

## The Knife and the Gate

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The first edition of *The Sacred Depths of Nature* was generally treated badly and unfairly by the reviewers. The reviews were all the same: some nicely written science stories, some heartwarming reflections. The reviewers placed the book, incorrectly, in the romantic tradition of nature writing. The second edition provides a welcome opportunity think about the book more carefully. *Sacred Depths* (in both editions) radiates power; in other words, it is *talismanic*. *Sacred Depths* is a grimoire, and I take grimoires very seriously. I am a Pennsylvania German (that is, Deutsch). I am a descendant of *brauchers* (experts in Deutsch folk-magic), and I was born and raised in the culture of Deutsch folk-magic. I know grimoires, and *Sacred Depths* is superlative.

*Sacred Depths* is written in an essentially Protestant context, and I'll look at it in terms of three Protestantisms. The *first Protestantism* just consists of church-goers, theists who mainly affirm the doctrines of Protestant Christianity. They have their *Daily Devotionals*, in which each chapter consists of a Bible story followed by reflections on that scripture. These reflections illustrate values. Good struggles with evil, but good always wins in the end. The bitterness turns sweet, the emotions run out into heartwarming positivity. This first Protestantism uses a Biblical heart to animate a body of joy. But that heart animates its body through *Protestant rationality*. From the premises in the Biblical heart, you can *reason* to the values in the joyous body. This rationality is the blood, the blood pumped by the heart, that circulates through the veins and arteries of the body. Protestants rejected the aesthetic practices of earlier Christians. Gone are the icons, statues, rituals, and saints. Primarily putting their religion into *words*, they preach, they pray.

The *second Protestantism* consists of recent anglophone atheists and naturalists. Clark argues that these atheists are “members of a distinctly *Christian* heretical sect, formed in reaction to equally heretical forms of monotheistic idolatry” (2015: 277; his italics). Eller says atheism exists entirely within the theistic universe, and that “arguing against god(s) is just as effective at perpetuating god-concepts as arguing for god(s)” (2010: 15). Modern anglophone atheists are doing *Protestant apophatic theology*, Protestant theology pursued through negation alone. Denying the existence of God doesn't mean you have to give up Protestant culture. You can still take the *meanings of your concepts* from the Protestant dictionary, and the *patterns of your thinking* from the Protestant grammars. These atheists agree with the church-goers that, if there is no God, then nature is valueless, meaningless, purposeless, random, blind, absurd. They also have their Daily Devotionals, in which each chapter consists of a science story followed by reflections on that science. But these reflections are demythologized, ascetic, and puritanical to the point of nihilism. These apophatic Protestants use a scientific heart to animate a nihilistic body. As with the church-goers, that heart animates its body through *Protestant rationality*.

The *third Protestantism* emerges from the conflict between the first two. Both theistic and atheistic Protestants regard religions as *theories* composed of *beliefs*, which are true or false. And, since science is also a theory, religion and science can conflict. As Fraser (2015, 2018) argues, this is a conflict *within Protestant theology*. It emerges because the same Protestant rationality produces two conflicting hearts, and two conflicting bodies. There are (at least) two ways to resolve this conflict. According to the *way of fundamentalism*, you put the Biblical heart into the nihilistic body. Fundamentalists just stop reasoning altogether. According to the *way of religious naturalism*, you put the scientific heart into the body of joy. Goodenough chose the way of religious naturalism. She says “Religion is Belief with a capital B” (2000: 565). Of course, that’s Protestantism with a capital P. In *Sacred Depths*, she says a religion contains a Cosmology and a Morality (1). Religion remains a *theory*. But turning it into religious naturalism requires *cutting* the bonds between the old Protestant hearts and their bodies. And, since those hearts and bodies were bound together by Protestant rationality, religious naturalism *sacrifices* Protestant rationality. Cutting out the hearts is a bloody act, not an act of rational deliberation, but an act of magical separation. Goodenough ended the conflict, but not through reasoning. She ended it with a pure act of will.

This pure act of will emerges from Goodenough’s encounter with the abyss (16-19). Staring into the deep night sky, she was “overwhelmed with terror” (17). Given this initial ontological shock, it seems appropriate to read *Sacred Depths* in parallel with the long tradition, both literary and philosophical, of metaphysical horror. Consider *The King in Yellow* by Robert Chambers, or the Cthulhu Mythos, started by H. P. Lovecraft. While the theists say nature has an ultimately moral meaning, and the atheists say it is meaningless, metaphysical horror offers a third option: nature has a superhuman meaning, one which is neither humanly good nor humanly evil, but which, relative to us, looks merely psychotic. Nature is transcendently hideous, and, staring into its abysmal depths, you risk insanity. So Goodenough, averting her gaze, offered an exchange: she *made a deal* with the abyss. Through this deal, the abyss becomes “Mystery”, and her deal is a “Covenant”.

Making a deal with the abyss entails encountering it as agency, even if only poetic or symbolic. Goodenough objects to referring to this agency as “God”. Fine with me. Like Goodenough (223), I don’t care about God. And thinkers from the Gnostics to Tillich have long known that the abyss is not God. Nevertheless, if the abyss can be encountered in terror, and engaged through an exchange, then it deserves a name, a name which can only be spoken poetically. Poetically speaking, I name the abyss *Hekate*, the Great Mother, the deity of magic, patroness of Eleusis, Mystery indeed. Through her deal with Hekate, Goodenough gained the magical power of pure will. Here’s the deal: Holy Hekate, Mother of Witchcraft, Mother of Shape, if you give me the magical power to bind the heart of science to the body of joy, I’ll give you the blood of Protestant rationality. What else are you going to do when the terror at the heart of nature hands you a knife?

The sacrifice was successful; the invocation worked. Goodenough sutured the heart of science into the body of joy. Consequently, *Sacred Depths* is also organized like a Daily Devotional (7-8). In this Daily Devotional, science stories are bound to reflections intended to arouse a positive emotional-aesthetic response to nature. By sacrificing Protestant rationality, Goodenough gained the power to *willfully assert* a positive response to nature. She says “Mystery generates wonder,

and wonder generates awe” (18). She says the awe can terrify or emancipate, and she *decided* on emancipation. But she did not *reason* her way to emancipation by means of arguments; on the contrary, granted power through her Covenant, she simply *willed* it, and it came true. The emotions in *Sacred Depths* are awe, wonder, joy, gratitude, assent, dignity, reverence, love, hope, and so on (3, 39, 60, 126, 182, 220, etc.). In *Sacred Depths*, you won’t find the Lovecraftian theology of the Cthulhu Mythos. You will meet neither mad Azathoth, nor virulent Nyarlathotep, nor tellurian Cthulhu. This is not wrong. Goodenough *earned* the right to adopt a joyful response to nature. She earned it by making a pact. According to its terms, she gets to see nature as *beautiful*, and its depths as *sacred*. But Hekate gets the blood. Goodenough’s nature may be beautiful, but it does not *shine* with glory; it’s depths may be sacred, but they are not *holy*. Glory and holiness remain with the blood.

By making this blood sacrifice, by giving the power of reasoning back to Hekate, Goodenough was excused from answering the Big Questions. While most books on science and religion are filled with argumentation, there is no reasoning in *Sacred Depths*, no analysis or dialectic, no logic, no philosophy. This is appropriate: *reason* does not make a *Covenant* with Mystery. Reason emerges when the horror in the abyss looks into itself without flinching. But in *Sacred Depths*, reason, in its Protestant form, has been sacrificed, its power returned to its abysmal mother. Returned to its mother, the blood no longer flows between heart and body. When the Big Questions go unanswered, the little questions go unanswered too. Why think rocks and rivers have “inherent magnificence” (39)? Or that, lacking selves, they are worthy of “respect and reverence” (39)? No reasons are given. Goodenough presents gratitude as a proper emotional response to nature (5, 71, 182, 212-3, 220, etc.). But how does it even make sense to feel gratitude to an impersonal totality? Or to feel gratitude to something that will destroy all value? No explanations are provided. Given that nature itself will destroy all value, that the sun will naturally incinerate the earth and kill all life, religious naturalism looks self-contradictory.

Consider the many *calls* in *Sacred Depths*, in the reflections, as parts of its Morality. We are *called* to “offer our heartfelt gratitude” to our ancestors (182); and “nontheistic religious naturalists are *called* to revere the whole enterprise of planetary existence” (213); and so on. Who or what calls us? Biological diversity “calls us to marvel at its fecundity” and “to stand before its presence with deep abiding humility” (98). Again, who or what calls us? These calls, after all, are ethical commands. Goodenough often talks about imperatives that emerge within nature. Yet who or what commands these imperatives? We are “asked to respect, cherish, nurture, and celebrate” nature, and “to consider it sacred” (199). Who or what asks? It certainly isn’t *nature*; nature is committed to exterminating all life. It can’t be humanity. Humanity made a different choice: eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die. These calls always came from God. However, in *Sacred Depths*, God is dead. The Morality of religious naturalism looks self-contradictory.

Graham Oppy (2018) says religious naturalism is oxymoronic, a contradiction in terms. Is he right? Since anything follows from a contradiction, you can be a religious naturalist while also being “Buddhist or Christian or Confucian or Daoist or Hindu or Hopi or Jew or Muslim” (216). Yet *paganism* is missing. Why? Because when reason escapes from the contradictions in religious naturalism, it returns to its pagan womb. Poetically speaking, I will therefore give reason a pagan name. Hekate, through parthenogenesis, gives birth to *Loki*. Loki is pure reason,

unsurpassable cunning, the absolute shapeshifter, whose protean power makes and breaks all forms. Obviously, Loki is not logical. It would be paradoxical, after all, to have logic justify itself. The sacred shape of logic emerges, like a shining *eidolon*, from the holy darkness of the eldritch night. Cosmology and Morality are gods whose well-formed bodies are beautifully organized. But Loki sees through the lies told by the Aesir, and brings them to an end in Ragnarok. When Loki escaped from Protestant rationality, God lost his voice, and bled to death.

Conceptually speaking, the contradictions in *Sacred Depths* mark the fact that God is dead. They occur because *Sacred Depths* is a Protestant book in which Protestant rationality is sacrificed. Demographically speaking, *Sacred Depths* was read by the last generation of American mainline Protestants. It would be plausible for a historian of religions to see it as a funerary stele to a lost culture, a monument raised to honor its ruined myths. More accurately, I think it is a *gate*. It is the gate through which Loki escapes into the pagan wilderness. Following Loki, the offspring of these last Protestants ran through that gate into the pagan wilderness: to Asatru, astrology, Burning Man, crystals, meditation, psychedelics, reiki, transhumanism, yoga, Wicca, witchcraft.

The contradictions in *Sacred Depths* are sources of its potency. They emerge because, by stitching the science stories to the reflections, *Sacred Depths* is a fortuitous juxtaposition of opposites. Lautremont employed such juxtapositions, often taken from nature, in his spectacular book of metaphysical horror, *The Songs of Maldoror*. Adopting Lautremont, I say the *Sacred Depths* is “as beautiful as the chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table.” Lautremont’s method of juxtaposition inspired the surrealists. Andre Breton declared “It is, as it were, from the fortuitous juxtaposition of [opposites] that a particular light has sprung, *the light of the image*, to which we are infinitely sensitive” (1972: 37, his italics). From the juxtaposition of opposites in *Sacred Depths*, the light of an image appears, a beacon on the other side of the gate.

*Sacred Depths* begins with an *epiphany*: “The realization that I needn’t have answers to the Big Questions, needn’t seek answers to the Big Questions, was an epiphany” (18). It was the epiphany of Hekate. But Hekate, whose power conjures, neither calls nor commands. Encountering basic physics, Goodenough says “I take in the abstractions about forces and symmetries and they caress me, like Gregorian chants, the meanings of the words not mattering because the words are so haunting” (19). What *words*? Basic physics, emerging from the visionary power of pure mathematics, unfolds its meanings in hieroglyphic shapes. Those mathematical runes do not speak; on the contrary, they *depict*. They depict the *eidolon* that flowers into Yggdrasil, into the beings among beings. That *eidolon* is indeed an epiphany. But in *vision*, not in speech. The epiphany of Hekate reappears in every chapter, in the gap between its science story and its reflections. In speech, every one of these chasms cries out: *Why?* But its cry is a gate into vision. Perhaps *Sacred Depths* does summon one of the deities of the Cthulhu Mythos. To quote Lovecraft, “Yog-Sothoth knows the gate. Yog-Sothoth *is* the gate.”

Now there is only Night, the visceral scream of Hekate, at the core of the primordial singularity. Holy Hekate, Mother of Ruptures, Mother of Dreams, if you’ll release me from the reasoning needed to answer the Big Questions, I’ll release your child from its bondage to speech, from its bondage to Belief with a capital B, from its bondage to Protestant Morality and Protestant Cosmology. Done. Hekate handed Goodenough a knife, and, with this knife, she set Loki free.

Loki is a light, a light beyond the gate, a light shining in the wilderness, a light that makes an *eidolon*. Freed from Protestant rationality, Loki visualizes, Loki hallucinates, Loki displays. Reason, in this far more productive form, is *seidr*, it is rune-magic. Loki is both male and female. Impregnated by a stallion, Loki gave birth to an eight-legged horse. Holy Loki, pregnant again through self-fertilization, give birth to our cosmos in vision. Holy Loki, may the blood flow through your lurid phaneron. Holy Loki, may the blood flow from your natal self-revelation. Holy Loki, manifest yourself, from the Great Mother Hekate, to absolute infinity. Paganism is not Belief with a capital B, it is Vision with a capital V. While Goodenough looks at science with the eyes of Belief, paganism *uses science as its eyes*.

Holy Hekate, look and see what your child has done. In the cores of the black holes, in the images of the primordial singularity, the unblinking eyes of Hekate eternally watch the cosmic dream unfolding (Danielson et al., 2022). But if Hekate is female, and Loki male-and-female, then let our unfolding cosmos be the *Horned God*, the thermodynamic *Cernunnos*, who is born in fire, and who dies in ice. Nature does not preach a “credo of continuation” (214-15), but envisions a shining *eidolon* of irreversibility. Circling through the wheel of the cosmic year, self-surpassing Cernunnos is born, flourishes, dies, and is recursively born again. The divine life-blood of reason flowers into Vision, and Vision flowers into speech. Vision engenders new symbolic rituals and disciplines, new ways of thinking. But they are driven, not by Protestant *logos*, but by pagan *eidos*. You will not be *called* to give thanks. When the *eidolon* flowers in your body, you will growl like a shaman. When the *eidolon* flowers in your body, your hands will see, you will make altars, you will erect stone circles, you will carve shoals of logical sigils, you will cast mathematical runes. You will participate in Vision through the ritual ordering of shining shapes. You will hallucinate gratitude like a visceral exudation (Steinhart, 2021). And that hallucination, made from Vision, will be pagan.

Through its contradictions, *Sacred Depths* summons and opens a gate. It is a powerful grimoire indeed. This gate opens into that otherness which radically transcends Protestantism (and Abrahamism more generally). The most accurate name for that otherness will refer to something that is radically *unthinkable* by both theistic and atheistic Protestants. For both theists and atheists, that which is unthinkable is *witchcraft*. Any description of witchcraft, by either a theist or an atheist, is wrong. Witchcraft is the difference between being-itself and the beings among beings. Through witchcraft, the nocturnal emptiness of being-itself evolves into infinitely shining light. Hartshorne would have been right had he said witchcraft is the self-surpassing surpasser of all. Witchcraft manifests irreversibility; irreversibility conjures simplicity into complexity; irreversibility is that rationality through which Vision unfolds into signs. Witchcraft bears Vision; Vision bears Yggdrasil; Yggdrasil bears all existing things. Beyond the gate, in the holy light of Vision, witchcraft will generate awe, wonder, joy, gratitude, assent, dignity, reverence, love, hope, and so on. Not in the way that Goodenough expected, but in a new way, a way that belongs properly to a new culture. May the Great Mother Hekate give birth to wilderness eternally. May the blood of Loki animate all things with *eidos*. From the holy fire in the heart of the equations, may Cernunnos spin through endless iterations. May Yggdrasil grow from root to sky. Blessed be.

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