

Exploring Resources of Naturalism

RELIGIOPOIESIS

by Ursula Goodenough

Abstract. Religiopoiesis describes the crafting of religion, a core activity of humankind. Each religion is grounded in its myth, and each myth includes a cosmology of origins and destiny. The scientific worldview coheres as such a myth and calls for a religiopoietic response. The difficulties, opportunities, and imperatives inherent in this call are explored, particularly as they impact the working scientist.

Keywords: belief; metaphor; myth; religion; religiopoiesis; reward; science; theological reconstruction.

Since the publication of *The Sacred Depths of Nature* in 1998, I have had opportunities to present the core concepts of religious naturalism in numerous venues: bookstores, colleges and medical schools, museums, youth groups, adult-ed groups and sermons in churches and synagogues, women's forums, writers' workshops. I have also received numerous letters and e-mails from readers. Even after factoring in the obvious bias that persons who are resonant with the project are more likely to express appreciation than those who are not, it can nonetheless be said that there has been an outpouring of appreciation and gratitude, both for the scientific narrative itself ("I came to understand the nature of things for the first time") and for my personal reflections on its religious meanings ("Finally someone has written down what I have long felt").

Of particular interest has been the response of fellow scientists. Many have expressed appreciation and gratitude, but many others have expressed

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incredulity: How did I have the “nerve” to write such a book? How did I “dare” to wander into the topic of religion? Wasn’t I concerned, in so “exposing” myself, that I would lose respect as a professional scientist? Didn’t I worry that I might not get my grants funded or my papers published?

In this essay I explore these concerns, first analyzing the religion-science landscape from the perspective of a scientist and then inviting scientists to join the conversation. I examine some of the factors that discourage persons, and scientists in particular, from making contributions to religious dialogue, and suggest ways around these difficulties.

THE THEOLOGICAL RECONSTRUCTION/ RELIGIOPOIESIS SPECTRUM

To most outsiders, and therefore to most scientists, the religion/science dialogue is perceived as a venture in what academic theologians refer to as theological reconstruction: a new insight about the nature of the universe is encountered through scientific inquiry, and adherents of traditional religious faiths then work to find ways to incorporate that understanding into the canon. This cycle of challenge and response, ongoing now for several millennia, has yielded religious traditions that are selected for their resiliency quite as much as for the potency of their myths. A conspicuous sector of the present-day dialogue continues in this vein. Scientists are to my mind correct in regarding theological reconstruction as outside their ken, since it requires a deep and nuanced knowledge of the histories and trajectories of particular faiths that most scientists (with some notable exceptions) have not begun to master.

In a second kind of venture, the scientific understanding of Nature serves as the starting point, and its religious potential is then explored. John Dewey, Teilhard de Chardin, and Julian Huxley are among those who have made important early contributions here. A key stimulus for carrying such a project into present times is the transformation that has occurred in the nature of the scientific story itself. Whereas science has, until recently, been segregated into discrete sectors of knowledge—Newton’s laws, thermodynamics, Mendelian genetics—there has emerged in the past fifty years or so a coherent cosmology, fully as integrated as Genesis 1, that yields important insights into our nature, our history, and our constraints and possibilities. The second project, which can be called *religiopoiesis*, takes this story and works with it.

I regard *The Sacred Depths of Nature* as a contribution to present-day *religiopoiesis*. I stress the word *contribution*. As developed more fully below, no one person constructs a religion. But it is also the case that unless individual persons are encouraged—exhorted!—to offer contributions, there will be no “stuff” available to cohere into new religious orientations in future times.

THE PERILS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF RELIGIOPOIESIS

The poiesis part of religiopoiesis comes from the Greek *poiein*, to make or craft, the same root as poetry. Religiopoiesis, then, is the crafting of religion. The term religiopoiesis has the advantage that its Greek-antiquity-ness helps disguise its meaning and hence obfuscates its baggage. The phrase “crafting religion” is in fact deeply problematic—for at least two reasons.

First, many of us have been raised to understand that religious tenets come to humankind via blinding-light revelations, either to great/divine persons in ancient times or to mentally unstable/maniacal persons in modern times, and we feel no identification with either group. “What, me, articulate a religion? You gotta be kidding!” We become embarrassed, uneasy, even talking about the idea. Indeed, to many it can seem blasphemous.

The second problem is that religion is many different things—text, response, ritual, ideology, morality—and most of these topics have not been deeply considered by persons who have devoted their intellectual lives to understanding and contributing to the scientific worldview. An honest response would be “Religion? Don’t know a thing about it. Stopped going when I was eleven.” A more common response is “Religion? What a lot of balderdash! I like the Gregorian chants and all that, but the rest is baloney.” Neither of these responses is likely to generate enthusiasm for engaging in the project.

Counterbalancing these difficulties are the opportunities presented by a religiopoiesis project in our times.

Whereas folk wisdom holds that religious cosmologies derive from blinding-light revelation, historians of religion tell us that most are in fact the product of the interaction of cultural traditions and approaches: e.g., a story from Mesopotamia is combined with a story from Persia and modified to be coherent with Hebraic tradition. In this respect, the fashioning of our scientific cosmology has been an analogous process. We can attribute key insights to various persons—quantum theory to Bohr, evolution to Darwin, regulated gene expression to Monod—but we all know that these are incomplete attributions, that the “revelations” experienced by these men emerged from a vast cumulation of understandings.

By the same token, the crafting of religious responses to the scientific worldview can—indeed must—be a collective and dynamic project. There are huge domains of knowledge to be considered, and there are millennia of religious quests to be explored, quests that articulate what persons seek in their religious experience. Indeed, it is the collective nature of the project that can serve to deconstruct our uneasiness about engaging in it: no one person is setting himself or herself up as the guru; we’re all responding from our own perspectives, offering rather than professing.

THE DUALITY WITHIN RELIGIOPOIESIS

Granted that religions are complex, we can recognize two poles, and an intervening spectrum, in any religiopoiesis project.

The first pole can be called theology. A theologian, trained in philosophical discourse, uses this rubric to talk about ultimacy: What is the meaning of meaning? How do we know that we know? What are we talking about when we speak of purpose or evil or destiny? These intellectual questions may strike some as sterile and uninteresting, but for others they represent the core of religious life. Talmudic scholars have movingly described their studies of the Torah as deeply religious exercises in which they experience transcendence in their cognitive apprehension of God's word. The scientific cosmology certainly invites stunning opportunities for theological discourse. How do we think about ultimate reality in an evolving universe? How does our understanding of genetics inform our need to believe that we possess free will? What do computers tell us about ourselves? Is there such a thing as a metaethics? How are we to think about and decide ethical questions if no coherent metaethical framework can be found?

Scientists may argue that they lack the philosophical training to engage in such dialogue, but I disagree. Our training has honed our ability to analyze empirical data and understandings, make deductions therefrom, and integrate disparate modes of reasoning. We have much to contribute here, and if our language sounds different from theological language, this may not be such a bad thing.

The second pole can be called spirituality. It is accorded romantic adjectives: emotional, intuitive, poetic, mystical. It explores how we feel when we apprehend a cosmology—religious responses such as hope or fear or fellowship or compassion. The new cosmology invites spiritual responses as well. How does an understanding of biological evolution inform our understanding of empathy? community? gratitude? death? How do we deal with its vast nihilistic underbelly?

Theological/spiritual dualities, and their many intergradations, are inherent in all religions and are seminal to religiopoiesis. It is the integration of the theology and the spirituality that forms the matrix of a viable religious orientation: the theology alone is dry as dust; the spirituality alone is self-absorbed, even autistic. Indeed, one of the important insights from contemporary neurobiology is that these distinctions are at least partially false: without an emotional or intuitive component, theological/philosophical issues may have no meaning to the thinker in the sense that he or she will not be able to assign value or importance to alternative outcomes.

There is, of course, a whole other dimension to religious life, which is how we behave and why. Religions have always been in the business of recommending or requiring modes of morality, and any new religious ori-

entations will doubtless come to carry such directives as well. But I have come to understand that directives only work if they flow from belief. It is as we believe in the American Way and the Constitution that we obey governmental regulations, and it is as we believe in the theological/spiritual core of our religious traditions that we attempt to respond to their moral edicts. To give an example in the current context, I would propose that the most enduring form of environmentalism will emerge from a theological and spiritual apprehension of our place in the scheme of things. Scientists have important things to tell us here.

BELIEF AND REWARD

Religion is about Belief with a capital B. A religious person adopts the most compelling theology and the most satisfying spirituality on offer, frequently the constellation encountered in childhood, and allegiance to those understandings is then called Belief. There is, of course, an additional factor here, in that religious traditions have invariably included rewards for Belief: dwelling in the house of the Lord forever, the receipt of eternal grace, reincarnation into a better life, respite from plague and drought.

The scientific cosmology, authored by cosmic evolution and not by prophets or visionaries, is not inherently a proposition that calls for belief or Belief. One is not asked to believe in the Schrödinger equation or the genetic code; one is instead asked to examine the evidence for these discoveries and, if it is judged inadequate, to propose and conduct experimental tests of alternative models of reality. Where the scientific accounts evoke our belief statements, then, is in the realm of our acceptance of their findings and our capacity to walk humbly and with gratitude in their presence.

The reward component is problematic because nothing now apprehended by scientific inquiry suggests the existence of the rewards offered by the major religious traditions. One way out is to say that, because our scientific understandings remain incomplete, these rewards may still be on offer and indeed may never be perceived by our limited human faculties. A second response is to suggest that the awe and wonder generated by the understanding of scientific cosmology is itself its own inherent reward, a response that is not likely to carry much freight in our times since most persons find the scientific cosmology difficult and alienating. But it does not have to be that way. *Religiopoiesis*, in the end, is centrally engaged in finding ways to tell a story in ways that convey meaning and motivation.

METAPHOR

Our scientific facts come to us as facts: DNA sequences, Hubble images, extinctions. But our understandings—scientific, theological, and spiritual—come to us as metaphors, either the metaphor systems we call language

and mathematics or the metaphors we call the arts. The richness of our metaphors indicates the depth of our understanding.

I have explored the topic of religious and scientific metaphor in a previous essay (*Zygon* 35 [June 2000] 233–40), but it is appropriate to revisit the topic in the present context because there exists enormous confusion and misunderstanding here. I have been told, for example, that to say that the life of Christ is a metaphor for how we can best love is to commit a heresy, that one can speak reverently of Christ only by professing full Belief in the claims made for him by the authors of Christianity. I am coming to understand that this view, in fact, can itself also be considered a heresy. Christ has always been about metaphor, and Christianity has always been about the symbol systems inherent in its texts and art and ritual—and this can be said for all religions worth our attention. To be sure, billions of persons have been warned that if they fail to regard religious metaphors as inviolate they will fail to receive the rewards of faith, but those engaging in religiopoiesis can bypass these injunctions and approach the metaphors for their inherent value, for what they tell us about how and why people value what they do. Here we have in a sense come full circle, for we began by saying that theological constructionism also works with the traditional religions. In a religiopoiesis project, however, we are informed but not constrained by previous interpretations. We can ask the traditions to speak to us yet again, in whole new contexts.

Perhaps the most important act in the process of religiopoiesis, then, is to open ourselves to metaphors: those in our traditional religions, those in the poetry and art of past and present times, and those that emerge from our articulation of scientific understandings. The goal is not strict intellectual coherence, any more than the goal of a poem is to fit in seamlessly with all other poems. The goal is to come up with such a rich tapestry of meaning that we have no choice but to believe in it. This is, to my mind, the urgent project before us all.