

Truths We Believe about God

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A Biblical & Theological Rejection of Wm. Paul Young's book, "Lies We Believe About God" (Twelfth in a series.)

"Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world [i.e., naturalism, ed.], and not after Christ."

—The Apostle Paul, Colossians 2:8, KJV

Conclusion: Part 2

NATURALISM

Undercurrent in Evangelicalism

Naturalism's influence upon evangelicalism has earlier been traced in the movement's history, observing the initial effect of the philosophy upon American Christianity evidenced with the rise of liberalism and its rejection of supernaturalism, then naturalism's influence upon Neo-evangelicalism with that movement's accommodation of evolutionary theory, then the Charismatic movement's protest against naturalism by working of supernatural "signs and wonders," then by the mega-church's employment of humanistic means to produce "results" of church growth, and now the emergent church's reinterpretation of the biblical mandate to fit a this-worldly vision of reality by adjusting the church's message to fit the ecological, social, economical, political and spiritual needs of life on this planet. (By saying this I do not suggest man has the right to abuse this planet and its life. God has given humans the right of beneficial dominion over, not destruction of His world, Genesis 1:26. And the Bible also gives instructions, even commands, about how we are to treat others, Galatians 6:10.)

As ideas have consequences, there is however a sequence of "isms" inherent within a naturalistic philosophy of life. We begin with the source, the philosophy of naturalism which at core is anti-Christ because Scripture presents the Lord Jesus as the supernatural creator and sustainer of the universe (Colossians 1:16-17); and that after His Second Coming, the whole cosmos will consummate in Him "so that God may be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28). The Lord Jesus Christ is the Omega point toward the universe is headed (Revelation 1:8, 11; 21:6; 22:13).

Naturalism

Naturalism, especially in this modern world in which scientific and technological advantages reduce the insecurities and harshness of life, negatively influences people to be less dependent upon God because the philosophy asserts that nature is king. Nature is viewed as the essence of being. Ah, life is good! that is, until we come to the end of it. Is this all there is? Death has a way of exposing humans to the insecurity within nature. Death brings our vulnerability up close and personal (Romans 5:12). But despite the prognosis of death, naturalism seeks to explain life, even the mystery of it, through knowing "the methods characteristic of the natural sciences." [123]

Naturalism favors a monistic worldview (that everything which exists is one natural reality) as opposed to a dualistic worldview (that everything which exists is constituted of two realities, one natural (below) and one supernatural (above). (See John 8:21-30.) Respectively, these realities are the cosmos and its Creator, the universe and God. Though supernaturalism holds that God has and can miraculously interrupt the cosmos whenever and however He wills (i.e., creation, the Exodus, the incarnation of Jesus, His resurrection from the dead, His promised personal return, etc.), philosophical naturalism rejects "the supernatural, or world of god and invisible agencies." [124]

Evolutionism

So enter the theory of evolution, naturalism's brain child. Might it be said that evolution evolves out of naturalism? To accommodate their faith to the latest advances in science or human knowing and because they think it's settled theory, many evangelicals believe some aspect of evolutionary theory. Unwilling to consider that the theory might be flawed and false, Neo-Calvinists like the well-known Timothy Keller accept "truths" about evolution and try to incorporate the theory into their Christian faith despite the fact that the theory neither needs nor wants God. Evolution is a quite self-sufficient theory and doesn't need God. But incorporating God into evolution by evangelicals appears as so much Christian "window dressing." Really I quite like my naturalism they say, but I'll give God a nod.

After discussing pros and cons of the theory (mostly pros), Keller stated in his best selling book *The Reason for God* (2008): "For the record I think God guided some kind of process of natural selection," indicating he believes in theistic evolution, but adds that he rejects "the concept of evolution as All-encompassing Theory [by using capital letters "A" and "T" Keller a nod to God that the theory is not divine, ed]." [125] Another example is evident in Paul Young's book *Lies*, when his friend C. Baxter Kruger encountered an eccentric Indiana Jones looking "systematic microevolutionary botanist" whom he found himself seated next to on a commercial jet flight. After Kruger introduced himself to the botanist as a theologian, the "microevolutionary botanist" responded, "I suppose you want to talk me about evolution." "Not really," Baxter answered. "I don't care much about that, but please tell me more about plants." (LWBAG, 127) These two illustrations, there are many more I am sure, indicate that vast numbers of evangelicals determine what they believe about God by mixing naturalism and supernaturalism. In their heart of hearts, or mind of minds, they do not entirely believe God to be the cause of all causes, but rather in the natural make-

up of the universe, causes are their own causes. Causes cause themselves. In other words, the universe is a symphony without a Composer and a Director.

Enter Intelligent Design—a scientific movement which adapts Thomas Aquinas' teleological argument for God's existence. Intelligent designers ask, how can there be natural design in the universe absent a supernatural Designer? Their answer of course is, there can't. The point is made. But naked knowing does not prove Jesus is God and lead individuals to accept the Gospel and believe in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Don't get me wrong. There is a place for believing God is the Designer of the universe and the Cause of all causes. Nature bears wonderful testimony to "His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature" (Romans 1:19-20). But left unto itself this argument takes its believers no further than into Deism, believing that, oh! yeah, there's a God, but He's left us on our own to figure life out and fend for ourselves. Intelligent Design, while giving God nodding acceptance, is just another nuance of the philosophy of naturalism. While the popular theory explains God, it does not explain His Son. For that supernatural revelation, *the logos*, is needed (John 1:1-5, 14).

Many evangelical pastors and theologians, perhaps to enhance their worldly credibility, acceptance and respect, continue to look for common religious ground with scientists. Why argue about evolution when they mutually accept all or part of the theory to be true?

But many individuals think that the consequence of believing in evolution is atheism. Charles Hodge (1797-1868) thought so and stated as much in his book, *What Is Darwinism?* [126] Maybe evolution does demand atheism, but then, given the innate need of humans to worship someone or something bigger than themselves, there just might be another possibility, and that's . . .

Pantheism

Young: God's in Everything

Pantheism, believing that *nature is God*, or panentheism, that *nature contains God* (as a can contains Coca Cola) or that God's being permeates nature (like a colored dye poured into a glass of water), is basic to *The Shack's* view of God. God participates in and is not separate from nature. As Jesus explains to Mack about "Papa-Elousia":

*Being always transcends appearance—that which only seems to be. . . . That is why Elousia is such a wonderful name. God who is the ground of all being, dwells in, around, and through all things—ultimately emerging as the real—and any appearances that mask that reality will fall away. (Emphasis added, *The Shack*, 112).*

Kruger: Everything's in God (The Trinity)

After drawing an intertwined three-circled symbol of the Trinity, C. Baxter Kruger, Young's friend, relates the following conversation he had with that scientist mentioned earlier which Young recounts in his book *Lies*: "Look," says Kruger to the scientist,

*this is the symbol for the Three-Person Oneness of God. Inside of this moving divine dance of relationship, everything was created: every human being, every plant, every subatomic particle, everything. God loves His creation and our participation in it. (Emphasis added, **LWBAG**, 127-128)*

Connect the dots . . . Imagine! Young says . . . God who is the ground of all being dwells in, around, and through all things. God's in everything. Kruger says . . . Everything from particles to people is "inside" the Trinity. This is how Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) imagined reality. He saw the universe to be "pan-Christic," that "Christ is in all things" and "all things are in Christ." To de Chardin all things includes "all humanity . . . all creation, all of life, all

beings and elements in the cosmos.” [127] Young and Kruger appear to have taken the cue for their worldview from Teilhard, and call it whatever you might wish, this symbiotic worldview of Christ being in nature (Can we say nature incarnates Christ?) is pantheism. About pantheism Samuel Andrews insightfully observed:

The essential element of Pantheism . . . “is the unity of God and nature, of the Infinite and the finite, in one single substance.” The Infinite is not swallowed up in the finite, nor the finite in the Infinite, but both co-exist; and this co-existence is necessary and eternal. Thus we have the One and the many, the Absolute, the All. It will have no dualism; it will unify nature, man, and God. [128]

Pantheism or panentheism, call it what you wish, philosophically intrudes into who Scripture reveals God to be (Colossians 2:8). In a pantheistic view of the cosmos the worlds of above and below meld into one, the idea of divine immanence (God’s down here) consuming any idea of divine transcendence (God’s up there).

God’s Lesson about Pantheism: Mercy Seat, Ark and Temple

Though the glory of the Lord came to dwell on the Ark’s Mercy Seat beneath the Cherubim in the temple, the materials of the ark and the temple were not permeated with divinity. Solomon knew that the Lord transcended anything he could build. His dedicatory prayer reflected this:

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded?

–1 Kings 8:27

Think for a moment: Solomon, according to the Lord’s revealed instructions and specifications, built a beautiful temple out of valuable materials. The Lord however, was not in those

materials and neither was He in the temple until He came to dwell in it (2 Chronicles 5:14; 7:1-3). Evidently God is not in all things. If He was, then all Israel would have to have done is build the temple and worshipped it, like a lot of people do when they reverence their beautiful and majestic churches and cathedrals. But from God's perspective, there are no sacred places and no sacred spaces (John 4:21-24; 1 Timothy 2:8). That Israel was ordered to build a temple absent God's presence testified to His transcendence! Yet given the human heart's propensity to worship nature, the story of the Old Testament faith could be related "in terms of a tension between a spiritual conception of God and worship . . . and various pressures, such as idolatry, which attempted to debase and materialize the religious consciousness." [129] Such is the transcendent separation of the Holy God from His material creation. That is why God ordered the Second Commandment: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (Exodus 20:4).

The Lord is Holy

The essential attribute of God in Scripture is holiness. As regards God being holy, one Old Testament scholar observed:

The basic idea conveyed by the holiness of God is His separateness . . . the One who stands apart from and above the creation. . . . It is no exaggeration to state that this element overshadows all others in the character of the deity . . . [130]

Yet the heathen worldview does not accept God's transcendence over creation but rather chooses to believe He's immanent in creation, that He exists and dwells in everything whether it be animate or inanimate (Romans 1:23). Hence pagans could make idols out of materials they believed were indwelt by the universal soul of God, that divinity was in, through, with and

around the wood and precious metals they used to fashion their images (Jeremiah 10:8). The problem was that their idols could not act or speak, unless demons would use the idols to deliver fake oracles (Zechariah 10:2). As Isaiah mocked:

*They shall be turned back, they shall be greatly ashamed,
that trust in graven images, that say to the molten images,
Ye are our gods.*

—Isaiah 42:17

The point: pantheism, believing that God is wholly immanent, or its cousin panentheism, that nature is permeated-infused of a divine Soul, leads to idolatry. In contrast to the surrounding pagan nations and their worship centers, this explains why the glory of the transcendent Lord came dwell in the temple—He came to dwell on His terms and not Israel’s—and later why when Israel apostatized from Him to worship idols, the glory of the Lord departed from the temple (Ezekiel 8:3-4; 9:3; 10:4; 11:23). The whole point of the coming and going of the Lord to and from the temple was to show His chosen nation that though He transcendentally dwelt apart from and above the temple, He could, if He chose to, come to dwell immanently within it! The Lord did not dwell in every ancient temple built by man, only in Israel’s. His indwelling was exceptional and selective. As Paul the Apostle told the philosophers on Mars Hill, “God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands” (Acts 17:24). By the way, as to the selective indwelling of God, let’s not forget beloved, that in this present age regenerate believers, not everybody, are “a temple of the Holy Spirit, whom you [we] have from God” (1 Corinthians 6:19). God’s presence does not dwell in everything or every person, but in some people, in believers who have been baptized in, with, and by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13; John 7:39; 14:16-17; Romans 8:9).

“Papa-Elousia” is not holy!

But the God of *The Shack* is not holy. He does not live separate from nature. He is part of it. Instead of being called "His Excellency," we might call Young's *Papa* goddess, "her immanency"! In Young's allegory God is not high and lifted up, but base and brought down (See Isaiah 6:1-7.) This may explain why in *The Shack* Young consistently spells Creation spelled with a capital "C"; because his scheme of reality involves a panentheistic universe permeated of divinity, that God "is the ground of all being dwelling in, around, and through all things." [131] Likewise, while denigrating a biblical worldview as one of unnecessary institutions, arbitrary authority, and inhibiting rules, *The Shack* is big on experiencing "Creation" with a capital "C"—strolling in the garden, hiking in the forests, lying on a dock and looking up at the stars in the night skies, exploring caves, walking on water, and so on. Young's pantheism leads to communion with nature which eventuates in mysticism, seeing visions, hearing voices, experiencing visitations, whether imagined or real. But as evolution/pantheism is the *brain child* of naturalism, so mysticism is the *soul child* of pantheism.

Mysticism

In connecting the divinity within them to the divinity dwelling in, with, through and around them, mystical meditators (or imaginers, Romans 1:21) become laws unto themselves resulting in spiritual anarchy, one person's experience either coalescing with or contradicting another's. Over a century ago Samuel J. Andrews insightfully navigated the mindset of the pantheist in his book *Christianity and Anti-Christianity* (1899). He observed that, "Every man, being Divine, is a law to himself. The Divinity in him rules and guides him." [132] So disengaged with the idea that Scripture was and is any kind of direct and binding Word from God, perhaps being but a recollection of people's "experiences" with the divine, pantheistic mystic-meditators will only "listen to and obey the inward voice." [133] So the inner

voice asks (Compare *The Shack's* portrayal of the Bible just covered.):

Why hearken to the voices of the past? Why listen to the ["prophetic," ed.] utterances of an old Bible? "If a man claims to know and to speak of God, and carries you backward to the phraseology of some old mouldered ["dusty and decayed," ed.] nation in another country, in another world [ancient Israel to whom were committed the oracles of God, Romans 3:2, ed.], believe him not." In other words, it is nothing to me what God has said by Moses or Paul; I am concerned only with what He says to me today. [134]

Pantheistic seekers into the divine, and make no mistake pantheism needs, even demands, mysticism, sense God speaking directly to them or experience having conversations with God. Whether imagined within themselves or received from spirits, these voices allow mystic meditators to relate to others their experiences with God. In the "spiritual exercise" of meditation we can be reminded that idolatry is thinking wrong thoughts or experiencing wrong emotions about God. As a result, "No law can be sacred to any man, but that of his own nature. Let every man obey his own Divine impulses." [135] So as meditators take their mystical journey into themselves or transcendence, let the new metanarrative begin. Here we have it: naturalism leads to imagination and imagination stimulates belief in pantheism which asks people to commune with nature in and around them, and that is mysticism—it's all within the mind and soul of man, or worse, demonic, as souls cavort with the spiritual principalities and powers in the universe (Greek *stoicheion*, Colossians 2:8; See Ephesians 6:12).

Communing with and experiencing nature can also be classified as existentialist (For definition, see footnote.). [136] In imagined conversations which he claims streamed into his consciousness from God, Young asserts his beliefs about God. His source of belief is primarily himself. Often he tries to

find biblical confirmation for his conversations, but as he distorts Scripture to do so, he does not. Why try to find truth from some old leather Bible with gold edges, or what he calls “guilt edges”? That’s why he calls other sources, including truths from the Bible, *Lies*. By asserting that his conversations with God make him an authority on theological truth, the author demeans Scripture because for existentialists the Word becomes a “troublesome obstacle . . . in the way of the decisive conversation between the I and the Thou.” So the existentialist asks, “How can I meet a Thou if he has the written Word in between?” [137] So Young cleverly inserts his conversations with God to replace the Bible, and from appearances, record numbers of evangelicals, based upon his talks with God, are buying into and believing the story and theology of *The Shack*.

Drunken Spirituality

About the arrogance pantheistic belief promotes in the human soul, Samuel Andrews offered this insightful impression:

Pantheism is an inebriating faith, of which vanity or sensationalism is apt to be the first word, though not the last. . . . When you put the Unities, and Immensities, and Abysses in the place of God, you are very apt indeed to feel what a wonderful fellow you must be to front the World and the Eternities in that grand way. [138]

Stay tuned for the final “ism” which derives from a naturalistic worldview, which is . . .

Conclusion: Part 3 to follow . . .

Footnotes

[123] Simon Blackburn, “Naturalism,” *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, Second Edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005): 246.

[124] Ibid.

- [125] Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2008): 98.
- [126] Charles Hodge, *What Is Darwinism?* (New York, NY: Scribner, Armstrong, and Company, 1874): 102. Hodge says, "We have thus arrived at the answer to our question, What is Darwinism? It is Atheism."
- [127] Ursula King, *Christ In All Things: Exploring Spirituality with Teilhard de Chardin* (London, GB: SCM Press Ltd, 1997): 70, 68.
- [128] Samuel J. Andrews, *Christianity and Anti-Christianity in Their Final Conflict* (New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1899, Second Edition): 126-127.
- [129] J.A. Motyer, "Idolatry," *The New Bible Dictionary*, J.D. Douglas, Editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962): 551.
- [130] E.F. Harrison, "Holiness; Holy," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, General Editor, Volume 2 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982): 725. As another scholar summarizes, "God's holiness thus becomes an expression for his perfection of being that transcends everything creaturely." See Jackie A. Naudé, "7727 qadosh" *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, Volume 3, Willem A. VanGemeren, General Editor (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997): 879.
- [131] It can be counted that the word "creation" occurs approximately twenty times in *The Shack*, and is always spelled with a capital "C." By his use of the upper case spelling contra Romans 1:25, is the author assigning divinity to nature? Too, in its first occurrence of the word "nature" is spelled with a capital "N." (*The Shack*, 15) On the page preceding, Young also wrote of "the god of winter." (*The Shack*, 14)
- [132] Andrews, *Christianity and Anti-Christianity*: 256.
- [133] Ibid: 257.
- [134] Ibid.
- [135] Ibid: 258.

[136] “Essentially existentialism is a revolt against rationalism, with its stress on reason alone, for its failure to progress beyond the obvious, its lack of engagement with people, and its ignoring of their real needs. . . . Existentialism is to be experienced directly rather than taught.” See E.D. Cook, “Existentialism,” *New Dictionary of Theology*, Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, Editors (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988): 243. Based upon the above definition, *The Shack* qualifies as an existential book as it engages the experience of readers at the level of one great emotional need, that of resolving any *great sadness* they may have experienced in their lives.

[137] Emphasis mine, Robert P. Roth, “Existentialism and Historic Christian Faith,” *A Christianity Today Reader*, Frank E. Gaebeline, Editor (New York, NY: Meredith Press, 1966): 231.

[138] Mr. H.R. Hutton quoted by Andrews, *Christianity and Anti-Christianity*: 258.