

What, exactly, does HRN mean by the "negative forms" of faith (RMWC: 41 f.)?

Since the faith of which he says they are the negative forms is radically monotheistic faith, understood "as confidence in the One and as loyalty to the universe of being," he speaks of them as forms of "distrust and disloyalty, which are to positive faith as minus 1, not 0, is to plus 1, or as error, not ignorance, is to the life of reason." These "negative forms" of faith, he says, regard, "in distrust and suspicion," "the principle of being, the source of all things and the power by which they exist" as "fate or destiny or blind will or chance" (38). But only a couple of pages later he expressly associates them with the two forms of "human faith" that he calls respectively "henotheism," or "social faith," and "pluralism," or "polytheism." In the moments in which radically monotheistic faith emerged, he says, "men's natural pluralism and social narcissism, together with their deep distrust of existence, were overcome for at least a moment and the consequences became evident in all spheres of activity" (40). In other words, the "negative forms" of faith are negative only relative to the One. Relative to the one social god or the many gods to which they are directed, they are not negative but positive—as positive, at any rate, as forms of idolatry are capable of being.

In his own way, then, HRN would presumably take my point that what, negatively considered, is distrust in God and disloyalty to God's cause, is not absolutely negative because it is also to be considered positively as idolatry. On the other hand, I have no reason not to take his point that the idols that human beings naturally erect alongside God are typically either merely some social one, in the case of henotheism, or simply some individual many, in the case of pluralism.

I also find it significant, by the way, that HRN speaks of the first as "our natural henotheism," even though he appears to use "natural" elsewhere as qualifying pluralism as well (as in the passage quoted above from 40). This he does, presumably, because "[t]he historically and biographically primitive form of faith seems to be the henotheistic, or social, type" (25), whereas polytheism is spoken of as "our despairing polytheism" (48), presumably

because it typically emerges when the prevailing form of social faith breaks down.

The one point where HRN's analysis still seems to me to differ from my own is in not making clear that and why idolatry cannot mean "the diversion of faith wholly away from God . . . to some merely nondivine thing falsely identified as divine" (RG: 23 f.).

3 December 2006