

5. RELIGION IN ROLSTON'S ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Is there religion deep down in Holmes Rolston's environmental ethics? As anyone who has read Rolston's work or heard him speak will find obvious, a profound love of earthen nature and a desire to experience, understand, appreciate, and protect it animates his work. Rolston is as articulate and insightful a champion of wild nature as we have on the contemporary scene. Rolston's defense of nature is multi-disciplinary: It spans ethics, aesthetics, and religion, and all of these are informed by a philosophy of nature tightly hitched to science.¹

With Rolston's winning of the Templeton Prize, it has become clear that others value Rolston at least as much for his religious insight as for the scientifically-informed love of wild nature that drew me to his work. Religion is at the core of Rolston's worldview. When accepting the Templeton prize he said: "I've spent my life in a lover's quarrel . . . with the two disciplines I love: science and religion" (Ostling, 2003). Any attempt to get to the bottom of Rolston's philosophy of nature will have to determine what role religion plays in his account.

In this chapter, I consider the role religion plays in Rolston's understanding, evaluation, and defense of nature, particularly its role in his environmental ethics. How central is religion to Rolston's defense of nature? What sort of religion, if any, fits with—or is required by—his environmental ethics? My conclusion will be that while an immanent nature spirituality is a congenial part of his environmental ethics, a transcendent deity is not. I suggest that Rolston's appeal to such a deity in his account of natural history undermines important aspects of his environmental ethics.

IS RELIGION NEEDED FOR ROLSTON'S ENVIRONMENTAL VALUE THEORY?

One of the most striking features of Rolston's philosophy is how intensely valuable he finds nature (both aesthetically and ethically) and how forcefully he argues for such value in light of possible evidence to the contrary. In the aesthetics of nature, Rolston embraces positive aesthetics. Quoting John Muir, he writes: "None of Nature's landscapes are ugly so long as they are wild" (1988: 237). Rolston acknowledges that if one looks at particular aspects of nature one will find ugliness: "If hikers come upon the rotting carcass of an elk, full of maggots, they find it revolting" (1988: 238). But this "momentary ugliness is only a still shot in an ongoing motion picture" (1988: 239). Rolston argues that a scientifically-informed approach will note with appreciation that "The rotting elk returns to the humus, its nutrients recycled; the maggots become flies, which become food for the birds; natural selection results

in a better-adapted elk for the next generation" (1988: 239). Although for Rolston, virgin nature is not "invariably aesthetically positive in immediate detail" (1988: 245–46), "these ugly events . . . (are) anomalies challenging the general paradigm that nature's landscapes almost without fail have an essential beauty" (1988: 243). With regard to ethically important non-instrumental values, Rolston locates them throughout nature: In humans, animals, plants, microbes, abiotic natural wonders, natural systems and processes, and especially in the creative, prolife, systemic nature that drives natural history on earth: "The projective system is fundamentally the most valuable phenomenon of all" (1988: 225). Rolston finds nature so spectacular that he characterizes it as a "wonderland" and "sacred gift."

Not all commentators find this intense positive valuing of nature in Rolston. In a helpful article that examines the provocative fact that Rolston, more than any other environmental philosopher, worries about possible defects in nature (i.e., the "disvalues in nature"), Wayne Ouderkirk describes Rolston's overall evaluation of nature thus: "I think it is also fair to say that he considers the whole system, *including the disvalues*, as valuable. . . . I believe that Rolston is right that thus far we can say that the system has gone *mostly* in the positive direction" (Ouderkirk, 1999: 144–45). But Rolston's appraisal of the value of earthen nature is hardly lukewarm. One might think it is because Rolston is a master at expressing the case against nature's value. For example, Rolston writes: "The wilderness teems with kinds but is a vast graveyard with hundreds of species laid waste for one or two that survive. . . . Wilderness is a gigantic food pyramid, and this sets value in a grim, deathbound jungle. All is a slaughterhouse, with life a miasma rising over the stench" (1983: 193). But when Annie Dillard appraises evolutionary history as an odious scene of suffering and violence ("I came from the world, I crawled out of a sea of amino acids, and now I must whirl around and shake my fist at that sea and cry shame"), Rolston is compelled to respond: "If I were Aphrodite, rising from the sea, I think I would turn back, reflect on that event, and rather raise both hands and cheer. And if I came to realize that my rising out of the misty seas involved a long struggle of life renewed in the midst of its perpetual perishing, I might well fall to my knees in praise" (1994b: 58).

Ouderkirk is quite right that Rolston's focus on and account of disvalues in nature parallels the theodicy provided by theists attempting to make sense of evil in a world created by a beneficent deity. Rolston (1992) argues that the so-called disvalues in nature—predation, suffering, death, parasitism, randomness, disasters, selfishness, blindness, indifference, waste, and struggle—are necessary for the far greater positive values evidenced in natural history—viz., life, sentience, mind, and culture. These disvalues systemically drive nature's value achievements. Rolston writes: "It is a sometimes tragic view of life, but one in which tragedy is the shadow of prolific creativity. . . . A world without blood would be poorer, but a world without bloodshed would be poorer too, both less rich in biodiversity and less divine" (2003: 85).

Rolston's strenuous defense of positive aesthetics and of the intensely positive overall value of natural history invites a religious interpretation. A supreme deity would not make an ugly world filled with evil. Thus, on this interpretation, Rolston accounts for these negative dimensions of nature in order to provide a theodicy.

However, a secular rationale is equally available: An unattractive, disvaluable nature where ugliness and evil compete closely with beauty and goodness is not one that we ought to worry much about preserving for its own sake, and this goal is at the heart of Rolston's project in environmental philosophy.

One might argue that religion is implicated by the way Rolston defends nature's positive value rather than simply because he does so. Rolston conceives of natural processes as "sacrificial" in the sense that good is resurrected out of evil, life out of death. Rolston interprets the fundamental character of the biological world as involving struggling and suffering in the achievement of something higher. The evolutionary advancements Rolston sees as the trend of natural history—from matter to microbes to plants to animals, from reflex to instinct to learning, and from nature to culture—have been earned at the price of extinction, death, and suffering: Millions of species and billions upon billions of individuals have been sacrificed to attain the marvelous life forms we find in nature today. Rolston routinely describes nature as "cruciform" (2003: 84) and he interprets "the way of nature as the way of the cross" (1987: 144). He argues that "the capacity to suffer through to joy is a supreme emergent and an essence of Christianity. Yet, the whole evolutionary upslope is a lesser calling of this kind, in which renewed life comes by blasting the old" (2003: 84). Thus, one might argue that Rolston's defense of nature's value implicates not just religion but Christianity in particular.

While there can be no doubt that Rolston's account has been influenced by Christian theology, whether that account is a successful defense of nature's value is independent of the truth of the related theological claims. Nature may well have the character of struggling through to something higher and have an essential goodness that is dependent on death and suffering whether or not Christian theology provides an accurate metaphysic.

In one of the few treatments in the environmental ethics literature of the role of religion in Rolston's environmental philosophy, Francisco Benzoni argues that "The theological dimension of Rolston's work . . . undergirds his entire ethic" and that "his ethic is . . . finally a theological ethic" (1996: 339, 349). Benzoni claims that the objective intrinsic value theory central to Rolston's environmental ethics is "finally grounded . . . in his theology and thus in the divine" (1996: 339). On Benzoni's account of Rolston's views, the creative prolific earth would not be objectively good if there were no God. Benzoni writes:

The intrinsic value of creation is based in the divine creator. The creator is the basis and foundation of reality who declares that the earth is good. In other words, it has real, objective intrinsic value that is utterly independent of human valuation, and indeed human existence. Ultimate reality has declared creation to be good. This is entirely different than a value theory in which human loving or valuing nature for its own sake endows it with intrinsic worth. . . . Because God declares that creation is good and God loves creation for its own sake, quite simply, creation is good and is intrinsically valuable (1996: 348).

Benzoni is right that Rolston wishes to avoid a Callicott-style account whereby nature's intrinsic value results from humans valuing nature for its own sake. But unless one accepts the view that intrinsic value is a kind of valuing and thus requires a valuer, there is no need to posit a God who intrinsically values nature in order for nature to have intrinsic value independent of human valuing. On Benzoni's account of Rolston, we don't get a nature with objective value, but rather one that has subjective value conferred by God. This is clearly at odds with Rolston's own insistence on the objective intrinsic value of nature.

One might interpret Benzoni as claiming that Rolston needs God to bestow objective, non-instrumental value on nature which it then has on its own and not because God or anyone else values it.² But if one is suspicious about the possibility of objective intrinsic value, it is not clear how positing a God as bestowing such value clears up any mystery. Further, far from finding it mysterious, Rolston is, if anything, too sanguine about the reality of objective intrinsic value in nature. Perhaps Benzoni thinks Rolston's ethic is "theological" because Rolston posits God as accounting for certain valuable dimensions of nature (as we shall see below). On this interpretation, Rolston's value theory depends on God because his account of natural history is ultimately theological. In short, because his metaphysic of nature is theological, so is his value theory. But even if God created significant aspects of nature and is thus responsible for them (and thus for their value), they need not be valuable because God created them rather than because of their own value-adding features. I see no evidence in Rolston writings that suggests he thinks that nature is valuable not because of the kind of thing it is, but because it has a causal origin in the hand of God. As I show below, Rolston does understand certain valuable aspects of nature (e.g., nature's "enthraling creativity" and its prolific, prolife fertility) as manifestations of divine activity. When we value these aspects of nature, we are—on his account—valuing God's presence in nature. But here again Rolston's theological appeal serves an explanatory and not evaluative role: He argues that the earth's prolife creativity can not be explained without God, not that its value somehow depends on being a manifestation of God. In the last section of this chapter, I argue that this explanatory appeal to a transcendent deity is in serious tension with fundamental features of Rolston's environmental ethics rather than being a centrally important part of it—as Benzoni would have it.

While it is clear that Rolston's conceptualization of nature's value has been greatly influenced by religion, fundamentally his environmental value theory does not depend on supernaturalist, religious metaphysics. Thus I think it is a mistake to characterize Rolston's environmental ethic as a theological one.

RELIGION IN ROLSTON'S ACCOUNT OF NATURAL HISTORY

I have argued that Rolston's environmental value theory stands by itself, largely free of any reliance on transcendental religion. In the next section of this chapter, I argue that an immanent nature spirituality, while not strictly required for his environmental ethics, fits harmoniously with it. In this section, I explore the role a transcendent deity plays in Rolston's account of the origin of natural history. Rolston's explicitly

theological writings provide a prominent place for a transcendent deity in our explanation of the natural world.

There are times in these writings when Rolston downplays the need for a transcendent religious account of valuable nature and suggests that such an account is open to doubt. He writes:

Whatever you make of God, biological creativity is indisputable; There is creation, whether or not there is a Creator . . . Some biologists decline to speak of creation, because they fear a Creator lurking beneath. Well, at least there is genesis, whether or not there is a Genitor. . . . Biologists may doubt whether there is a Creator, but no biologist can doubt genesis (1994b: 58).

But Rolston clearly thinks that our scientific understanding of natural history leaves room for religious interpretation and explanation. "Biological explanation," he says, "is modestly incomplete" (1998: 429). "God," he writes, "is an explanatory dimension (a cause in the Aristotelian, though not the scientific sense) for which contemporary biology leaves ample space" (1999: 368).

Further, Rolston argues that religious explanation is not just possible but is required for the fullest account of the phenomena. "Laws are important," he writes, "but natural law is not the complete explanatory category for nature" (1994b: 56). "This phenomenal world, studied by science, urges us on a spiritual quest" (2003: 82). "The history of Earth . . . is a story of the achievement, conservation, and sharing of values. Earth is a fertile planet . . . This creative systemic process is profoundly but partially described by evolutionary theory . . . Such fecundity is not finally understood until seen as divine creativity" (1994b: 57). Rolston argues that when the need for an explanation of nature's creativity is acknowledged by the naturalistically minded, the "usual turn here is simply to conclude that nature is self-organizing (autopoiesis)" (1998: 429). But this is to respond to "the mysterious genesis of more out of less" with a label that looks scientific but is "really a sort of mystical chant over a miraculous universe" (1998: 429). Purely naturalistic accounts give you a nature with "overwhelming mystery" and insufficient explanation.

One might think that Rolston limits religion's role to explaining the meaning of what has happened in natural history: "God gives meaning to the world, which science is incompetent to evaluate" (1999: 368).³ But Rolston also suggests that religion plays a causal explanatory and (perhaps even) a predictive role in the account of natural history. Although he grants that we don't "need God to do biology" (1998: 433), he points out that "the only forces biology is competent to detect are natural ones" (1998: 433) and he writes about both "biological and theological forces producing" forms of life (1994b: 49). He does say that "God does not intervene as a causal force in the world," but then immediately takes it back by saying "not at least of such kind as science can detect" (1999: 368). God is "a countercurrent to entropy, a sort of biogravity that lures life upward" (1998: 430). Although the role Rolston provides for God may seem to be a traditional "god of the gaps" position—whereby God is posited to fill in the gaps in our scientific knowledge of the world—Rolston

appears to craft a causal role for God that is not open to falsification by future scientific discoveries.

Rolston argues that God helps to explain numerous dimensions of natural history. God is “the divine wellspring from which matter-energy bubbles up” (2003: 84) suggesting that Rolston sees God as the creator of matter-energy and thus as providing an answer to the question of why there is something rather than nothing. In accordance with “the anthropic principle,” Rolston argues that the set up of the universe was “spectacularly fine-tuned for life. Hundreds of microphysical and astronomical phenomena . . . have to be almost exactly what they are if life is to be possible” (1994b: 52). For example, “the charges of electrons and protons, the strengths of the four binding forces . . . the expansion rate of universe, the proportion of hydrogen and helium” (1994b: 52). Rolston concludes that “Even before there is life we already get a pro-life universe” (1994b: 52). Rolston argues that the earth also has a set up that makes it a “prolife planet.” It is the right distance from sun and has liquid water, a suitable atmosphere, the right elements, an energy source deep in the earth, and so on. He writes that “the Earth-system is a kind of cooking pot sufficient to make life probable, even inevitable” and claims that “God is somehow behind that set up” (1998: 430).

Additionally, Rolston argues that the diversity of life that has issued forth on this planet is so stupendous and progressive that it is indicative of God. “The story goes from zero to five million species in five billion years, passing though perhaps one billion species en route” (1994b: 53). Not only have there been an incredible number of kinds, but there has been advancement toward complexity:

Once there was no smelling, swimming, hiding, defending a territory, gambling, making mistakes, or outsmarting a competitor. Once there were no eggs hatching, no mothers nursing young. Once there was no instinct, no conditioned learning. Once there was no pleasure, no pain. But all these phenomena appear, gradually, but eventually . . . Natural history suggests a creative genesis of life transmitted across long-continuing turnover of kinds, shared across a long history of struggling toward more diverse and complex forms of life (1998: 418, 422).

In short, Rolston sees Earth’s biodiversity as “miraculous” and requiring explanation. “It would be a rather anomalous result if there had appeared novel kinds steadily over many millennia but only by drifting into them” (1998: 422). He concludes that “when such construction of valuable biodiversity has gone on for millennia, the epic suggests mysterious powers that signal the divine presence” (1998: 432).

More generally, Rolston thinks God helps to explain the “remarkable negentropic, cybernetic self-organizing that characterizes the life story on Earth” (1998: 432). Rolston asks “where the information comes from by which matter and energy becomes steadily so informed that there is, across evolutionary history, this river of life that flows uphill, this brilliant output from a beginning in mindless chaos” (1998: 433)? Quoting Dan Dennett, he wonders how “out of next to nothing the world we know and love created itself” (1998: 433). Without the posit of divine intervention we get “information floating in from nowhere” and “appearing ex ‘nihilo’ ” (1998: 429, 430).

Rolston thinks science has not explained—and perhaps never will be able to explain or predict—certain dimensions of natural history. The miraculous, complex biodiverse earth is not even in the “possibility space” of the original elements: “The know-how, so to speak, to make salt is already in the sodium and chlorine, but the know-how to make hemoglobin molecules and lemurs is not secretly coded in carbon, hydrogen, and nitrogen” (1998: 428). “Given chemistry as premise, there is no deductive or inductive logic by which biology follows as a conclusion. . . . There is no covering law (such as natural selection), plus initial conditions (such as trilobites), from which one can deduce primates” (1994b: 53, 56). He argues that “Looking at a pool of amino acids and seeing dinosaurs or *Homo sapiens* in them is something like looking at a pile of alphabetical letters and seeing Hamlet. In fact, Hamlet is not lurking around a pile of A-Z’s; such a play is not within their possibility space—not until Shakespeare comes around” (1998: 427). This gap in the scientific account of biodiversity’s origins can be “congenially” filled by a divine author.⁴ For Rolston, God can be seen as having input at crucial turning points in natural history:

Anyone who takes the divine inspiration seriously will have to posit occasions . . . during which God provides information in the world . . . by some inspiration that first animates matter and energy into life, or launches replication and genetic coding . . . or moves life onto land, or invents animal societies or acquired learning, or endows life with mind, and inspires culture, ethics, religions, science (1998: 433).

Rolston explains the “mechanism” of God’s intervention as follows: “Monotheists who take genesis seriously do not suppose a *Deus ex machina* that lifts organisms out of their environment, redesigns them, and reinserts them with an upgraded design. Rather they find a divine creativity that leads and lures along available routes of Earth history” (1994b: 55). Rolston argues that the openness and randomness inherent in nature allow for divine intervention without trace:

God could also be in the details. That might be difficult to know, especially if God operated with the resolve to maximize the creaturely autonomy and integrity, to prompt rather than to command. Still, God could be slipping information into the world. That will not be detectable as any gap in or perforation of the natural order . . . Chance is an effective mask for divine action (1998: 431).

It is noteworthy that Rolston frequently sums up his view of God’s role in explaining natural history somewhat equivocally: “That there is a divine presence underneath natural history becomes as plausible as that there is not” (1998: 434).

IMMANENT NATURE SPIRITUALITY AND ROLSTON'S ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

It is clear that a transcendent deity figures prominently in Rolston’s account of natural history. I now return to the issue of the relation between Rolston’s environmental

ethics and religion. I argue that while an immanent nature spirituality fits harmoniously with his environmental ethics, the appeal to a supernatural and transcendent deity, in many ways, takes us away from it.

Nature spirituality is a religious attitude toward earthen nature that is naturalistic in the sense that it is the natural world itself that is the appropriate object of religious attitudes.⁵ It is not committed to supernatural beings and has a thoroughly immanent conception of the godly. While apart from human culture (and rudimentary animal culture), nature is all there is, this spirituality finds that nature is precious, awesome, even enchanting. For nature spirituality, salvation is to be found in an altered understanding of and relation to the natural world, not in getting in touch with something beyond this world.

Naturalistic spirituality sees earth as a holy place and claims that if anything is sacred and worthy of reverence and devotion, it is this miraculous earthen community of life. It views the Earth as a magnificent, majestic place that should elicit our love, thanks, and humble respect. Because the earth produced us and sustains us and every other living being, it treats the earth as our creator and the ground of our being. For nature spirituality, earth warrants profound parental-like respect and should be cherished, revered and defended.

Nature spirituality fits well with Rolston's writings in environmental ethics. In fact, as I argue below, it fits far better than the more explicit transcendent religious approach found in his theological writings. Consider Rolston's outrage at the idea of humans managing planet earth. In writing as powerful as any in the Rolston corpus, he rebukes the "planetary managers" paradigm of the human relation to nature as a kind of sacrilege and idolatry that involves a misplaced trust in humans rather than in nature. The idea that the human "relationship to nature (is) one of engineering it for the better" involves, he says, "a danger of false gods, and an overweening trust in 'Science, Technology, and Industry' (that) may result in too little trust in 'Mother Earth' after all" (1994a: 226–27). Rolston asks:

Is man the engineer in an un-engineered world? . . . There is ample inventive and engineering power in nature, which has built Earth and several billion species, keeping the whole machinery running with these species coming and going for billions of years. Who built the engineers, with their clever brains and hands, with which they propose now to manage the planet? . . . Hands are for managing, but hands are also for holding in loving care (1994a: 227–28).

This appeal for humility about humans' place in nature and the suggestion that we trust earthen nature given its multi-billion-year record of success fit nicely with nature spirituality and do not suggest—much less require—a transcendent deity.

Rolston argues that we are earthlings first and foremost and that our responsibility to the earth is the most fundamental of all. "What is principally to be protected (is) the value of life arising as a creative process on Earth" (1994a: 234). The earth's natural processes, he says "are the ground of your being, and we all owe the Earth system far more than we owe obedience to civic laws, the national history, or even the

heritage of our cultural system" (1994a: 236). Rolston repeatedly claims that "Nature is grace (whatever more grace may also be)" (2003: 81). Grace, he explains, is a goodness that one has no cause to expect, a favor that one does not deserve. Nature has this type of surprising and uncalled for goodness. Life on earth is a spectacular gift and such a gift calls for ultimate responsibility.

While Rolston allows that we can doubt the appropriateness of directing our religious faculties toward the transcendent, he claims there can be no doubt that we should take a religious attitude toward the earth: "Perhaps there is a God above, and this marvelous earth creation may witness to that God, but meanwhile what cannot be doubted is that on this enthralling earth we live and move and have our being. . . . If there is any holy ground, this is it" (1994a: 236).

Rolston argues—as does Wendell Berry (1992: 103)—that what has happened on earth is far more "miraculous" than the religious miracles typically mentioned. The story of the development of life on earth is a story far more marvelous and spectacular, far more deserving of praise and wonder, far more of an account of a holy event than are stories about—say—Jesus walking on water. If the parting of the seas is a miracle that should elicit religious response, what about the existence of the seas in the first place?

Moses thought that the burning bush, not consumed, was quite a miracle. We hardly believe any more in that sort of supernatural miracle; science has made such stories incredible. But what has it left instead? A self-organizing photosynthesis driving a life synthesis that has burned for millennia, life as a strange fire that outlasts the sticks that feed it. . . . This is hardly a phenomenon less marvelous even if we no longer want to say that it is miraculous. . . . To go back to the miracle that Moses saw, a bush that burned briefly without being consumed, would be to return to something several orders of magnitude less spectacular (1996: 398–99).

Rolston thinks the idea that "science chases out the holy" is superficial (1996: 387) and he rejects the secular/sacred contrast "as though anything sacred must be of some other, supernatural realm, not of this present world" (1996: 387). He asks, "What if the secular world proves to be pretty spectacular stuff? What if we lose our confidence in the supernatural, only to find it replaced by increasing confidence that nature is super, superb, mysteriously animated and inspired?" (1996: 387). Rolston argues that biology and religion have "increasingly joined in recent years . . . in admiration for this marvelous planet that we inhabit" (1996: 410). "That respect," he says, "sooner or later passes over to a reverence. . . . *Homo sapiens* reaches a responsibility that assumes spiritual dimensions" (1996: 410). Such reverence, he suggests, is not dependent on a transcendent deity. He writes: "And if one cannot get clear about God, there is ample and urgent call to reverence the Earth" (1996: 408).

Rolston's writings in environmental ethics make a powerful case that a religious attitude toward nature as a sacred and holy place is important for proper acknowledgment of the intense value of the earth, for underlining the seriousness of our obligations to preserve it, for an appropriate condemnation of its destruction (as a

type of sacrilege), and more generally for developing the proper virtues (such as humility) in our relationship with it. Rolston's environmental ethics lends significant support to an immanent nature spirituality and is itself most consistently interpreted as involving such a religious dimension.

Some will object to naturalistic spirituality because they think the religious attitudes involved require an intentional or conscious being as an appropriate object, something nature spirituality purports to do without. Talk of the earth as our creator, or of being thankful to the earth, would seem to treat the earth as a conscious intentional being. If life on earth is a gift, it might be argued, this requires a giver to whom we can be thankful. How can one revere and be devoted to something that is not kindly or lovingly disposed towards us?

Some religious attitudes are, however, perfectly legitimate when directed at non-intentional, non-conscious entities. That this spectacular planet and the natural history that underlies it were unplanned and not created by an intelligent designer does not lessen our ability or duty to love it or defend it. Nor does it entail that we should be any less thankful. It is true that such attitudes will differ in some of their details when they are not directed at a personal, loving deity. Reverence for earth is not likely to be the identical type of attitude as reverence for a personal God. Love and thankfulness when directed at beings that cannot be aware of these attitudes are different than are love and thankfulness directed at a person. In the latter case, one expects some kind of response; one expects that these attitudes will make a difference to their object. The earth will not respond to those who love it and are thankful for it any differently than to those who fear and denigrate it. Nevertheless, for nature spirituality, these are appropriate attitudes and they make a difference in the lives of those who are so disposed and in how they respond to and treat the earth.

Rolston distinguishes between nature spirituality—a view that is close to what he calls “soft naturalism” in *Science and Religion* (1987: 253)—and the supernaturalism he thinks is required for an adequate explanation of natural history. At one point he describes how a transcendent religion differs from immanent religions thus: “In contrast with the surrounding faiths from which biblical faith emerged, the natural world is disenchanted; it is neither God, nor is it full of gods, but it remains sacred, a sacrament of God. Although nature is an incomplete revelation of God's presence, it remains a mysterious sign of divine power” (1991: 5). Although he has provided powerful arguments and language supporting religious naturalism (what I have called “nature spirituality”), Rolston thinks it inadequate: “My problem with that is you get a nature with overwhelming mystery and minuscule sense of explanation” (2004). When he criticizes soft naturalism in *Science and Religion*, he claims it is unable “to give much account of the central creativity” in nature and becomes a “mystic chant over an unintelligible Universe” (1987: 256, 257).

TROUBLES WITH TRANSCENDENCE

I have argued that while Rolston's environmental ethics can stand on its own apart from religion, it is congenially interpreted as involving an immanent nature spirituality.

I now turn to my concern that Rolston's posit of a transcendent deity to account for certain aspects of natural history undermines some of the ideas and attitudes his environmental ethic has so powerfully defended.

At the most general level, I worry that the appeal to a transcendent God is likely to take the focus off valuing the earth and place it instead on valuing the transcendent creator. Why revere the proximate cause when we can revere the ultimate cause, especially when only the latter appreciates our attitude? If there is a God above and this marvelous earth witnesses that God, then should we not be valuing the earth instrumentally as witness to the transcendent—at least in the first instance? While it is true that we could intrinsically value both the earth and its creator, the transcendent creator account seems in tension with Rolston's insistence on the fundamental importance of nature's intrinsic value.

In addition to shifting the focus off valuing of the earth to valuing God, a religious attitude toward earthen nature is threatened by Rolston's appeal to transcendent deity. If the holiness of earth is a function of its manifestation of a divine presence, then veneration of the earth would seem a kind of idolatry. If—as Benzoni (1996: 347) interprets Rolston—“God is the divine parent, coaxing forth ever more diversity and complexity through the available pathways of nature,” then fundamentally the glory is God's rather than the creation's. This does not fit happily with Rolston's insistence on the incredibly intense, fundamental, and ultimately religious value of the earth itself.

The transcendent account of natural history would also seem to diminish our appreciation of it. By explaining the mysteries he identifies in natural history, Rolston takes away from its miraculous nature. Earthen nature's prolific, prolife story is more incredible if it exists without conscious design or “orchestration” (2004), to use a word Rolston prefers. If God planned the course of natural history, “leading and luring it upward,” then its origin and development becomes less astounding and less awe inspiring. A central part of why the natural world is so amazing is that it has not been intentionally produced. Gene Hargrove makes the same point about natural beauty: “Our aesthetic admiration and appreciation for natural beauty is an appreciation of the achievement of complex form that is entirely unplanned. It is in fact because it is unplanned and independent of human involvement that the achievement is so amazing, wonderful and delightful” (1994: 183). On the transcendent God account, the richness of the world we have inherited becomes less of a fortuitous and uncalled for gift and more of an expected result. One would expect this much from a transcendent creator, at least one who has the traditional characteristics of a monotheistic god. In fact, one might expect more.⁶

Furthermore, the transcendent creator account of earthen nature is in serious tension with Rolston's emphasis on valuing wild, spontaneous nature. To the extent that systemic nature is a product of mind and purpose, to that extent it is artificial. In his theological writings, Rolston has argued that in crucial ways and in the dimensions that science hasn't or can't explain, natural history has been “orchestrated.” God directs the play and makes sure the story is ultimately a good one. Thus, in fundamental ways, nature is more of a divine artifact, than a spontaneous, unmanaged performance.

Additionally, the value of nature as other is compromised. While it is true that a divinely “inspired” nature remains other in the sense of having a profoundly nonhuman origin and fundamental reality, there is an important respect in which, on this account, nature becomes more familiar and less other. In many ways, a transcendent deity is more like humans than is nonhuman nature. Like humans—but unlike nonhuman natural processes—such a god is purposeful, conscious, and personal. Just as human presence in wild nature diminishes its wild otherness, so too, perhaps, would God’s presence: There is another person there, or at least evidence of—or the workings of—another person.

Rolston has resources with which to respond to these objections. Most importantly, Rolston’s account of how God interacts with nature allows for significant spontaneity, autonomy, and creativity in the creation and its creatures. Rolston describes God’s involvement with nature as “leading,” “luring,” and “urging” the creation onward and as “prompting” rather than commanding. He explicitly avoids conceptualizing God’s creative activity toward the world as one of design (1999: 369) and argues that God’s involvement is an “empowering permission that places productive autonomy in the creation” (1999: 370). Rolston argues that “there is enormous self-creativity in the creatures, but the context and ambience of that is the possibility space opened up by divine inspiration” (2004). “In Earth’s wildness,” he says there is “a complex mixture of authority and autonomy, a divine imperative that there be communities (ecosystems) of spontaneous and autonomous (‘wild’) creatures” (1991: 7). He accepts a “loose teleology, a soft concept of creation, and yet one that permits genuine, though not ultimate, integrity and autonomy in the creatures” (1998: 431).

Rolston might appeal to a parent-child analogy to argue that divine origin does not lessen the value of the natural world. That parents produce and then empower their children to lead productive lives neither diminishes the children’s autonomy nor devalues their accomplishments. So too, God’s production and empowerment of the creation and its creatures should not undermine their autonomy or devalue their accomplishments. Nor should it weaken our appreciation or diminish our valuation of them.⁷ Because Rolston sees God’s involvement in natural history as empowerment of a genuinely autonomous creation, his account does not take away all the wild spontaneity in nature and it leaves much that we can intensely value for its own sake. For example, tigers are no less intrinsically valuable or awe inspiring (as tigers) because God “opened up the possibility space” for such a being to evolve.

Nevertheless, Rolston’s account of a transcendent deity’s activity in natural history changes the fundamental character of nature from an amazing, spontaneous, progressive diversity that is of fundamental value to a nature whose substantial achievements have been orchestrated by something beyond nature that is the fundamental value. While there remains localized spontaneity and achievement in nature to value for its own sake, the fundamental creativity of the system, the “systemic value” of nature that Rolston has argued is most to be cherished, is due to the activity of the deity. The most miraculous facts of natural history—that life persists in the midst of its perpetual perishing, that life fights entropy and increases in diversity and complexity, that there is matter-energy when there might not have been, and that the

universe is suited for life—are all now manifestations of God's grace. I do think this shifts the focus from valuing nature to valuing God, places the ultimate value in God rather than nature, takes away the amazement that purposeless spontaneity could have produced such valuable products, and significantly shifts our conception of nature from a wild otherness to an artificed creation, lovingly given.

CONCLUSION

If I am right about these concerns, then Rolston's appeal to a transcendent deity in his theological writings is not only unneeded for his environmental ethic, but is in serious tension with it. In describing his seminary and religious studies training, Rolston writes: "The trouble was I had to fight theology to love nature" (1991: 2). I guess I am here suggesting that he continue that fight. Rolston has provided strong support for an immanent nature spirituality and such a spirituality—though it is not needed for a Rolstonian environmental ethic and defense of nature—fits well with it. The posit of supernatural agency to account for what our science of natural history leaves unexplained not only raises significant explanatory problems of its own, but causes trouble for what I take to be the most compelling environmental ethic in the field.⁸

NOTES

- ¹ No environmental philosopher knows the natural sciences better than does Rolston. Scientific description pervades Rolston's writing, and appropriately so, for we can't properly appreciate, protect and love what we don't understand, and the natural sciences are central to our understanding of nature. Rolston significantly "scientizes" his aesthetics, ethics and religion of nature. The title of one of Rolston's papers (1995) asks: "Does the Aesthetic Appreciation of Landscapes Need To Be Science-Based?" Rolston's answer is "yes," at least for the deepest sort of aesthetic appreciation. In the end, Rolston also thinks that the deepest types of environmental ethic and natural theology also need to be science-based.
- ² Footnote #1 in Benzoni's paper suggests such an alternative.
- ³ At times, Rolston (1987: 311–313) pushes hard on the idea that religion explains the meaning of events whereas science explains the causes.
- ⁴ Rolston's argument here raises a host of questions: Does he reject causal determinism? Is he saying that even an all knowing being could not predict this biologically rich world given full knowledge of initial conditions and the relevant laws, perhaps because the free will of God is an additional factor? Is this why natural selection is not a sufficient explanation for how we get primates from trilobites? Does Rolston reject the possibility that there can be emergent properties in the course of natural history, at least none without a causal origin in God?
- ⁵ It need not be naturalistic in the sense of embracing a reductionist account of religion in terms of the categories of the natural (or even social) sciences.
- ⁶ Thus a theodicy for natural evil becomes paramount. Rolston clearly takes up this challenge, as Ouderkirk shows.
- ⁷ While there is much analogous here, there is also significant disanalogy. Typically (and ultimately) parents let go of their children, who really do then lead their own lives. In contrast, while God lets his autonomous creatures make their choices, God continually empowers, inspires and orchestrates the context of such choices.
- ⁸ I thank Phil Cafaro for the chance to speak at an American Philosophical Association sponsored session on Rolston's work. I also thank Holmes Rolston for comments on a draft of this chapter.

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