

Theology Of, By, & For Religious Naturalism

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Introduction

This essay was originally conceived as a response to Ursula Goodenough's 1998 book *The Sacred Depths of Nature*. That book consists of twelve chapters, each of which consists of two sections. In the first section of each chapter Goodenough presents one aspect or step in the process of cosmological and psychobiological emergence and evolution that has produced the unitary universe of which we humans are a part. The second section of each chapter is a reflection inspired by the first; together, these reflections constitute a general description of what can be called religious naturalism.

Rather than considering Goodenough's book in detail, I shall attempt to give a theological description, discussion, and defense of the concept and practice of religious naturalism as I think of it (and as I commend it to Unitarian Universalists for their consideration).

First I'll present a brief description of the scientific approach that has led to our current understanding of nature as a unitary universe of matter-energy emerging and evolving in a continuously expanding space-time. Then I'll describe religious naturalism as a theology, a religion, an ethics, and a spiritual transformation. And finally, I shall present a historical narrative that may be taken as The Story of Religious Naturalism.

The Scientific Approach/Method to Understanding Nature

I take the term 'nature' to refer to the whole complex, interrelated and interacting unitary universe of matter-energy in space-time, a universe of which humans are an integral part I base this statement on the findings of modern (current) scientific research. I judge that this research provides us with the best description available regarding the nature and operation of our universe.

In conducting their research, scientists consciously or unconsciously operate with three fundamental premises:

- (a) The complex of matter-energy in space-time being dealt with is real-actual (from *res*= thing and *actus*= act), not a construct of human imagination (and humans like all other life forms are part of the complex).
- (b) This reality-actuality operates in a regular and dependable manner, i.e., in accordance with a complex of principles that can be called natural law.
- (c) By careful observation and interpretation, scientists, and observers generally, can gain some understanding of this natural law

Note that these premises are eminently reasonable and respectable—in fact, all living beings must operate in accordance with their equivalents in order to live.

Currently available findings of scientific research provide ample evidence for the following:

- (1) The universe as we know it and are part of it is the product of a process that involves both physical-cosmological and psycho-biological emergence and evolution; that is, no assumption of separate creation of different classes of entities (such as species of life) is necessary.

(2) A “monist” view of the universe is also justified; that is, no assumption of a separable “vital force” is necessary to explain the emergence of life, or of a separable “mental force” to explain the emergence of mind, soul, or spirit.

(3) If the characteristic we call “personality” can be ascribed not only to human individuals but also to human groupings such as corporations and nations (as is being done by U.S. courts), the characteristic can also be ascribed to ecosystems, including our global ecosystem, and to our universe itself.

The term ‘naturalism’ will be taken as referring to a philosophical position based on these assertions.

Religious Naturalism: A Theology

The scientifically-based theological position I take in this paper is that the whole reality-actuality that we experience, as we live within and as part of it, has emerged and evolved as a single interrelated and interactive complex of matter-energy in space-time. As an act of faith (like our belief that the process really and actually exists), I assert that this process of emergence and evolution constitutes a single creative process—a single “purposeful creative act” of a single creative principle or agency. Both the principle and the purpose are probably beyond human comprehension and description. Nevertheless, I believe I have ample reason for treating the whole process and its whole product as holy and sacred, as suggested by Goodenough in her book title, *The Sacred Depths of Nature*.

If we are created as an integral part of the unitary universe, we are presumably here to support achievement of its ultimate purpose, and thus can best find meaning for our lives in doing so. Whatever that purpose is, it can probably best be achieved by continued smooth interconnected and interactive operation of the universe, and particularly of Earth’s psychobiosphere, with a minimum level of total pain and suffering (mental and physical) for those humans and others who can experience such pain and suffering.

Religious Naturalism: A Religion

Religious naturalism is a religion in that it is a system of belief and practice that demands and facilitates one’s intellectual and emotional reconnection with one’s self, one’s family, one’s local and global community and ecosystem, the universe of which the global ecosystem is a part, and (perhaps) the creative source of this universe.

In thus becoming consciously, intellectually and emotionally part of a much larger whole and holy reality-actuality, we can find meaning and purpose far beyond that which more traditional anthropocentric faiths in an anthropomorphic deity can offer.

Religious naturalism is especially superior in its ability to satisfy a psychological need not often thought of explicitly—a need to overcome what can perhaps best be thought of as a global claustrophobia. We humans, and perhaps other species, fear being closed in, either physically or mentally. We not only dislike being locked in cages, but also want to be free to move, to travel, beyond our homes, villages, regions, continents—even beyond our planet. And we dislike limitations in our mental capabilities, fear any deterioration in them, and wish instead to expand them. We wish to feel that we can physically or at least mentally escape from or transcend the restriction to a limited space and time that seems to be our lot as finite living persons.

Can religious naturalism actually provide this transcendence? The answer initially seems to be no.

We are offered, as finite beings, life within a limited space and a limited time, with the constant need for our own effort to maintain life over that space and time. We can meditate, to help ourselves determine the best we can do and then do it, but it does not seem reasonable to pray for help—religious naturalism offers no one to pray to.

But modern science and religious naturalism do offer safety, security and joy in living within our normal human limitations—century-long and fairly disease-free life, and joy in being consciously, intellectually and emotionally aware and appreciative of the universe and of ourselves as part of it. And this joy can be enhanced by our broadening and deepening understanding of the full scope, nature and operation of the universe, as well as by contemplation of the seemingly limitless mystery that remains beyond the limits of our understanding. We thus can transcend, go beyond ourselves to a degree unimaginable only a century or two ago. And it may well be that those who live out a full natural life span will find that the joy they have had is enough.

Religious Naturalism: An Axiology and Ethics

Religious naturalism obviously doesn't offer preordained law codes or next-life rewards and punishments. Does it therefore fail to provide adequate directions and incentives for good, i.e. ethical, human behavior? Religious naturalists can say that on the contrary, their religion provides superior directions and incentives—superior in that they more clearly govern behavior toward non-humans as well as humans, and offer the achievement of justice and mercy as its own reward. Religious naturalism does so by calling for religious or spiritual intellectual and emotional reconnection and love (agape) that leads to concern for and thus ethical behavior toward self, family, local community and ecosystem, and global community and ecosystem.

In religious naturalism, ethical behavior will be directed and driven by scientific knowledge of the consequences of various kinds and modes of actions and a desire to choose those actions that will best further the well-being of those affected by the actions. The resulting religious ethics thus will include social/political, bio/medical, engineering/developmental, ecological/environmental, and economic/business ethics, as well as what may be called population ethics. This religious naturalist ethics can be expected to provide principles and rules for decision-making and behavior that differ markedly from those provided by traditional theistic religion-based ethical systems.

Development of detailed ethical principles requires development of an axiology or value system. Traditionally, axiology theory has differentiated between intrinsic (or inherent) value and instrumental (or utilitarian) value, and has asserted that only humans are of intrinsic (as well as instrumental) value—and thus that only humans have natural rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Those philosophers who accept current theories of evolution and development and also this step-function theory of intrinsic value are forced to postulate that at some point in the evolutionary emergence of the human species (and at some point in the development of each human individual) the species (and individual) suddenly acquire intrinsic value. (In Roman Catholicism, this is the point at which souls are received.)

For religious naturalists, the primary possessor of intrinsic value is the unitary universe as a holy whole, and each elemental part of the universe, whether galaxy, organism, or individual atom, participates in that intrinsic value as it participates in the universe. This suggests that each part of the universe should be assigned a relative intrinsic value that depends upon the importance of its contribution to the functioning and well-being of the universe. Thus while human fingernail cells and brain cells are both of intrinsic value, the value of brain cells would be greater than that of fingernail cells. In a corresponding manner, greater value would be ascribed to a human organism than to a worm organism, and some intermediate value

would be ascribed to a chicken organism. It may be seen that this approach equates intrinsic value with a kind of instrumental value—instrumental to the functioning of the whole holy universe rather than to the human species.

How the religious naturalist determines such relative intrinsic value is yet to be determined. Yet it seems essential that this be done. Ethical rules for choosing what foods we are to eat, what clothing to wear, what subjects to use for medical research, and the choices that are so controversial regarding the beginning and ending of human and other life ought to be based on the development of an adequate and acceptable value theory.

Religious Naturalism: A Spiritual Transformation

In adopting religious naturalism as a faith and practice, we are not to be just converted—we are to be transformed. We must no longer think and feel that we, our families, our communities, the human species are separate from “the environment.” Instead we must think and feel that we are part of and at one with the whole holy system we call the global ecosystem. And we must appreciate and enjoy life as part of the system, or rather appreciate and enjoy the life of the system as we take part in it.

An analogy: Our brain cells live lives as individuals, but also as parts of brains that in turn are parts of human beings-doings. Brain cells must perform certain functions in order to continue their own existence. But they must also perform functions as parts of the larger entities. We naturally think, feel, and speak as complete organisms, not as brains and other organs or as collections of individual cells.

We find some measure of self-transcendence fairly commonly and easily: We lose ourselves and find meaning and purpose in human organizations such as social, political, military or religious organizations. But these are all human organizations that stay inside that wall that is so well illustrated by the *imageo dei* concept—the idea that we humans, and only we humans, are created in the image of God. We find it much more difficult to think, feel and find meaning in being part of a larger whole that includes non-human and even nonliving elements.

Nevertheless, we must achieve this transformation—and it is truly spiritual transformation—if we are to be true religious naturalists.

The Story of Religious Naturalism: A Naturalist & Religious Narrative

Findings of modern (mostly twentieth-century) science indicate that what we call nature is a unitary universe of matter-energy in space-time, which has emerged and evolved over a period of about 13.7 billion years into a complex of perhaps 100 billion galaxies, at least one of which contains perhaps 100 billion stars-- some of which are surrounded by planets, at least one of which supports an emerging and evolving complex of life forms, including a species we call human. The life process involves taking in food and discharging waste, while avoiding being taken in as food--all of which require what can be called decision-making. This decision-making gradually evolved into a specialized activity we call information processing or thinking.

Over the many-millennial history of the human species, many thinkers have asserted that the thinking is done by a separable entity called mind--a dualist view. However, for many reasons psychologists and philosophers of mind now generally take a monist position--a view that mind is a characteristic capability of brain that develops in each individual as directed by genetic and environmental factors. Thus as the human species emerged as part of a gradual 3.8 billion year evolutionary process from single-celled

species, so did human mental capabilities. Human mental capabilities most notably involved the development of symbolic systems and languages.

As the evolutionary process proceeded, many species developed social and cultural systems to facilitate individual and group survival and flourishing. For humans these systems were marked by their development of particular languages and social, economic, political and religious systems. The religious systems often, if not always, began with attempts to explain and deal with events for which there was no visible cause, and culminated in the emergence of several world-scale religious systems during what has been called an axial age, in the first century BCE. Most, but not all, of these systems involve ascription of the origination and continuation of the universe to a supernatural, superpersonal being or being-doing.

These religious systems built on the world views prevalent during the first-millennium-BCE axial period. The findings of modern science provide a new and markedly different world view. This revolutionary change in world view has pressured the world religious traditions to change correspondingly. In response, some religious leaders have denied the validity of the new scientific findings. Others have attempted to mitigate conflict by making minor adjustments in their traditional belief systems. Some people, however, including at least as many scientists as religious leaders, have decided to take science rather than traditional religion most seriously, and have tried to develop new religious systems.

Thus was religious naturalism born. It takes the findings of modern science seriously, and thus is inherently naturalistic. But it also takes the human needs that led to the emergence of religious systems seriously, and thus is also religious. It is religious, or reconnective, in that it seeks and facilitates human reconnection with one's self, family, larger human community, local and global ecosystem, and unitary universe--and perhaps with the source and sustainer of it all. But note that, as the unitary universe is and emerged as a single process, so its creative source must be a single source of all being-doing, all matter-energy in space-time, and indeed of space-time itself. It thus seems plausible to conclude that this source is itself beyond all being-doing, though it is the basis or foundation for being-doing and for living-thinking personality.

Religious reconnection implies love. And love implies concern—concern for the well-being of the beloved. Religious naturalism thus is marked by concern for the well-being of the whole of nature. This concern provides a basis and drive for ethical behavior toward the whole holy unitary universe. A religious naturalist ethical system is needed as a guide for such behavior, and a religious naturalist axiological system is needed as a basis for the ethical system. These systems are (or will be—they have not yet been developed in a logical and complete form) considerably more complex and less “black-and-white” than traditional ones, though pieces of them have emerged from traditional belief systems in the form of environmental and ecological ethics.

What this “full-service” religious naturalism requires of us is not just conversion, but much more—it requires a radical spiritual transformation.