

A Symposium—Naturalism: Varieties and Issues

INTRODUCTION

by Jerome A. Stone

Abstract. The papers in this section were given as a panel on Religious Naturalism at the American Academy of Religion in Denver in November 2001. The panelists included Jerome Stone, Gordon Kaufman, Ursula Goodenough, Charley Hardwick, and Donald Crosby. This introduction briefly describes the panelists, lists three questions the panelists were asked to consider, and names other current and past religious naturalists.

Keywords: Samuel Alexander; American Academy of Religion; Donald Crosby; Charley Hardwick; Gordon Kaufman; religious naturalism; Spinoza; Jerome Stone; Ursula Goodenough.

Religious naturalism is a contemporary approach to religious thinking with roots clearly stretching back at least to the 1920s, although there are some disguised predecessors. *Zygon* has published several items on religious naturalism recently (see Cavanaugh 2000; Goodenough 2000a, b; Rue 2000; Drees 2000; 2001; Stone 2002).

The articles in this section were presented as a panel by the Group on Pragmatism and Empiricism in American Religious Thought of the American Academy of Religion in Denver, Colorado, in November 2001. This panel was an attempt to represent the diversity as well as to explore possible lines of convergence among contemporary religious naturalists. It is

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important to note that no attempt was made to ask the panelists to label themselves as religious naturalists, though some of them had already used that self-identification.

The panelists were asked to address the following three questions as part of their presentation, although there were no strictures as to the amount of time devoted to them. (1) Are the Hardwick-Edwards and the Stone generic definitions of religious naturalism adequate? (A summary of these definitions is given at the beginning of the paper by Stone.) (2) What are the distinctive characteristics of your own approach to religious naturalism or why you do not consider yourself a religious naturalist?¹ (3) What are the chief issues or problems facing religious naturalism today?

The participants were chosen to represent diverse views. Jerome Stone, author of *The Minimalist Vision of Transcendence: A Naturalist Philosophy of Religion* (1992), is the author of articles in *Zygon* and one of the speakers at the IRAS Star Island conference in 2002. Gordon Kaufman is a well-known theologian, recently retired from Harvard. Cell biologist Ursula Goodenough, author of *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (1998), is well known to readers of this journal. Charley Hardwick, author of *Events of Grace* (1996), has worked on a rigorously physicalist basis for Christian theology informed by both existentialist thought and Henry Nelson Wieman. Donald Crosby has argued for a nontheistic process metaphysics. He is the author of *A Religion of Nature* (2002) and *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism* (1988).

A number of significant religious naturalists are not represented in this panel: Michael Cavanaugh, William Dean, Willem Drees, Delores LaChapelle, Henry Levinson, Robert Mesle, Charles Milligan, Karl Peters, Marvin Shaw, and others. A full grasp of religious naturalism today needs to assess the significance of their contributions. A complete comprehension of religious naturalism also will need to explore its roots in such thinkers as Samuel Alexander, George Santayana, John Dewey, Ralph Burhoe, William Bernhardt, Philip Phenix, the Jewish Reconstructionists Mordecai Kaplan and Jack Cohen, early Chicago School naturalists George Burman Foster, Edward Scribner Ames, Shailer Mathews, Henry Nelson Wieman, and Bernard Loomer, Unitarian Frederick May Eliot, and Universalists Clarence Skinner and Kenneth Patton. Careful analysis should be made of the religious humanists of the 1920s (especially John Dietrich, Curtis Reese, Charles F. Potter, and Roy Wood Sellars), Columbia University philosophers Frederick Woodbridge and John Herman Randall, and Chicago theologian Bernard Meland (especially his earliest writings) to ascertain if there are elements of religious naturalism in their work and also to test any proposed definition of religious naturalism. Charles Milligan (1987) reminds us that there are figures in literature who can be claimed by religious naturalists, including Wordsworth, Thoreau, Whitman, Sidney Lanier, Robinson Jeffers, Gary Snyder, and Alice Walker. The mention of Wordsworth

indicates that the roots of religious naturalism in romanticism and idealism need to be explored, but carefully, since the attitude of many of these figures toward the natural world is ambiguous at best. Finally, Samuel Alexander has pointed out that in the background looms the gigantic figure of Spinoza. Although he disagreed with Spinoza at key points, Alexander hoped that his epitaph would read, “He erred with Spinoza” (Alexander 1939, 95).²

NOTES

1. Whether Gordon Kaufman would accept the label was difficult to predict ahead of time. It is not a self-designation he easily uses, preferring to use *biobistorical naturalism* to describe his own view.
2. For Alexander’s essays on Spinoza see Alexander 1939, chaps. XIII and XIV, and Alexander 1927.

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