

# Beyond Belief: Confessions of a Religious Naturalist



by Michael Battenberg

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Over my many years on this planet I have worn many different hats; student hats, work hats and even religious hats. Yet the one hat I keep coming back to time and again is my photographer's hat. As I evolve as a photographer, my camera's eye is becoming increasingly specialized, focusing more and more on the small things: flowers, mushrooms and most recently insects and spiders. Those who know me well find this rather amusing seeing as I am actually quite squeamish about bugs and even more so of spiders. Why I don't switch to photographing puppies is beyond me, but there you have it: I like taking pictures of bugs and fungus!

More important still is the fact that just as I strive to create better images, I am also increasingly interested in knowing more about the creatures I shoot as *organisms* as well as members of highly complex ecosystems within other ecosystems. So I can now say that I wear yet one more hat—the hat of a Naturalist: an explorer of Nature. And some of the things I'm discovering are really quite astounding.

There's a species of butterfly that lives in Europe called *Maculinea alcon*, commonly known as the Alcon Blue, one of the so-called Gossamer Winged Butterflies. These attractive butterflies look like any other butterfly in a summer meadow, except that in their larval stage they have a very interesting relationship with ants.

Part way through it's development, the caterpillar of the Alcon blue falls to the ground and emits a chemical that so closely resembles the smell of an ant larva that ants drag the caterpillar into their nest and treat it as one of their own, feeding and cleaning it while the caterpillar grows, safely protected from predators. It spins its chrysalis underground, completes it's metamorphosis and upon emerging leaves the ants nest for the open air.

Well, safely from *most* predators. For there is a species of parasitic wasp, a member of the large Ichneumon family, that is able to locate these hidden caterpillars and exploit them to their own end. Upon picking up the caterpillars chemical scent, the wasp enters the ant's nest. Needless to say, it is immediately attacked. Yet this wasp too has a chemical trick up its six sleeves, and sprays it's own pheromone that causes he ants to begin fighting with each other. In the ensuing mayhem the wasp probes deeper into the dark nest until it finds one of the Alcon's caterpillars and injects an egg into its body. When these caterpillars spin their chrysalis what emerges is not a butterfly, but a wasp. The larva of the wasp has consumed the caterpillar from the inside out.



*Ichneumon*, similar to the one in the story. There are over 3,000 species in North America and 60,000 worldwide.

We have just heard a story of murder, Trojan horses, body snatchers and dementia as epic as any tale from Homer, the Bible or modern science fiction... and all without gods or devils, aliens or special effects. No disbelief to suspend; no physical laws have been broken. This story of multiple deception is repeated season after season in simple meadows where there are gentian plants, ants and of course butterflies and wasps.

Perhaps now is a good time for my “confession”, as promised in the sermon title. Very much like the characters in the story, I have managed to sneak an idea into this sermon disguised as another. A deception of sorts to be honest, but no worries, it’s nowhere near as sinister as the Ichneumon’s!

I’ve called myself a Naturalist, and I stand behind that title. Yet there’s more to this badge than meets the eye, for I’ve dragged another meaning borrowed from philosophy into the nest—one which provides an interesting twist to this morning’s topic.



*Ichneumon of the Subfamily Rhyssinae.  
Its tail is an ovipositor that doubles as  
a drill to penetrate dead trees*

In philosophy, Naturalism is a metaphysical position. This may sound pretty exotic, but in fact it’s quite the opposite. Naturalism claims that there is nothing beyond the world of observable phenomena, forces and causes; the realities that are studied by the natural sciences. It states that what we have called Supernatural for thousands of years—the gods and goddesses, demons and immortal souls—are products of the human imagination that have evolved according to natural laws, and act totally within a natural framework.

Simply put, Naturalism *naturalizes* religion. A further description is provided by William Murry, former minister at River Road Unitarian Church in Bethesda, Maryland. He writes:

*Religious Naturalism says two things. First, it holds that the natural universe is all there is. The supernatural does not exist. Second, it maintains that there is religious meaning and value in nature.*

This definition implies that Religious Naturalism is the child of both religion and science, and I believe it can share both of its parents’ best characteristics. As *Naturalism*, it seeks knowledge about the universe right here in this world of matter and energy, which includes our minds, our beliefs and whatever else the world of the Supernatural tries to encompass. As *Religion*, it seeks to frame our experience in a field of meaning and purpose by encouraging feelings of awe, mystery and gratitude, and promoting an ongoing discipline of reflection, contemplation and celebration.

Some Religious Naturalists prefer to use the existing symbol of God as a powerful metaphor in our understanding and appreciation for existence, while others abandon it altogether, seeking new forms of expression and understanding. Yet these groups share at least one thing in common. As Thomas Clark writes on the web site *naturalism.org*: “*spiritual experience doesn't count as a special way of knowing, but rather a special way of being*”.

What are some of the ways we can engage this special way of being, of plunging headlong into this world as this world, with no need to divine meaning from the arrangements of stars in the sky, or pages of an ancient anthology of stories?

The American rationalist philosopher George Santayana wondered :  
*Why should we not look upon the universe with piety? Is it not our substance? Are we made of other clay? All our possibilities lie from eternity hidden in its bosom. It is the dispenser of all our joys.*

Another expression comes from Ursula Goodenough, one of the preeminent voices in this new Naturalistic approach to religion, and author of “The Sacred Depths of Nature”. Like myself, she comes from a religious background. She has given up the supernatural god-concept of her childhood and now approaches the religious path as a Naturalist. Unlike myself, she is a trained scientist, and in her words I have found gems that have opened me up to new understandings. Here's what she says about her religious experience:

*The realization that I needn't have answers to the Big Questions, needn't seek answers to the Big Questions has served as an epiphany. I lie on my back under the stars and the unseen galaxies and I let their enormity wash over me. I assimilate the vastness of the distances, the impermanence, the fact of it all. I go all the way out and then I go all the way down, to the fact of photons without mass and gauge bosons that become massless at high temperatures. I take in the abstractions about forces and symmetries and they caress me like Gregorian chants, the meaning of the words not mattering because the words are so haunting.*

### ***The fact of it all***

Is this not the source of all fascination, religious or otherwise? The fact of life and death. The fact of gravity and black holes. The fact of a Mind that appears to itself to be somehow of another world, yet whose workings are tied to a dizzying array for neurons, chemicals and electrical signals. The fact of a solitary parasitic wasp that can sniff out a caterpillar in a hole. The fact of a huge colony of honeybees that behaves as one superorganism, buzzing to a rhythm with no apparent conductor beside itself.



*Ants tending aphids. The ants protect the aphids from predators, and in return feed off the “honeydew” they excrete.*

In my personal experience, I have found that exploring the world of the very small through my lens has revealed relationships between organisms that are the very foundation of my life. To *know* that beneath my feet intricate threads of mycelia, mats of living fungus, can spread for kilometers and are breaking down the molecules and minerals that will ultimately feed me leads me to revere all the processes that support life on this planet. And when I actually see and touch some of these threads, forms of life that seem alien but are anything but alien, I am filled with joy and wonder. And best of all, no belief was necessary to make it all work.

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Is Religious Naturalism important? I believe it is. There is no doubt that in many quarters of this planet, the fully human yearnings for both knowledge and meaning, as embodied in Science and Religion, are at odds with one another. Yet I agree with the biologist E.O. Wilson who writes:

*Science and religion are two of the most potent forces on Earth and they should come together to save the creation.*

I will go so far as to say they “must” come together since they are both here to stay. But I will add this may prove to be difficult. Religion is rather like a bracket fungus, the large growths we often see growing out of trees. Under the bark is the “heart” of the matter. The vital mass of the organism is actually a vast network of mycelial threads busy at work growing, digesting, splitting and adapting to it’s host.

But at the surface, exposed to the sun and the air, the bracket, the fruiting body of the organism, quickly dries out and becomes rigid. It becomes lignified: stone-like.

The antidote, I believe, is not to cut away the bracket, but to encourage the *heart* of the organism to grow even more.

This will require both a sound knowledge of the sciences and a profound understanding of the workings of the human heart and mind, and the very human desires for a connection with truth, with the planet and with each other as mutually interdependent children of that planet. This is more than just an academic discussion; at it’s very heart, it is Faith itself.



*Bumble Bees live in underground colonies.*

In the closing words of her inspiring book, Ursula Goodenough offers us her own bold personal credo:

*“I profess my Faith. For me, the existence of all this complexity and awareness and intent and beauty, and my ability to apprehend it, serves as the ultimate meaning and the ultimate value. The continuation of life reaches around, grabs its own tail, and forms a sacred circle that requires no further justification, no Creator, no super-ordinate meaning of meaning, no purpose other than that the continuation continue until the sun collapses or the final meteor collides. I confess a credo of continuation. And in so doing, I confess as well a credo of human continuation”.*

And ultimately isn't this what religion has always been concerned with anyway: Human continuation? I suppose living forever and ever in heaven is a comforting fantasy, but all humans, whether they call themselves religious or not, breathe real air, drink real water and need real love. This must be our focus if we are to survive this millennium.

The elements are all there. Pulsing mycelial threads course beneath the bark of both our religions and our sciences. The key is learning how to bring all these threads together—to nourish the whole organism and in so doing ensure its continuance. For this is, after all, Everything We Are.



*Many Mushrooms, such as this Helvella lacunosa, have co-evolved a symbiotic relationship with the roots of trees*

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The Alcon Blue story is from the BBC's 2 DVD set: **Life in the Undergrowth**, hosted by David Attenborough (also available as a book). Selected episodes (though unfortunately not the Alcon Blue story) are available for viewing on the [BBC website](#).

All photos ©2009, Michael Battenberg. They were taken at the mouth of the Humber River, on the grounds of the McMichael Gallery in Kleinburg and at the Toronto Botanical Gardens & Wilket Creek.