SUPERNATURAL EXPLANATIONS AND INSPIRATIONS

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Abstract: I propose, in partial response to the rich essays by Millican & Thornhill-Miller and Salamon that religious traditions are too diverse to be represented either by a cosmological core or even (though this is more plausible) an ethical. Religious sensibility is more often inspirational than explanatory, does not always require a transcendent origin of all things (however reasonable that thesis may be in the abstract), and does not always support the sort of humanistic values preferred in the European Enlightenment. A widely shared global religion is more likely to be eclectic than carefully 'rational', and is likely to be opposed by a more overtly 'supernatural' project founded in revelation.

A COSMOLOGICAL CORE?

Religious diversity is taken by many to suggest that no particular religious tradition should be endorsed as the one true creed. This conclusion does not follow merely from there being many different 'religious' beliefs and practices: there are after all many different conceptions of the ordinary, physical world, and most — but not necessarily all — of them may be mistaken. The problem is rather that there seems no neutral and unbiased way of deciding between 'religious' traditions, whereas most of us — or at least most likely readers of this volume — will agree that there are unbiased, 'scientific' or 'scholarly' ways of deciding between stories about the physical world, or even about human history. One attractive answer is to suggest that there are after all 'core doctrines' shared by all or almost all traditions, and that these can be given a rational basis, even if they cannot finally be proved. I shall suggest that 'supernaturalism' is not necessarily a common theme, whether interpreted cosmologically or ethically, and that 'supernaturalist' religion, especially in its Abrahamic forms, is very likely to be at odds with the commoner 'natural religion'.

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What exactly is meant by such terms as 'religious' or 'supernatural' is contentious. The simple answer may be merely that ghosts, ancestral spirits, gods and demons are universal features of the human landscape, under many names and disguises. Heirs of the European Enlightenment are generally certain that such spirits don't exist, excluded from the 'real world' because they cannot be caught, weighed or dismembered. Thomas Sprat, in his *History of the Royal Society,* declared his faith in the 'Real Philosophy' in terms that echoed St. Athanasius' rejection of pagan oracles:

> The poets of old to make all things look more venerable than they were devised a thousand false Chimaeras; on every Field, River, Grove and Cave they bestowed a Fantasm of their own making: With these they amazed the world. ... And in the modern Ages these Fantastical Forms were reviv'd and possessed Christendom. ... All which abuses if those acute Philosophers did not promote, yet they were never able to overcome; nay, not even so much as King Oberon and his invisible Army. But from the time in which the Real Philosophy has appear'd there is scarce any whisper remaining of such horrors. ... The cours of things goes quietly along, in its own true channel of Natural Causes and Effects. For this we are beholden to Experiments; which though they have not yet completed the discovery of the true world, yet they have already vanquished those wild inhabitants of the false world, that us'd to astonish the minds of men.[1]

That same 'real philosophy' may also in the end eliminate all older notions of personal choice and consciousness, as well as any good reason to consider that our minds could ever grasp reality. 'What peculiar privilege has this little agitation of the brain which we call 'thought' that we must thus make it the model of the whole universe?"[2] Maybe we can exclude ghosts, ancestral spirits, gods, demons, and even formal and final causes (as Enlightenment philosophers proposed) but we had better not exclude *all* conscious agencies and meanings, nor all rational explanations of the way things are.

Whether that criticism of Sprat's Real Philosophy could *compel* us to preserve some elements of the older story may be moot, but it does, perhaps, suggest that 'supernaturalism' of a sort is at least respectable. Is such a 'rational supernaturalism' to be found in all or most 'religions'? Is it what Millican and

1 Thomas Sprat, *History of the Royal Society* 3rd ed. (Elibron, [1722] 2005), 340; cf. Athanasius, ed., *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* 2nd ed. (Bles, 1944; written c.318 AD), ch.8, para.47.

2 David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1779), part 2.

Thornhill-Miller have in mind? They seem to identify the 'core' of religious belief as proposing a 'supernatural' explanation of the obvious truth that the world exists, that there is no logical or mathematical reason to expect it to be so 'fine-tuned' for the emergence of living, sentient and intelligent creatures like ourselves, and perhaps also for that most surprising fact of all — that we can reasonably expect to understand the inner workings of a universe immensely older, larger and more alien than any environment for which our evolutionary history could prepare us. If there is a grand explanation for the world's existence, and its nature, it cannot be merely one more already existing thing, but must lie entirely outside the world.[3] 'Natural laws' — that is, the regular patterns to be observed in the world at large — do not themselves explain the existence of a universe. They do not even dictate what the universe must be, if it exists at all. It is — as Wittgenstein remarked — a delusion to suppose that such laws are ever explanations[4]: they merely specify what needs to be explained.

This cosmological argument has been formulated and rebutted many times, but it can be acknowledged as at least a *reasonable* doctrine: any grand explanation must rely on the reality of something that does not exist simply as one more being or feature amongst many actual or potential beings or features. On the one hand it cannot be merely 'contingent' but must, somehow, be metaphysically necessary. On the other, its connection to the ordinary world examined at many different levels by scientists and scholars cannot be simply 'logical': particular existential claims are never *necessary* truths — unless there is indeed something utterly unlike all merely empirical entia whose essence requires its existence. The Grand Explanation must be something that *must* be real (its imagined unreality must be impossible), but the existence of the ordinary world, precisely, *isn't* something that must be. This conclusion can be partly evaded by proposing that all *possible* worlds are real (but only a few of them contain such sentient creatures as ourselves, who must then — unsurprisingly — discover that the world *they* live in is compatible with their own existence), but though this may be an imaginable solu-

3 Branden Thornhill-Miller and Peter Millican, "The Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma: Revisions of Humean thought, New Empirical Research, and the Limits of Rational Religious Belief", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7, no. 1 (2015).

4 'At the basis of the whole modern view of the world lies the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena': Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 6.371.

tion to the 'fine-tuning' puzzle it plainly does not provide a reason for the existence of such a multiverse, nor even for the existence of apparently 'fine-tuned' bubble worlds[5]. Nothing that we ordinarily encounter or imagine *has* to exist: either there is no explanation for the existence of such contingencies or the explanation must be much more like the personal choice of an intelligence than the automatic issue of a given nature. So even if we no longer find it possible to believe in any *particular* providence — that lightning expresses a god's anger, or that the innocent will be saved from ruin — it may be that a *general* providence is responsible for the world's (or worlds') existence, and for its (their) intelligibility.

So the common thread of 'religious' sensibility is — perhaps — to acknowledge that the world — the complete totality of all contingencies — is or has been 'chosen' (as it were) by a reality whose being and actions (as it were) are not determined by anything beyond itself. We gesture toward that reality under the title 'God' or 'the Divine' or 'Brahman' or (best of all) 'the Nameless'. This account has more than merely cosmological significance: it is not, after all, an especially useful cosmological hypothesis, in that — precisely — we can infer nothing at all about the nature of the worlds and creatures that the Nameless 'chooses' merely from what we know of Its own reality. We cannot even be confident that the Nameless chooses that the world of our experience will continue to abide by its current seeming regularities, or that we will not momentarily find ourselves in what seems an entirely different world or history. We cannot do more than hope that we shall be permitted to rely on our reasoned convictions, but must be ready to re-evaluate our lives at any moment. Which is perhaps not bad advice. However useless as a cosmological construct, the Nameless origin of all things is a salutary goad to living life as it comes!

But of course another response may be simple resentment, or at least indifference. The Nameless need not evoke any sentiment of respect, or love, or worship: the thought of It is merely to unsettle any too quick reliance on what we imagine we know already. No ceremonies or ritual practices do more than dis-

5 It is a common fallacy to suppose that in an infinite array of worlds all *possible* worlds must definitely exist: there may be infinitely many possible worlds that don't exist alongside the infinitely many ones that do. So the infinite multiverse does not guarantee the existence of any fine-tuned world, and our actual existence remains without clear explanation.

guise our nakedness before the imagination of something, not ourselves, that is larger and older and even stranger than Laniakea[6]. The sight of the night sky (itself, as we know, merely a visible fragment of the sidereal universe, let alone of an imagined multiverse) may evoke identical feelings of awe or exultation. But neither the sky nor the Nameless Itself can be propitiated or appeased or even mildly pleased. Nor of course can it be defied, insulted or evaded. Insofar as the Nameless is hypothesised as a sort of explanation for there being a relatively intelligence-friendly universe proponents of this argument may suggest that the imagined 'choice' is to promote the existence of intelligent agencies something like ourselves. But others, less entranced by our own intelligence, may suggest instead that the Nameless is (as J.B.S. Haldane has it) 'inordinately fond of beetles', or even of entirely empty spaces. That *humanity* is the focus of creation can only be a revelation, not a reasonably neutral judgment.[7]

DIVERSE RELIGIOUS AFFECTS

Is it true, in any case, that all 'religious' traditions are agreed in seeking a cosmological Grand Explanation, or even in the evocation of untrammelled mystery or an Unknowable Transcendent? The currently popular anthropological explanation for 'religious' feeling may be that our ancestors found it easiest to identify *personal* agency in the world around, and so made themselves at home in a world of gods and demons. But there seems to be no empirical evidence for the story, and some clear argument against it. Only sophisticated investigators think it important to explain what ordinarily occurs: what usually happens is the context for explanation, and invites no further comment. Why, for example, is it dark at night? And why do we think children (mostly) cute?

> Possibly the most pathetic of all the delusions of the modern students of primitive belief is the notion they have about the thing they call anthropomorphism. They believe that primitive men attributed phenomena to a god in human form in order to explain them, because his mind in its sullen limitation could not reach any further than his own clownish existence. The

6 See R. B. Tully et al., "The Laniakea supercluster of galaxies", *Nature* 513, no. 7516 (2014).

7 See my "God, Reason and Extraterrestrials", in *God, Mind and Knowledge (The British Society for the Philosophy of Religion Series)*, ed. Andrew Moore (Ashgate, 2014).

> thunder was called the voice of a man, the lightning the eyes of a man, because by this explanation they were made more reasonable and comfortable. The final cure for all this kind of philosophy is to walk down a lane at night. Anyone who does so will discover very quickly that men pictured something semi-human at the back of all things, not because such a thought was natural, but because it was supernatural; not because it made things more comprehensible, but because it made them a hundred times more incomprehensible and mysterious. For a man walking down a lane at night can see the conspicuous fact that as long as nature keeps to her own course, she has no power with us at all. As long as a tree is a tree, it is a top-heavy monster with a hundred arms, a thousand tongues, and only one leg. But so long as a tree is a tree, it does not frighten us at all. It begins to be something alien, to be something strange, only when it looks like ourselves. When a tree really looks like a man our knees knock under us. And when the whole universe looks like a man we fall upon our faces.[8]

Explanation, in brief, is unlikely ever to have been the point, even for stories — like the oldest Mediterranean myth we know — that purport to offer a fairly plain and even impersonal account of cosmic history. In that oldest story Something, the primeval mound, Atum, emerged — for no particular reason — from Nothing, and gradually diversified into the million things: the One that became a Million[9]. 'Personal beings' whom we might call gods emerged fairly late in the process. Nothing at all lies beyond the actual beings, which act according to their purely contingent nature, and so at last abandon the world, or at least this world, to us and to our kindred. Even if there is life 'beyond the grave' this too is subject to the Fates, to Fate. Whatever now stands out against a background of other creatures (whatever, that is, 'exists') will at last be swallowed up again in Nothing, maybe to emerge again in the endless cycle, but without any prospect of 'leaving the world behind' or encountering any Mystery beyond. Here and now we mortals had better acknowledge the many powers that govern human — and animal — life: Sex, War, Pride and Cleverness. We may also recognize the many moods that alter our perception of what is happening. Asking for *an explanation* or imagining that we can ever transcend our status to encounter the Unknown God is futile. Here we are, and may as well put up with it. In all generations we invent or rediscover

8 Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (Brodley Head, 1905), 63.

9 See Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, trans. John Baines (Cornell Univ. Press, 1982), 172–85.

rituals to mark out particular stages of our lives, and help us to forget mortality a while. We readily identify with particular tribes and orders, and asking us instead to adopt a 'common core' of doctrine, belief or practice may be to ignore the real significance of doctrines, beliefs and practices. We may quietly acknowledge that there is a common pattern — but it is a common pattern to be established in very different ways. A 'thin' religiosity, and especially one that downplays all emotional affect, is no match for the actual 'thick' traditions.

Trying to identify a common core in the belief that this is more likely to be reliable than any of the different doctrines, and in the hope that we can thereby avoid intransigent and possibly violent conflicts between different tribes and cults, is not an enterprise that has had much success in the past. Islam, Rational Deism, Bahai-ism, Western Vedanta, have all at various times attempted to identify and promote what was taken to be a universal doctrine. Other religious believers have rather regarded these as heresies, or rival cults. Even if they were 'thin' in their beginnings, they soon thickened — and of course the particular themes that each reformer sought to emphasise as 'the true core of religion' reflected their own presuppositions. There is a parallel with the search for a universal language: it turns out, in practice, that the proposed new language is far more parochial than its inventors fondly supposed, and that it simply serves the purposes of one particular tribe (if it survives at all). The more 'eclectic' route to a universal language is simply to permit the diffusion of terms and idioms: English in its multiple variants is far better known than Esperanto, and may itself be surpassed as a 'lingua franca' or a 'creole' through the intermixture of different language communities — which will still retain their dialects or even private codes despite also speaking Global (itself perhaps a blend, somehow, of Spanglish and Mandarin Chinese)[10].

Is this simply to concede that the diversity of creeds and practices is an argument for there being no one right way? Instead of insisting that there is some definite matter on which all the creeds agree (that there is a 'supernatural' explanation of existence), and that this is enough for us, let us concede that the tribes do *not* agree (and that their disagreement is a large part of their

10 On the problem of devising or developing a truly 'global' religion, and an attempted taxonomy of existing forms, see also my "World Religions and World Orders", *Religious Studies* 26, no. 1 (1990), and "Global Religion", in *Philosophy and the natural environment*, ed. Robin Attfield and Andrew Belsey, Royal Institute of Philosophy, supplement 36 (CUP, 1994)

vitality). Not all 'religious' traditions aim to explain the universe, nor are they all focused even on the Mystery — the brute inexplicability of all things. They are ways of living very much as languages are ways of speaking. Creeds, rituals and languages all alike are changing over time, but not only nor always so as to speak truth about the universe: that is not the only nor even the most important function either of language or religion! Durkheim's thesis needs to be remembered. By his account most actual believers 'feel that the real function of religion is not to make us think, to enrich our knowledge, nor to add to the conceptions which we owe to science others of another origin and another character, but rather, it is to make us act, to aid us to live.' He does also concede that religion 'is not merely a system of practices — but also a system of ideas whose object is to explain the world'.[11] But the primary purpose of 'religion', in its broadest sense, is inspiration rather than explanation.

> The believer who has communicated with his god is not merely a man who sees new truths of which the unbeliever is ignorant; he is a man who is stronger. He feels within him more force, either to endure the trials of existence, or to conquer them. It is as though he were raised above the miseries of the world, because he is raised above his condition as a mere man; he believes that he is saved from evil, under whatever form he may conceive this evil. The first article in every creed is the belief in salvation by faith.

The faith intended here, it should be noted, is not an unreasoning belief in particular propositions, but the determination to continue loyal to a particular vision, god and tribe.

NATURAL AND SUPERNATURAL

And how does this impact on the very notion of the 'supernatural'? One response, in line with my earlier note that not all traditions aim to 'explain' reality by reference to a reality beyond the 'natural' world, would be that the practices and stories to which Durkheim is referring exist to encourage, channel and discipline entirely 'natural' feelings and desires. Music and movement, colourful display, processions, public ceremonies and painful initiations mark out our lives. We all learn what to do with ourselves, as individuals and as collectives, from seeing, hearing and participating in the rituals of our time

11 Émile Durkheim, *The elementary forms of the religious life* (Allen & Unwin, 1915), 428.

and tribe. Human Nature is not simply biological, but expressed in multiple forms according to tribal patterns (which are also changing constantly but are very rarely reinvented utterly *de novo*). How indeed could we ever expect to invent some entirely novel way, as though we could have ever stripped off our language, cultural habits and remembered histories?

And yet perhaps there are occasional signs of some movement beyond the usual, beyond the 'natural'. The 'supernatural' as a category may have a significance other than the cosmological. Natural explanations are always likely (maybe certain) to be circular, and the only Grand Explanations must lie outside the frame of 'natural law' and usual events. Correspondingly, most moral and political 'revolutions' are only turns of the wheel: some new class displaces the old rulers, but fulfils much the same function. Even if a new 'Golden Age' occurs it will soon give way to Silver, Bronze and Iron once again. Is there any way away from the constant repetition of old errors? Does anyone hope to escape?

> A man cannot think himself out of mental evil; for it is the organ of thought that has become diseased, ungovernable, and, as it were, independent. He can only be saved by will or faith. The moment his mere reason moves, it moves in the old circular rut; he will go round and round his logical circle, just as a man in a third-class carriage on the Inner Circle will go round and round the Inner Circle unless he performs the voluntary, vigorous, and mystical act of getting out at Gower Street.[12]

Plainly, I am more in sympathy with Salamon's agatheistic response to the suggestion of a more global, 'second order' religiosity: namely, that the issue lies with the *ethical* rather than the cosmological, inspiration rather than explanation.[13] And even the purportedly cosmological gets its popular force in the way I have suggested: 'when the whole universe looks like a man we fall upon our faces'. The first move might indeed be to propose that there is a common *ethical* and emotional core in all religion: that both tribal and proselytizing religions, for example, endorse some version of the Golden Rule — to treat others as we would wish ourselves to be treated. Maybe we can acknowledge that, despite the myriad claims that there are no ethical universals, al-

12 Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (House of Stratus, [1908] 2001), 11.

13 Janusz Salamon, "Atheism and Agatheism in the Global Ethical Discourse: Reply to Millican and Thornhill-Miller", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7, no. 4 (2015): 230ff.

most all peoples everywhere consider loyalty, courage, fairness and sobriety to be virtues. No-one applauds cowardly and drunken traitors — even if there are some disagreements about the proper locus of our loyalties (to family, nation, church, party — or the Nameless). We find in 'religion' the courage to continue, to 'have faith' in the eventual victory over 'evil' (which is to say, over rage, malice, pride and ignorance). The scientific enterprise itself — as I indicated earlier — depends on faith, on the indemonstrable conviction that our investigations will have appropriate issue (and that we can usually trust our colleagues to report their own results both accurately and honestly). It is perhaps not easy to maintain this conviction in the face of teachers who insist that 'reasonable people' must acknowledge that we are barely evolved primates, programmed to prefer our own immediate kindred, likely to jump to easy conclusions, and indifferent to any truth that we are ill-equipped to discover. And in identifying the common 'ethical' core we may be misled by a similar, naturally ungrounded hope: why may we not notice that, left to ourselves, humanity constantly recreates caste societies, that we divide the world, and our own species, into the 'pure' and the 'impure' (male and female, freeborn and slave, native-born and foreign), that we ratify scapegoating and revenge? Why on the other hand do we so easily assume that 'everyone' really agrees to value 'human beings' more than other creatures, or that 'everyone' wants a comfortable life? Those seeking a merely naturalistic account of either our ethical or our epistemic habits usually neglect to notice what our actual habits are, preferring to emphasise only the likelihood that we will have some 'good' feelings of a kind that they themselves endorse, and some prudential insights. A merely naturalistic epistemology, like a merely naturalistic ethical philosophy, is no more than a convenient fiction.

So is there a fully 'supernatural' option, in ethics as in cosmology? That was indeed the message often maintained by the Hebrews: Abram walked away from the household of his ancestors and the gods of the Chaldaeans, summoned to obey a wholly distinctive voice and be turned at last into Abraham[14]. The only name that Moses learnt for his God was '*Eh'je asher eh'je:* I

14 *Genesis* 11.31-12.4; 17.1-8.

will be who I will'[15]. Christians in their turn refused to follow the obvious, natural and eclectic religion of the Roman world, refusing to accept the names and natures expected of them. They insisted instead — more vehemently even than the Hebrews — that there had been a great mistake in human and natural history, and that it was their novel duty to be loyal to an agent 'from outside', and so assist in the creation of a new humanity, a new world, growing within the carcase of the old and destined to be revealed 'in glory' at the last[16]. It is here that 'the supernatural' has its real beginning. The gods of the nations, after all, have only their given natures, within a world unfolding according to regular and expected patterns. Our duties, as family members or citizens, are ready made for us — for the freeborn as much as for the slaves. Extreme versions of this doctrine or attitude are encapsulated in the familiar Gnostic myth: this world here was and is devised by a lesser, ignorant and probably malicious, god, and the true light is breaking in from Outside Over There. Nothing 'natural', nothing that usually happens or is usually preferred, is really of any value, and true agents of the light are indeed, as the Romans thought them, 'enemies of (natural) humanity'. This option is indeed extreme — and probably incoherent. We cannot suppose ourselves (and the world) entirely and irredeemably corrupt without abandoning any hope even of recognizing or admiring the 'supernatural' call. The preferred account was rather that this is indeed a 'fallen' world, which still contains the possibility of re-creation.

'Supernaturalism', in brief, is only one religious option, rather than the core of all religion, and is better understood in ethical than cosmological terms. Thought of the transcendent and incomprehensible cause of everything may evoke religious awe, but without any hint that we should live in any particular way, or have any hope of understanding. Such awe, considered as a natural and humanly familiar mood, is itself a part of the usual human world, and leaves our expectations of that world untouched. Nothing in the world, or in our life within it, is radically transformed by this, any more than by the sudden onset of romantic love, or music, or success in sport or business. All such suddenly euphoric passions are significant in their way (they carry us

15 *Exodus* 3.13. See Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, tr. N. Plaice et al. (Blackwell, [1959] 1985), 1235f. See also Kornelis H Miskotte, *When the Gods are Silent*, tr. J. W. Doberstein, (Collins, 1967), 297.

16 See Paul *Epistle to the Romans* 18.19-25.

'out of ourselves' and out of our usual troubles), but do not necessarily turn us toward the 'the supernatural'. The 'supernatural' demand that brought Abram out of Haran, and the people of Israel out of Egypt, or that broke the social bonds of ordinarily civilized life for followers of Christ, identifies a religious form distinct from others (including, of course, many of the forms which Christian Churches promoted in the later centuries). As such it does not constitute the core of all religious forms, but rather a rejection of most religion. Whatever broad or narrow religious sensibility eventually converts terrestrial humanity (Esperanto, as it were, or Mandarin-infected Spanglish) those who follow the *supernatural* call will be outsiders, rebels, spies, as much as they were in the Roman Empire. If they are right, the New Heaven and New Earth will supersede the old (and there will be no more sea)[17]. The lay theologian John Wren-Lewis emphasised the creative and non-circular message of this gospel, with a passing rebuke to the enterprise of 'explaining' things by appeal to an unknown and unknowable cause:

> If 'supernatural' means 'creative — capable of changing the ordinary order of nature' — modern science and technology actually realize the supernatural, whereas by contrast traditional religion, by identifying the supernatural with something hidden behind the scenes of experience, actually had the effect of making people think of life as a matter of conforming to the laws of the great overall system[18].

Or is there one last twist to this elaborate story? If the supernaturalist preaches liberation from all other bonds, and an end to all idolatry, maybe that is, after all, a hidden, esoteric, theme in all or very many serious religious traditions? Maybe all such traditions contain contradictions: on the one hand, they validate existing ties of loyalty and status, giving symbolic form to significant life events and habitual distinctions; on the other, they intimate that all these stories, symbols, regulatory habits are only superficially important. They provide us with a quiet and familiar context for our lives, hinting always that there is beauty and high purpose in even most trivial happenings. But the real focus of our endeavours must always lie beyond.

17 Revelation 21.1.

18 John Wren-Lewis 'Sense of the Supernatural': *Guardian* 3rd September 1964. I have addressed the thought of Wren-Lewis at greater length in an essay to be included in Victoria Harrison and Harriet Harman, eds., *Atheisms* (Routledge, forthcoming).

> The ancient traditions of devotion and reflection, of worship and enquiry, have seen themselves as *schools.* Christianity and Vedantic Hinduism, Judaism and Buddhism and Islam are schools… whose pedagogy has the twofold purpose — however differently conceived and executed in the different traditions — of weaning us from our idolatry and purifying our desire.[19]

Just as the Nameless origin of all things offers no convenient predictions (except, just possibly, that we have a little better chance of understanding things than if the 'natural universe' was all and we were only a minor branch of primates on an unremarkable rock) so also the call of the Unknown offers no safe haven, no assurance that the future will be to our taste (except, just possibly, that the future will be forever). There is little point in thus leaving home and our comfort zone unless there really is a reality beyond our idols and beyond our wishes. And we shall succeed in it (if this is possible) only by using the rituals for their real purpose. We may hope, in the interests of global peace, that the many 'religious' traditions of humankind (including Western humanism) may find some points of 'agreement', whether that is in a set of 'core beliefs and practices' or in a tolerant eclecticism which acknowledges that 'there cannot be only one way to so great a mystery'. But granted the diversity of belief and practice even within any single such tradition, and granted the possibility of intrusive revelations, contrary to the thoughts and habits that we 'naturally' adopt, the hope of unity is perhaps unlikely to be fulfilled. In 384 AD Symmachus, as prefect of the city, pleaded with the emperor to allow the ancient *Ara Pacis* to remain in the Roman Senate:

> The divine Mind has distributed different guardians and different cults to different cities. As souls are separately given to infants as they are born, so to peoples the genius of their destiny. We ask, then, for peace for the gods of our fathers and of our country. It is just that all worship should be considered as one. We look on the same stars, the sky is common, the same world surrounds us. What difference does it make by what pains each seeks the truth? We cannot attain to so great a secret by one road (*uno itinere non potest perveniri ad tam grande secretum*)[20].

19 Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'* (CUP, 1996), 21.

20 Symmachus *Relation* 3, ch. 10: taken from http://www.ucalgary.ca/~vandersp/Courses/texts/sym-amb/symrel3f.html (accessed 18th July 2017). It is worth adding that the aphorism is greater than its author. James O'Donnell remarks, after prolonged reading of Symmachus's letters, that 'rarely do we get so comprehensive a literary portrait surviving from antiquity of so

His plea — which was in essence a plea for ancestral privilege, for existing rights of property, for slavery and class distinctions — was rejected, in the name of a wilder, genuinely 'supernatural', order.

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thoroughly wearisome, fatuous, and pompous an individual. The letters are simply as preposterous as their author was' (James J.O'Donnell "The Demise of Paganism", *Traditio* 35 (1979).

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