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Ursula Goodenough. *The Sacred Depths of Nature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. Pp. xxi + 182. \$13.95 (Paper).

[1] There exists a certain genre of biology writing which might be called "meditations on the natural history of life." Some classic authors of this genre are Aldo Leopold, Loren Eiseley, and John Janovy. The word "meditations" is appropriate here because these works are similar to religious meditations; they are reflections, often highly personal, on a story, in this case the story of life. Ursula Goodenough's book belongs to this genre.

[2] Goodenough opens with some charming autobiographical notes. Her father was a Methodist preacher who subsequently became Professor of the History of Religion at Yale. She became a biologist, currently at Washington University, married, and has five children. She eschewed religious practice until she joined a Presbyterian congregation about twelve years ago. She sings in the choir, recites prayers, listens to sermons, but she is not sure whether she is a Christian or even theist.

[3] Hence the project of the book. She proposes to construct a worldview which can be universal and can serve as the foundation of an ethic. She labels her worldview "religious naturalism." Her approach toward laying out this worldview is to present the story of evolution and then to reflect on this story. In presenting the story of evolution (both types - the cosmos and life), she excels. She must be a great teacher. In short and elegantly written chapters, she lays out the origin of the universe, the origin of earth and life, the biochemistry of life, the mechanisms of evolution, the evolution of biodiversity, the development of human consciousness (including the physiology and chemistry of neurological systems), the evolution of sex, and the role of death in the evolutionary process. All of this is presented with remarkable economy, clarity and elegance. Indeed, for the non-biologist who wishes to know the basics of biology, I could not recommend a better primer.

[4] But then there is religious naturalism and the ethic which Goodenough proposes follows from it. This worldview and ethic is slowly developed in a series of reflections at the end of each chapter. Here is the heart of it, and if this seems brief, it is because there is not much more to it. The vastness and grandeur of the cosmos can be seen as the "locus of Mystery" (11). The emergence of life is very improbable, and this is why we should hold that life is

sacred. The deep genetic homology between all living things is the ground for the fellowship and community of all life. She sees here a consonance with the central claim of all religions that all humankind forms a community. Biological diversity evokes a sense of amazement and humility. Again, she finds a consonance here with the practice in most religions of bowing before the Divine. Because of our common heritage and the genetic homology between all living things, we ought to have empathy and compassion for all living things (114). And because of their closeness to us in the evolutionary tree, we should have special concern for our closest relatives, the oranges [sic], gorillas, chimps, and bonobos. "The preservation of their habitat and dignity emerges as a commandment" (164). Finally, the amazing complexity and diversity of life should lead us to express gratitude (171). But, one may ask, to whom?

[5] I mentioned at the outset that this book reminded me of the writings of Leopold, Eiseley, and Janovy. But now I must admit a prejudice. I have never found Leopold *et al.*, although delightful reading, very helpful for the construction of a philosophy of life and an ethics. I do not think it is possible to construct a system of meaning and value from scientific theory and natural history alone. The latter are certainly important in such a construction and must be taken into account and as much so as possible, but in the end they will not yield a system which gives us the meaning of life and produces moral principles. Part of this has to do with the is-ought fallacy (or more accurately, a sometimes fallacy). But more is involved. I agree with Alasdair MacIntyre that such grand systems can only be formulated within traditions. Traditions by their very nature are stories of human figures and events. Thus the very enterprise of constructing a system of ideas that gives meaning to life and that contains (or entails) ethical principles based on natural history is bound to fail. It should not be surprising, then, that Goodenough's system of meaning and value is so thin. And I suspect that most of the ideas on meaning and value that she claims to glean from natural history and current scientific theory are really imported from elsewhere.

[6] In sum, I recommend reading Goodenough's book for its beautifully and economically crafted presentations of natural history and contemporary theories of biology. It also contains elegant line drawings by Ippy Patterson. But for a theory of the meaning of the cosmos and of human life and principles of ethics, look elsewhere.

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