

Naturalism, Supernaturalism, and Christian Faith in God

1. Clarification of the question implied by this title should begin by making use of the concepts of the first two alternatives worked out by Charles Hartshorne (as well as—in a slightly different way—in my own paper on four different senses of “transcendence”).
2. It should proceed by inferring (*modus ponens*) that Christian faith in God evidently implies supernaturalism at least in the broad Hartshornean sense.
3. It should then raise the question of whether Christian faith doesn’t also imply supernaturalism in something like the strict Rahnerian sense—both because of the first gratuity that is the subject of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo a Deo* and because of the second gratuity that is the subject of the doctrine of grace *sensu stricto*.
4. It should then explain why this question is not as easy to answer as is commonly supposed, because even a neoclassical theism affirms, in its way, both gratuities—both the utterly free grace of creation and emancipation and the utterly free grace of redemption and consummation.
5. It should then argue that the answer to the original question finally depends on the Christian theological adequacy of the concept of God’s negative, as well as positive, freedom—against which it can be objected crucially (1) that, from the standpoint of the apostolic witness, it is purely speculative; and (2) that its implications are doubtfully consistent with the essential claim of that witness that God’s love of all creatures is no mere accident in God but God’s very being, and that, therefore, the same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of the life of human beings in and under God’s grace.—It should be made clear in this connection that and why the idea of God as loving Godself as triune will not turn the trick—not even if the philosophical objections to such an idea can be met. Beyond these there are both (1) fundamental philosophical objections; and (2) objections arising from the

contemporary apologetic situation with its thoroughgoing rejection of all forms of self-alienation.

6. Finally, it should argue that, either way, Christian faith in God is more than supernaturalistic belief, because it is obedient trust in and loyalty to God as one's own God and not simply belief in certain assertions about God. This means that such obedient faith can be absent even where there is the most orthodox supernaturalism, even as faith can be present even where it is only inadequately objectified in the most heterodox naturalism. Christian faith in God is faith decisively *through* Jesus Christ, and therefore, in a way, also *in* Jesus Christ—although not, of course, simply belief in certain assertions about him, but also—and primarily—faith in him himself as the veritable incarnation of God's own word of pure, unbounded love.

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1. One problem with carrying out the above project is to get a clear and sharp definition of "naturalism" and "supernaturalism." There is the need to show, specifically, that both terms can be defined either more strictly or more broadly and that in their broad definitions they, in a way, coincide, or, at least, approach one another, in meaning. Actually, it would appear that "naturalism" in the broad sense is a theistic metaphysics, whereas "supernaturalism" in the broad sense is the religious fulfillment of a theistic metaphysics.

2. Another problem is to deal with what I've called elsewhere "the mistaken projection" of religious truth, i.e., the transformation of *existential* mystery into reflective *conundrum*.

3. Still another, is to come to terms with Blumenberg's insight that it is the element of *voluntarism* that makes theological supernaturalism supernaturalist.

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On "Supernaturalism"

According to Blumenberg, "the supranatural to begin with is the future, that which is temporally transcendent of the world; it is only the weakening of eschatology that makes out of this a permanent 'level' of being above nature, and thus makes human life into an existence in two realities. This scheme, subtly worked out by the scholastics, already implies the antithesis; what it actualizes can be entirely reduced to one theological element: the voluntarism in the concept of God. Since what one may call the supranaturalism of the theology of grace is at bottom only an aspect of voluntarism, it is naturalism and voluntarism that finally stand over against one another in our tradition" (RGG³, IV, 1333).

But, if this be so, then, insofar as it is the genius of neoclassical theism to be both voluntaristic and naturalistic--without compromising either or sacrificing one to the other--it is presumably the heir to the tradition of which classical theism is but a first, crude expression.

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