

# RESPONSE TO WALTER GULICK'S OBSERVATIONS ON MY WRITINGS ABOUT RELIGION OF NATURE



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## ABSTRACT

*In responding to Walter Gulick's discussion of my writings on Religion of Nature, I stress the pervasive moral ambiguity of nature as a focus of religious commitment and point to a similar ambiguity in all of the religious ultimates known to me. I take issue with one aspect of Gulick's interpretation of the Book of Job. I insist on a balance between discursive and non-discursive modes of expression in religion and warn against excessive and misleading literalism. I explain my views on the natures and relations of aesthetic and religious symbols, and welcome Gulick's comments on how the symbolism of the Trinity in Christianity can be related to Religion of Nature. I endorse his statements about the close relation of aspects of my work to some key ideas of Michael Polanyi.*

Walter Gulick has done a splendid job of describing and explaining central themes of the version of religious naturalism I call "Religion of Nature." He has carefully investigated five of my books concerning this topic, with occasional references to others, and I am deeply grateful to him for the thoughtful attention he has devoted to this task. He has shown a patient willingness, not only accurately to *present* some central claims of my writings and their relations to one another, but also to delve into the *logic* of these

claims, often in fresh, interesting, and clarifying ways. In saying this, I do not mean to detract from the force and relevance of his critical questions and arguments. These are well worth pondering, and I shall devote the rest of this essay to reflecting on them. By doing so, I may be able to remedy some unclarity in my presentations and perhaps even to bolster the cogency—or at least the further considerability—of the claims and arguments in question. I hope not so much to resolve our disagreements into consensus as to add further clarity to the character of these disagreements and their underlying arguments, as a stimulus to further thought about matters of great importance.

Before addressing the stated disagreements or concerns, however, I want to note a passing comment that Gulick makes about the categorization of Religion of Nature. He sees it as a variety of pantheism. I do not view it in this way. Our Western mindset seems to incline us to think that all religion must have some sort of God or *Theos* at its heart. Religion of Nature emphatically does not. Nature may function religiously in ways similar to the function of God in Western theism, but so does Nirguna Brahman in Hinduism or the Dao in Daoism, and neither is a God. It is also a mistake, in my view, to speak of nature as *divine*, because this terminology again conjures up Western conceptions of God. For me, nature is an appropriate focus of religious commitment and concern in its own right, with no reference to *Theos* or God required. To call it a version of *pantheism* is thus a misnomer. New wine should not be poured into old bottles.

My first response to Gulick's critical comments relates to interpretation of the biblical Book of Job. I may have left the impression in my comments on this text that I view it as a kind of theodicy or attempt to justify the ways of God in the world, and especially in the affairs of human beings. It is not a theodicy. In fact, it is a refutation of attempts at theodicy. Gulick is right to distinguish the poetic corpus of Job from the introduction and conclusion tacked onto it by later pious priests. These later additions present the actions of God in a highly unfavorable light. Gulick is also right in his claim that the ambiguity of nature figures centrally in the Book of Job. But the personification underlying this ambiguity is not just an archaic artifact. I think it is the biblical God speaking, and speaking as the directing power behind the events of nature. It is the acts of God that are ambiguous, not just the forces of nature. This statement allows me to make again the observation I have made throughout my writings on Religion of Nature. There is no credible religious ultimate known to me in any of the religions of the world that is or can be devoid of moral ambiguity.

Such ultimates may be claimed to be so, but to the extent of their being relevant to or responsible for any aspect of the lived world, they must have some share in the ambiguities of the world. A God who is wholly and unambiguously good, for example, must be a God who has nothing to do with the world, either as creator, source, sustainer, or guide for the world. The reason is that the world is shot through with

moral ambiguities, and God must relate to, deal with, and adjudicate among those serious ambiguities in his or her actions. If the future is open and not totally controlled by God, then God can only weigh the probable effects of God's actions for the future. God's intentions may be good, but the future effects of those intentions cannot always be guaranteed to be good. And we continually have to ask, "Good for what or whom," especially in cases of the inevitable conflicts of good built into the world.

If, on the other hand, God completely controls everything that happens in the world, including human choices and actions, then God is by virtue of that fact responsible for all of the moral ambiguities of the world. If God created the world *ex nihilo*, God has created it with its character, limitations, and predictable conflicts of goods. It is obvious that in this world, creation and destruction go hand-in-hand. Similar analyses can be made for other putative religious ultimates in their relations to the world, whether these ultimates are regarded as personal or impersonal.

My second response to Gulick's critiques relates to his suggestion that my perspectival epistemology and metaphysics may at least sometimes incline me to a kind of selective subjectivism that emphasizes the salutary and creative aspects of nature as over against the daunting and destructive ones. He goes on to suggest that my examples of synecdoches can also leave this impression. He is right in implying that in my discussion of synecdoches I should have used examples of them that point in both directions. But I want strongly to emphasize here, as Gulick does elsewhere in his essay, that I hold that *the whole of nature* in all of its moral ambiguity is the focus of Religion of Nature. The sick-minded soul is right in regarding nature with reverent wariness, bewilderment, and terror, just as the healthy-minded one is right in regarding it with acceptance, love, and joy. Either aspect of the spectrum when taken by itself fails to do justice to the whole of nature in all of its aspects or to what it means to be religiously committed to the sacredness, wonder, and dread of nature. Nature is often not morally fair—at least from particular perspectives—and our challenge as humans is to live in the face of this palpable unfairness with full recognition of nature's metaphysical ultimacy and of our humble place within nature.

For Religion of Nature there is no human face behind nature. We humans are but one of about eight to ten million species of life on the face of the earth. The solar system in which our earth is contained is a little smudge in the Milky Way galaxy, and that galaxy is one of perhaps two hundred billions or more galaxies, each with its own billions of stars. Nature does not focus exclusively or even primarily on us. And yet, we are at home here. We can live lives of meaning, importance, and value here. We can relate to the human faces of one another as a species of life on earth and to other sentient beings as well. The positive gifts of nature are resident in its ambiguities and could not, as Gulick points out, be made available to us without its ambiguities.

Frank recognition and affirmation of this fact is integral to Religion of Nature. We should not cherry-pick the moral goods implicit in nature but must find ways to live in the face of the moral ambiguities of nature, with humble gratitude and respect. Metaphysical fact cannot be annulled by anthropocentric wishful thinking. The sick-minded soul is constant and urgent reminder of this inescapable fact, and the healthy-minded ones need to pay careful attention to this reminder. This point is central to my understanding of Religion of Nature.

To say, as Gulick does, that this understanding provides little solace to those in the grip of tragic events is to beg the question. The tragedy is real and irrevocable, and it can occasion irremediable grief. But that is as true in theistic religion as it is in a naturalistic one. A God who allows, despite all of his might and concern, the Holocaust or the wholesale carnage of the First and Second World Wars of the past century is no less ambiguous, in my mind, than a nature that makes it possible for these regrettable events to occur. In either case, human finitude and freedom enter crucially in, and the natures and lives of humans, whether as creatures of God or nature, are fraught with ambiguity. The stretch of even a few years of human history makes this fact abundantly clear.

Gulick also interprets my work, in the third place, as *privileging* non-discursive imagery over discursive thought. I do not mean to do so, but only to insist on not neglecting the essential role non-discursive symbols play in religion, including Religion of Nature, and on the constant interplay of the two modes of religious experience, thought, and practice. Gulick calls attention to the role of tacit factors in both discursive and non-discursive thought, and this fact needs to be kept in mind. But it is a mistake to confuse the two modes, to try to reduce one of them to the other, or to minimize the importance of the one in favor of the other. My emphasis in *More Than Discourse* was on the “more” that non-discursive thought, expression, and practice give to religion in addition to its necessary discursive affirmations. It was not intended to imply that *only* non-discursive thought or even *primarily* non-discursive thought is required in religion. The book is intended among other things to be a corrective to excessive and misleading literalism in interpretations of religious texts and traditions.

I think, in the fourth place, that Gulick misunderstands my remarks on the nature of art and the relations of art to religion when he thinks that I am not concerned with the role of intentionality in both spheres. What counts as a work of art for us is that in which we find or expect to find aesthetic meaning and value. What counts as religious articulation or expression is that in which we find or expect to find reference to some kind of religious ultimate and its relations to the world and to our lives in the world. The aesthetic quality of a work of art is found squarely within it, while the religious quality of any kind of articulation or expression lies in its ability to point beyond itself to some kind of religious ultimate and the gifts and demands of that ultimate for

our lives. A church icon can function in either way, for example, but its usual primary role is a religious one.

A single work can function in different ways, as I tried to explain with my example of Chagall's "White Crucifixion." How it functions or is intended to function is the key to whether it can be rightly regarded as a work of art or a work of religion, or in some cases, as both. Gulick makes a significant point when he calls attention to the fact that works of art are just as situated in larger contexts as are works of religion. But I continue to insist that the *aesthetic* meaning of the work of art, quite apart from such things as its place in art history, the biography of the artist, its resemblance to other art works, or the materials out of which it is fashioned, is focused on the work itself and on what is intrinsic to it as a work of art. The religious meaning of a work of religion, on the other hand, must invariably point beyond the work to a religious ultimate, and, in doing so, it situates the religious work in the context of the manifold symbolisms of a religious tradition or religious outlook on the world.

Fifth and finally, there are no doubt Christian religious and moral motifs in Religion of Nature as I have developed it. This would not be surprising, since I was formerly a Protestant Christian and have grown up in the context of a community and nation suffused with at least commonly avowed Christian outlooks and values. The religious motifs I may have carried into Religion of Nature are not exclusively Christian, I contend, and can lay just claim to having much more than parochial significance. None of us can entirely escape his or her upbringing or conditioned perspectives. But we can endeavor to critique and broaden them as much as possible. I have tried to do so in my development of Religion of Nature.

Gulick's suggestion of a kind of naturalistic Trinity has interesting symbolic possibilities. Nature, like the Father in Christianity, is certainly creator and sustainer of all there is. Nature, including our own nature as a species, also provides us with the means to find and develop appropriate moral principles and values, many of which might be similar to the moral teachings of Jesus. In chapter six of my most recent book, *Nature as Sacred Ground*, I have sought to develop more fully than in my earlier books a metaphysical basis for moral values. And nature's numinous presence and healing power could be compared to the work of the Holy Spirit. Viewed in this way, a kind of functional common ground between the two religious outlooks could be brought to light. I especially like the implication in Gulick's concluding comments that aspects of Christianity, appropriately critiqued and expanded beyond their sectarian basis, and connected with similar motifs in other religious (or secular) traditions, should be extended beyond solely human wants, needs, and concerns to encompass the whole of nature in all of its ecological dimensions and forms of life.