

Brown: Epic of Creation holds answers

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worshipped. But, because nature is perceived by a religious naturalist to be metaphysically ultimate, 'that is to say, self-sustaining and requiring no explanation for its existence beyond itself'², nature is also understood as being religiously ultimate. This is because, even though nature is not accorded self-consciousness, personality, will or morality etc. (as the theistic God would be), nature is perceived to be the source and reason for everything we see and experience around us and so religious naturalists feel that we can 'grant to nature the kind of reverence, awe, love, and devotion we in the West have formally reserved for God'.³



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It is important to stress that for many religious naturalists – myself included – when they talk about nature as being the proper focus of religious commitment and concern they are not referring en bloc to the sum total of all created things and natural laws – to some giant collective entity, substance or thing. This present, sum total of things and natural laws, we can call 'natura naturata' – nature natured, the way the natural world happens to be at this moment. Instead, many religious naturalists use the word nature to refer to the creative power of nature, 'natura naturans' – nature naturing, nature endlessly doing what nature does.

Epic of Evolution

Now, the second idea of religion after the death of God.

Many of the people I meet, in addition to making nature their central religious focus and concern, also now take what is being called the 'Epic of Evolution' as their basic story of how things are and what things matter rather than the divine, theistic story that we find in our various sacred religious texts, such as the Bible. The 'Epic of Evolution' may be defined as:

"The [approximately] 14-billion-year narrative of cosmic, planetary, life, and cultural evolution – told in sacred ways. Not only does it bridge mainstream science and a diversity of religious traditions; if skillfully told, it makes the science story memorable and deeply meaningful, while enriching one's religious faith or secular outlook".⁴

All foundational religious stories are ones which try to say something about how things are and what things matter. But the post death-of-God, religious naturalist Epic of Evolution differs to those told by our old religions.

In our old stories, how things are and what things matter were indissolubly conjoined at the beginning of things. God creates both the physical universe *and* what is believed to be the world's unchanging, essential moral and ethical laws, which are forever to govern our responses to the world and which help us discern what things matter.

The Epic of Creation, however, separates out the creation of the physical world and the creation of our moral and ethical laws. In the Epic of Creation our conceptions of what is understood to be good and what is bad and our religious and ethical responses to them 'are not front-loaded into the story' as they are in traditional religion but, instead, are to be understood in wholly evolutionary terms. Our moral and ethical laws are perceived as being, like life itself, wholly natural and emergent; they are not perceived as things divinely

given by God from the beginning. This means the question of discerning what things matter, what things are good and bad and how to deal with the ramifications of this is – for a religious naturalist – part of an ongoing, natural evolutionary process in which, in the company of fellow explorers, we continually seek to discover and experience the world 'informed and guided by the mindful understandings inherent in our human traditions, including art, music, literature, philosophy, and the religions of the world' (RNA website).

After the death of God, the Epic of Creation offers many people a new guiding religious story that they find powerful both in terms of its scientific basis and its poetic, artistic and narrative aspects. It is a story which has the power to appeal because it feels to have about it both an intellectual and artistic persuasiveness relevant and meaningful to our own age and state of knowledge – a state that every religious naturalist is happy to acknowledge is highly likely to undergo considerable modification and, perhaps, even fundamental change in the future as our knowledge, experience and insight changes.

So there are the two things about religion after the death of God: nature as religiously ultimate and the Epic of Creation as the basic story of how things are and what things matter.

But I think it is important to conclude by stressing the importance of story in all this. Although it is *necessary*, it doesn't seem to be *sufficient for human well-being* merely to articulate a naturalistic world view after the death of God. Instead we need to ally a naturalistic worldview to good story telling in a way that results in the creation of a mutually supportive, intellectually and emotionally satisfying, challenging and informative whole.

Coming back to stories

It must not be forgotten that we are as much poetic as scientific beings and over the past five years I've been very impressed and influenced by the work of a still small cultural movement called the 'Dark Mountain Project' which was started in 2009 by two British writers Dougald Hine and Paul Kingsnorth. The following text appears on the project's website:

The stories which any culture tells itself about its origins and values determine its direction and destination. The dominant stories of our culture tell us that humanity is separate from all other life and destined to control it; that the ecological and economic crises we face are mere technical glitches; that anything which cannot be measured cannot matter. But these stories are losing their power. We see them falling apart before our eyes. New stories are needed for dark times. Older ones need to be rediscovered.

And it seems to me that, after the death of God, the Epic of Creation and an associated religion of nature can provide human kind with one such new story.

1. After Hegel: German Philosophy, 1840–1900, pp. 4–7, Princeton University Press
2. Religion of Nature, Crosby, p.xi
3. ibid
4. Taylor's Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature

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