

God Without Superstition

From letters to John Nooney

Christopher von Bülow*

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I'm glad to hear you liked my (unfinished) religion paper.¹ What I wanted to say but didn't get to say was that in my opinion the important thing about religion is not what kind of statements you believe in but rather how you feel about the world, other people, and yourself. The statements (like "There is a god, and he loves you" etc.) may help in feeling okay and able, in being tolerant and less selfish towards other people, and being accepting towards what life throws at you; but those statements are neither necessary nor sufficient for feeling and behaving that way. They can even be harmful, if people start thinking that belief in certain religious dogmas is the important thing, instead of how you feel and behave.

I think you get closer to feeling okay and behaving constructively, not by coercing yourself to believe unbelievable statements, but by making the right kind of experiences, maybe by the good example of others, by being accepted by others and valued by them as you are, not because you conform to their expectations. And the best way to make those experiences, I suppose, other than by being lucky, is by recognizing yourself, the good parts and the not-so-good parts, and how you fail to accept and value others because of your own fears. But that's just words, and words can't substitute experience. Otherwise I'd behave much more constructively in certain areas.

You wrote you found my paper a little disturbing. I don't think there's much reason for that. I didn't want to say there's a god in the sense of the Christians, Moslems or Jews, i.e., a god that's incompatible with the laws of nature and thus hard to swallow for rational, science-oriented people. I just wanted to say, if you, as a 'bright', wanted to, you could believe in a very watered-down version of god without miracles, namely, you could call the world and the run of life, *considered* in a certain way (viz., you, people, the world, are okay as they are—which doesn't mean you mustn't try to change certain things), *God*. Thus, you might translate the Christian "God loves you" as "You are okay as you are, no matter what you believe or what others say," and "Thy will be done" as "What's happened has happened, no use fretting about it, so what am I going to do now?"

*eMail: Christopher.von.Buelow@uni.kn; Website: www.uni.kn/FuF/Philo/Philosophie/philosophie/index.php?article_id=88.

¹"A God for Naturalists: How Science and Religion can be Compatible," www.uni.kn/FuF/Philo/Philosophie/philosophie/files/religion.pdf.

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I'm sorry for not answering sooner to your two letters, but I was very busy this past half year. ... Also, I hesitated to start writing to you because I find the topic ("God for rational people" or "God without superstition," let's say) quite interesting and am therefore inclined to write a lot, once I start. So I didn't want to start when I wouldn't have the time to finish. But now I have time, and your birthday's approaching too.

It was interesting to read about Spinoza. He seems to have been much more 'modern' or whatever than I would have thought possible in someone who lived so long ago. (By the way, did Spinoza believe in a life after death?—I hope not.) Already the fact that Damasio, as a neurobiologist, writes a book on Spinoza² indicates he is interesting. (I am reading Damasio's *The Feeling of What Happens*³ at the moment and I like it very much; seems a very promising approach to consciousness.)

What I like about Spinoza is that his 'God' isn't person-like at all, that God doesn't punish or reward. In the literal sense, he doesn't want anything and doesn't do anything, i. e., he is not like a human subject or agent, who thinks and plans and can be held responsible (to some degree) for what he does. Then again, in a metaphorical sense, 'God' does everything: everything that happens is an 'act' of God; and he 'wants' whatever happens, because why else would he 'do' it? (But I am really already expounding my own ideas about a sensible concept of God; what I think Spinoza *should* have said, even if he didn't actually say it.)

I also like it when Spinoza says: your own acts (and their 'worldly' consequences, I suppose) are all the 'reward' and 'punishment' you are ever going to get for these same acts. Perhaps it *is* possible that some people can do a bad thing and be happier with it than they would have been, had they done something better. But I prefer the belief that every deed is more or less its own reward or punishment [i. e., if you do something bad you will, in the end, feel worse for it than if you had done something better]. Anyway it would be good if more people believed this.

So, in a sense there is no secret plan that God is carrying out, no secret goal that God is aiming at, and which you have to figure out. In another sense, there *is* a kind of plan and goal. Maybe the best summarization of what I mean is that there is no *hidden* plan or goal or meaning. "What you see is what you get."

There is *no* plan in the following sense: Whenever somebody tells you that God's plan is such and such ("You have to work hard and brush your teeth" or "You have to love everybody as you love thyself" or "You have to convert or eradicate the infidels"), you don't have to believe a word he says. He may even be right, but just being told what the presumptive truth is, is of no use to you (in the matter of religion/spirituality). Also, the fact that he wants to convince you about a matter where arguments are misplaced (rather, experience is paramount here, and the capability to envision, and believe in, better possibilities)—again: the fact that he wants to convince you indicates that he acts out of motivations which are, at bottom, selfish. (Which is of course only human.) It's another matter if someone tells you that God's plan is that whatever happens, happens. Then he's probably right, but again, it's of no use to you.

There *is* a plan in the following sense: The 'plan' is that you figure out better and better what's good and what's bad, what works for you in your position in life and what doesn't, and then try to do what's good as best you can. And that's what

²Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*, Harcourt, 2003.

³*The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*, Harcourt, 1999.

everybody does. I don't mean to say that God's plan is that everybody should always act selfishly. Rather, you should pursue whatever goal matters to you, do whatever you think is important or right. Maybe after a while it turns out that you were wrong, then you change course. But that doesn't mean you have done something wrong. You just did the best you could do at the time, and now you can do better.

I think it's important that nobody can *tell* you what's good and what's bad, or what the 'meaning' of life is. They can tell you their opinions, and maybe it helps you in finding your own way. But there is no authority (in the ordinary sense), no holy book or high priest or commissar who is in the right position to inform you about the 'true' meaning of life. (The only authorities are life and you yourself who has to make sense out of his life.) That's not because nobody has any inkling about 'God's will' or the meaning of life, but just because the meaning of life is something that can't be successfully told by somebody to somebody. Maybe it can be told, but even then it's no use to you if you merely understand it intellectually and merely *think* that such and such is indeed the true meaning of life. It's no use because then you still didn't *get it* in the sense that matters.

What do I mean by "getting it"? It is a kind of believing: not believing *that* such and such is the case ("There is a God who loves me" or "There is a life after death" etc.) but rather like believing *in* someone. Believing in yourself, or in others: trusting that you, or they, can succeed. Or trusting that life is okay just the way it is right now, even if you are unhappy and dissatisfied. Or trusting that you will manage, whatever life ('God') may throw at you. Not worrying too much about the bad things that might conceivably happen, but rather taking the necessary precautions for what might realistically happen, and then just wait and see, content that you have done your best. Or trusting that other people are okay ('God loves them') just the way they are right now, even if they hurt you sometimes, even if you have to stop them from doing something harmful.

That's easy to say but hard to achieve. I think one can achieve it by degrees. It's next to impossible to be so accepting about intense pain, humiliation, or death. And it cannot be achieved by merely being of the *opinion* that it is good to be so trusting and accepting. What helps, I suppose, is when you make the *experience* that bad things can still be okay (or that good things *are* possible), sometimes. It is a process, in part chance, in part affectible by you. And sometimes it already helps to trust in that *process*: to realize that you are unhappy or afraid, and that there is nothing you can do anymore, and to accept *that*. In my experience, this can lead to an opening, a change, precisely by accepting that there might be no change. I believe that meditation helps too, practicing to be aware more and more of what happens inside and around you. Again, I think there is nothing hidden, it's just that our attention is often focused on what we would like to happen or what we are afraid might happen, and not on what is actually happening.

I am a little preachy here; I hope I'm not boring you. These ideas are what I culled from reading about Zen (books by Charlotte Joko Beck⁴—but I think you didn't have much use for them) and Taoism (Raymond Smullyan's *The Tao Is Silent*⁵—you didn't much like that one either, but I would recommend it again, suggesting that you try chapters 19, 21, and 22; they might be interesting to compare with Spinoza), and from taking some courses and therapy, probably also from books and movies

⁴*Everyday Zen: Love and Work*, HarperCollins, 1989; *Nothing Special: Living Zen*, HarperCollins, 1993.

⁵Harper & Row, 1977.

(e.g., *Groundhog Day*,⁶ great movie). By the way, I haven't read any of the books you mention. One day I might read Damasio's book, I suppose.

You write about nature as God: "birds singing, eating, squirrels up and down the trees, flowers delicate and fragrant, all the live, strong, healthy trees." In my opinion, 'God' is more than that. 'God' is also dying birds, decaying flowers, animals fighting one another, parasites sucking trees dry. Because that's life too. If God is nature, then God is in every aspect of nature, not only in the nice ones. Furthermore, just as birds building nests is a part of nature, so people worrying, building cars, preparing sandwiches, and shooting guns, are a part of nature, or at least of God. That doesn't mean you have to like it, it just means that you better accept it as what is there right now, as part of the very complex picture God is painting.

Nature, or life, or the universe: Why *call* it "God"? Why not just call it "nature," "life," "the universe"? Do they deserve this designation, which invests them with a special meaning? Just because the universe is all-encompassing, does that mean one has to revere it? If you tell someone that nature is God, he will probably think that you advocate burning incense for great NATURE, that you believe that everything which happens in NATURE is good, and so we ought to be Social Darwinists, or something like that. In short, he will think that you believe we ought to behave in some particular special way, do particular things we wouldn't ordinarily do, because nature has some hidden, special meaning which you have somehow understood or intuited.

That would be a misunderstanding, I think. A good interpretation of "Nature is God" would be, in my opinion: What is, is okay. If there is something you don't like, try to change it by all means, but whatever is the case right now, just is the case. There's no use in not accepting it, in complaining about it, rebelling against it. Whatever is, is nothing special. It is neither especially wonderful nor especially terrible, it's only nicer or less nice, more to our taste or less. And there is nothing in particular we all ought to do. We should just do our best, whatever that is; whatever we think that is.

That nature is God is not an objective fact which could be proven by argument or made plausible by research. Rather it is a stance towards life, towards yourself and other people: whatever will be, will be okay; whatever was, is okay; whatever people think and do, they are okay; whatever you want and do, you are okay—which is not to say that it doesn't matter what you do: what you do can make a difference, so you should do your best. Calling nature "God" is not a claim that so and so is the case. Rather, it is a decision, to view as okay whatever there is.

In a sense, there *is* something special: the ordinary things, ordinary life, which is all there is. It is special insofar as you treat it as special. It is not special in the sense that it has any hidden special qualities beyond being what it is.

In the part of Curley's introduction⁷ you sent to me, he writes that Spinoza identifies God with "a principle of explanation, a first cause of everything which exists." I don't like that part so much, not if it is supposed to have a more-than-metaphorical meaning. If you say that God is the universe and the cause of everything there is (viz., the universe), then you say nothing more than that the universe is the cause of the universe. That's either trivial or nonsense. Science has found out a lot about why things are the way they are, but beyond that one shouldn't act as if one had

⁶Dir. Harold Ramis, USA 1993.

⁷A *Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, transl., ed. and intr. Edwin Curley, Princeton University Press, 1994.

an explanation, or at least something informative to say, when one actually doesn't.

In a large part, I have written this for myself (out of motivations which are, at bottom, selfish, which is of course only human). Nevertheless, I wouldn't have written it if I thought it wouldn't interest you. So, could you make some sense out of this? Did you find it useful?