimensions of the ecological crisis confronting the world and to preach the gospel of a world in which each is part of all, in which every place and every one is sacred, and every place is holy ground" (Bumbaugh 1994, 37, italics in original).

Drawing on the scientific picture of evolution and ecology, he affirms that "It is a religious story in that it calls us out of our little local universes." Our struggles with meaning and purpose, our search for insight and understanding are not limited to the human enterprise alone, but are