

VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS NATURALISM

by Jerome A. Stone

Abstract. This article opens with two generic definitions of religious naturalism in general: one by Jerome Stone and one by Rem Edwards used by Charley Hardwick. Two boundary issues, humanism and process theology, are discussed. A brief sketch of my own “minimalist” and pluralist version of religious naturalism follows. Finally, several issues that are, or should be, faced by religious naturalists are explored.

Keywords: William Dean; Ursula Goodenough; Charley Hardwick; Bernard Loomer; Bernard Meland; minimalist vision of transcendence; religious naturalism; Henry Nelson Wieman.

First, I offer the Jerome Stone generic definition of *religious naturalism*—what I think marks the essence of religious naturalism. We start with naturalism itself. Negatively, it asserts that there seems to be no ontologically distinct and superior realm (such as God, soul, or heaven) to ground, explain, or give meaning to this world. Positively, it affirms that attention should be focused on this world to provide whatever explanation and meaning are possible in life. Now, *religious* naturalism is a variety of naturalism whose beliefs and attitudes assume that there are religious aspects of this world that can be appreciated within a naturalistic framework. Occasions within our experience elicit responses that are analogous enough to the paradigm cases of religion that they can appropriately be called religious. Religious naturalism usually includes an imperative for personal, social, and (recently) environmental responsibility. However, this is not a distinguishing

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characteristic of religious naturalism, given that it is shared with a variety of religious and secular-humanist approaches.

That is what I call Stone's definition. I also work with the definition that Charley Hardwick borrows from Rem Edwards: "(1) that only the world of nature is real; (2) that nature is necessary in the sense of requiring no sufficient reason beyond itself to account either for its origin or ontological ground; (3) that nature as a whole may be understood without appeal to any kind of intelligence or purposive agent; and (4) that all causes are natural causes." The term *nature* includes culture and human history. Further, religious naturalism involves a denial of three traditional theses and a reconception of religion with an alternative view. These three theses that are denied by religious naturalism are "(1) that God is personal, (2) that some form of cosmic teleology is metaphysically true, and (3) that there is a cosmically comprehensive conservation of value" (Hardwick 1996, 5–8; Edwards 1972, 133–41).

I have found some boundary issues with these definitions to be worth mentioning. The first is whether *The Humanist Manifesto* and the religious humanists John Dietrich, Curtis Reese, and Charles Francis Potter can appropriately be grouped with religious naturalists. I suspect that answer will depend on what you mean by *religious*. If human aspiration after ideals is religious, then indeed this type of humanism is religious. I find these humanists to lack what I call an openness to relatively transcendent natural forces residing in this world. However, given the two proposed definitions of religious naturalism, this issue is a dispute within the family. Also, recent humanists such as William Murry are developing a naturalism of openness to natural resources.

The second issue concerns process theology. As I understand it, the God of process theology, while deeply immersed within this world, is so ontologically distinct and superior as to fall outside the realm of naturalism as I understand it. An entity that is surpassable by none except itself is not naturalist—immanentist, yes; naturalist, no. The interesting question then becomes whether Henry Nelson Wieman's creative event is also so ontologically distinct and superior as not to fall within the orbit of religious naturalism. It would seem to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of the generic definitions if the fountain of much religious naturalism should turn out not to fit the definitions. However, one of my difficulties with Wieman is that he is not naturalistic enough, despite his intentions.

It should be emphasized that the purpose of a definition of religious naturalism is not to define a true believer but to draw some sort of line for purposes of study. To use the label or write a study of religious naturalism, one needs some idea of who is in and who is out. Boundary issues are the bane of the taxonomist but the delight of people who believe, with William James, that life overflows logic.

We should also note that several writers of distinction, other than members of this panel, are significant voices in religious naturalism. These include such writers as Michael Cavanaugh, William Dean, Willem Drees, Delores LaChapelle, Henry Levinson, Robert Mesle, Charles Milligan, Karl Peters, Loyal Rue, and Marvin Shaw.

As for what is distinctive about my own brand of religious naturalism, I have three approaches. One is to say, with a nod to Shailer Mathews, that God is our human symbol for the collection of person-, community-, and ecosystem-making forces in the world. Another is to say, with acknowledgments to G. B. Foster and Edward Scribner Ames, that God is the world perceived in its value-enhancing and value-attracting aspects. A third, influenced by John Dewey and Ursula Goodenough, is that this world on many occasions has a sacred aspect. Note that what is peculiar to my own vision is its pluralism. Each of these three approaches stresses forces, aspects, or occasions. What degree of unity there is to this plurality I am reverently reluctant to say.

There is a set of issues that religious naturalists should face. Not that we should agree, but these questions should be discussed.

The first issue is that between William Dean and me. If the divine refers to all of the world, it is usually power that is experienced as the basis of the sacred. In that case the divine is morally ambiguous. If the divine refers only to the morally good or value-producing aspects of the world, however, it is morally unambiguous but limited in power. As my friend Harley Chapman asks, in that case, where is Shiva? Baruch Spinoza, William Bernhardt, the later Bernard Loomer, and Dean line up on the side of the divine as power, whatever its moral ambiguity. Wieman and I are on the other side. Involved in this issue is whether our moral sensibilities should be central to our response to the divine or merely a subordinate aspect. Should we worship the morally ambiguous? Or, as George Santayana seems sometimes to say, should we distinguish between piety toward what has made us and spiritual aspiration toward ideals? Recently I have begun to think that part of what separates divergent trends in religious naturalism is the type of religious sensibility. Are there underlying differences in types of religion? Is there a naturalistic analogue for justification by faith and rebirth as with Hardwick? a striving for reconstructing life with Dewey, which he never quite reconciled with his nostalgia for the whole? Perhaps we need not prove who is right but simply acknowledge our differences. Is it a matter of balance? Would that deny the passion for the extreme to which the sacred often leads?

A related issue: Is the divine merely ideal, or is it also creative and sustaining? Is it the source of human and of trans-human good? Is our fundamental stance based on our own efforts, or may we have receptivity to

nature's grace? Is there a naturalistic analogue to forgiveness, justification, or sanctification?

A fourth issue concerns the education of our sense of the sacred. Goodenough is currently developing a theory of mindful virtue. Following Bernard Meland, I talk about the nurture of appreciative awareness.

Another issue: Is there any aspect of the world that is not sacred, that is profane? Or do we not experience the sacred at some times and places because of our insensitivity or because it has not manifested itself to us?

And again: Is the divine best conceived of as unitary or, as I suggest, plural? Or is a web or matrix, as Loomer and Meland suggest, better? Is the religious analogue to religious naturalism monotheism or polytheism? Or is this a false dichotomy, with an alternation between monistic and pluralistic understandings and responses more adequate? Meland talked early on about a theoretical unitary view in alternation with a practical pluralism.

In fact, let us raise the question, Is God-language necessary or advisable? Is religious naturalism merely a language game, or does it refer in some way to the world as a whole or to processes in or aspects of the world? Related to this, what is the status of scientific inquiry in religious naturalism?

Furthermore, do human values and ideals need transformation? What is the basis for a prophetic critique of reigning ideologies? Wieman distinguished between creative and created good. Gordon Kaufman and I both use the notion of regulative ideals. Sharon Welch suggests that we need to be open to and work with other communities.

Once again, what is the relation of religious naturalism to traditional religious communities? Can it exist within the more traditional faith communities? Does it need to create its own communities and traditions, as with reconstructionist Judaism or the Fellowship of Religious Humanists? Or are there favorable homes, such as the Unitarian Universalists? How can religious naturalism be institutionalized? Should we adopt the attitude of the Free Religious Association that institutions are the prison of free minds? Or is Goodenough right in saying that we offer our gifts and trust the ongoing process to make of it whatever happens?

Can we construct a single common story, an evolutionary epic of creation, or would that be a hegemonic imposition of a grand narrative?

Finally, religious naturalism has grown up on the monotheistic soil nurtured by both Jewish and Christian traditions. What is the relationship of religious naturalism to non-Western traditions? Shaw has referred us to Sei-ichi Yagi's *A Bridge to Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* where he engages a Kyoto Zen type of naturalism (Shaw 1999, 253–56).

It appears that religious naturalism is alive and well and has plenty of things to ponder.

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