DANCING WITH KARL PETERS

by Gregory R. Peterson

Abstract. *Dancing with the Sacred* by Karl Peters provides a coherent and at times moving portrait of the religious naturalist position. I highlight three broad issues that are raised by the kind of religious naturalism that Peters develops: (1) the meaning of the term *natural*, (2) the nature of God in Peters's naturalistic framework, and (3) the question of eschatology. In each area, I believe that Peters's work raises many questions that need to be addressed and also provides openings for further dialogue.

Keywords: creativity; eschatology; God-talk; Karl Peters; religious naturalism.

In *Dancing with the Sacred* (2002) Karl Peters gives us a personal testimony and constructive theology that attempts to paint a picture of religious meaning for the twenty-first century. At turns moving and insightful, Peters shares with us his journey toward a religious naturalism that retains a place for speaking of God and for centering value on the creative process present in the universe. Much could be said with regard to the themes and issues raised in the book, but I confine myself to three topics: the nature of naturalism, the place and meaning of God-language, and the role of eschatology. My goal in raising these issues is not so much to criticize (although there is some of that) as to give Peters a chance to amplify his own understandings of these topics, which are important to his own project. If he responds as I think he might, there may be more room for dialogue between religious naturalism and more traditional forms of theism than one might initially be led to believe.

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The Nature of Naturalism

What does it mean to be a naturalist? Peters gives us the following definition: "Naturalism means that everything is energy-matter and the information according to which energy-matter is organized" (2002, 9). At first blush, such a definition seems unproblematic and in line with most conventional understandings of naturalism. Among other things, to be a naturalist is to deny the existence of supernatural beings and entities: gods, angels, ghosts, souls, and the like. To be a naturalist is to accept the worldview that current science presents and to claim that it is sufficient for describing the universe. Certainly, this seems to be what Peters implies by naturalism.

This rather intuitive understanding, however, becomes much more complex when we examine the fine details. One important thing to observe is that, as a position, naturalism has a rather significant history, and what is understood to be natural has changed in no small way over time. For much of history, to speak of naturalism (or its cognates, physicalism and materialism) was to speak of a Democritian universe, with space as a container within which indivisible atoms moved through time. Newton's laws modified this somewhat (providing laws of motion and allowing for gravity to act at a distance), but the general outlook was the same. Only in the twentieth century was there a significant change. Einstein's theory of relativity altered our conception of space and time and (eventually) made it possible to conceive of a universe that has a beginning at a finite time in the past. Both Einstein's work and the development of quantum mechanics radically altered our conception of matter.

It is tempting to suppose that naturalism must be incoherent if it is capable of such radical change, but the naturalist would demur, and with good reason. All positions change over history. Moreover, the naturalist may still argue that these changes, although important, are not fundamental to the worldview that naturalism presents. Modern science has not found God, or an immortal soul, or an essential teleology—all things that naturalism has traditionally rejected—to be inherent in the universe. Alternatively, we can speak of different, competing theories of naturalism. Democritian naturalism turns out to be false; relativity–quantum mechanics–evolutionary naturalism turns out to be (or is argued to be) true.

There are good grounds to support this last claim, but it is not an indubitable one. After all, much is yet unknown about the world. Quantum mechanics remains unreconciled with relativity theory, and ambiguities remain about such matters as dark energy, dark matter, the interpretation of the many seeming paradoxes of quantum mechanics, and the nature of the Big-Bang singularity. Thus, we find physicists and mathematicians proposing string theory and models of quantum gravity, among other exotica. Perhaps tomorrow (or in a decade, or in a century) discoveries will be made that will revolutionize science. Perhaps tomorrow (or in a decade,

or in a century) science will find God, or the immortal soul, or an essential teleology inherent in the universe.

Should the naturalist be worried? Not necessarily. After all, the naturalist does not worry about latter-day science verifying the reality of Greek gods, ghosts, astrology, or a host of other spurious ideas. We can make our judgments based only on the evidence and reasoning available to us now. But naturalism is a position about and interpretation of science (as traditionally conceived), not a required consequence of scientific theories themselves. Peters, of course, knows all of this and is familiar with the history of scientism, where the claims and conclusions of science, philosophy, and theology get conflated with one another. I raise the point to reveal the inherent ambiguity present in naturalism as a position. As a position, naturalism usually is seen as drawing its strength from its link to science. If science does not unambiguously support naturalism, much of the strength of the position is weakened. Something more, it seems to me, needs to be said with regard to the relationship of naturalism to science and the extent to which the latter is taken to support the former.

Let us suppose for a moment that some form of naturalism is true. Which form should we go with? Certainly, we will reject a Democritian naturalism as being inconsistent with modern science. Certainly, most modern naturalists would agree with Peters's statement "[E]verything is energy-matter and the information according to which energy-matter is organized" (2002, 9). But what does this statement mean?

There seem to be three possibilities. First, we may understand this statement purely reductively. That is, everything is energy-matter and nothing but energy-matter. Here, Peters would be seen as following the path of various reductive materialists such as Francis Crick and Richard Dawkins. All the juiciness of life, it turns out, is an illusion, or at least nothing more than (with a few qualifiers) atoms in motion. Qualitatively, there is no difference between a human person and interstellar gas, although quantitatively one may observe that they are arranged somewhat differently.

Reductive naturalism is much criticized for a number of good reasons, and I am assuming that Peters rejects this position, although this is not explicit in his book. If he does, this leaves him two other options. First, he could claim to be a nonreductive naturalist (or nonreductive physicalist, as it is more conventionally termed). Nonreductive naturalism claims that our knowledge of the physical universe is essentially complete and that everything in the universe is composed of the lower-level building blocks of matter and energy. Higher-order realities are said to exist because they possess novel, emergent properties that are not simply reducible to their lower-level constituents, although they are not made of any new things. In this sense, one can speak of emergent entities (the whole of the organism) and also emergent laws (for example, the law of natural selection or of entropy). Nonreductive physicalism (NRP) has been championed within

the religion-and-science dialogue by Nancey Murphy (1998), among others. Versions of NRP also have been championed in the philosophy of mind as a means of solving the mind-body problem.

The difficulty with NRP is twofold. First is the problem of characterizing in what sense an emergent thing is said to be real and not simply reducible to its parts. Second, even if a reality is emergent in the nonreductive physicalist sense, in what sense does it have causal power? In other words, how is it possible for me to have free will? Much of the debate over the supervenience relation of the mind and body posited in a nonreductive physicalist approach has focused on this issue, with some prominent figures, notably Jaegwon Kim (2000), concluding that NRP is incompatible with any sufficiently robust account of mental causation.

Given Peters's affirmation of pragmatism, I suspect that he would not affirm such a systematic view as NRP. Instead, he may likely support a fuzzier notion of emergence, what I have labeled elsewhere as "open system emergence" (Peterson 2003, chap. 3). Here, what makes something emergent is not simply that it is a higher-order whole made of lower-level parts but that our descriptions of the lower levels are acknowledged to be ontologically incomplete (and thus "open"). On this account, for instance, it might be acknowledged that our current science is unable to give a satisfactory explanation of the phenomenon of consciousness. This would not be to deny that consciousness in some sense is or arises out of the physical, only that our present understanding of what is physical and (more particularly) of how the brain works leaves much to be desired.

If Peters moves in this direction—and I would argue that most naturalists in the end have to—the line between what counts as a naturalist position and a nonnaturalist position becomes more ambiguous. This is not to make the case that naturalists must end up believing in classical theism or that some distinction cannot be made between natural and (for want of a better term) supernatural. But it does make dialogue between proponents of naturalist and nonnaturalist philosophies much more interesting. In particular, I would like to find out to what extent Peters still finds room for the category of transcendence. If one is a reductive or even nonreductive physicalist, there would seem to be little room for transcendence. An open-system emergentist, however, might think otherwise.

Naturalism and God-Talk

These considerations lead us naturally to Peters's employment of God-language. His position may be that of an individual within the species (or genus) of religious naturalism, of which there are several outstanding examples (Goodenough 2000; Drees 1999). Given his commitment to religious naturalism, it may be asked why Peters feels the need to speak of God at all. After all, other religious naturalists seem to have no need for

retaining God-language and feel comfortable with categories such as "awe" or "the sacred." Why retain "God"?

Peters only hints at the full reason for this. He writes, "Following Charles Sanders Peirce I want to take abstract ideas and make them concrete; I want to define even words such as God, the ultimate source of existence, in a way that I can observe God working in the world. Many today have lost the capacity to talk about the sacred in such a way that the sacred or the divine is close to us" (Peters 2002, 38–39).

But is the best way to retain a sense of the sacred to retain God-language? There are, after all, obvious disadvantages. The most obvious is the potential for conflation. Because most in American society (and, indeed, the world) talk about God in a very different way (one that Peters criticizes), there is an uphill battle from the start. This conflation can pose challenges to the persuasiveness of Peters's position. Many naturalists, religious and otherwise, see the history of religion as dripping in blood and ascribe (sometimes with justification) much of this to the notion of absolute authority and power that traditional conceptions of God possess. Given that Peters has jettisoned much of what *God* traditionally means, why not give up the term altogether? After all, once I learned that astrology was false, I felt no compulsion to retain and redefine the term *astrology* in a way that was compatible with modern science.

Peters might respond by appealing not so much to Peirce as to Paul Tillich and his conception of the symbol *God* in terms of the category of ultimate concern. This is certainly appropriate, and it is important to note that the history of what people have meant by *God* has varied at least as much as what they have meant by *natural*. In Peters's naturalistic framework, by retaining the word *God* he has given ultimate significance to a specific category, creativity. In doing so, he retains many attitudes and behaviors (a sense of awe, an awareness of one's place in the universe, a life lived in humility and worship) by transferring the referent.

In several places Peters speaks approvingly of Taoism and the category of Tao as an impersonal, active force. Why not replace *God* with *Tao* and avoid some of the problems of potential misunderstanding? Although Tao has its own specific history, it is a term somewhat familiar to Western ears and generic enough to be useful. This seems to me the sort of thing that a religious naturalist needs to struggle with.

I also have concerns with identifying God with creativity. This is an obvious trend within theology, even under somewhat more orthodox auspices. Creativity is a central category for process theology, and in recent scholarship it has been held up prominently by Philip Hefner (1993) in his concept of created co-creator and by Gordon Kaufman (1993), who speaks of the divine in terms of the "serendipitous creativity" at work in the process of evolution. There is an appropriateness to this identification. The God of the Hebrew, Christian, and Muslim traditions is, after all, a

creator God, and the category of God's creativity has been important in various ways throughout the history of these traditions.

I suggest that the nature of this creativity, conceived now in a naturalistic context, needs to be much expanded on. Peters describes creativity as a two-step process characterized by random variation and natural selection. Is that all that creativity is? Strictly speaking, natural selection refers to a process that occurs only among biological organisms, but Peters clearly means something more general, for it appears that he wants to speak of a process more of cosmic evolution than biological evolution. I find this commendable but vague. In the physical world, it is not clear what random variation and natural selection mean beyond an interaction between chance and law, where chance is the randomness of quantum fluctuations, the contingency of events, or both. Certainly, the universe gives rise to more and more complex physical and biological structures over time, at least on our planet. Is this creativity? Perhaps it is, but it is not clear that it is the same kind of creativity that goes on, say, in the head of a brilliant scientist or imaginative artist. Despite this, there may be links. It would be interesting to think in terms of creativity itself evolving and becoming more rich and complex over time.

Peters notes that the high valuation of creativity as a universal principle leads directly to theodicy, and in what is the most moving chapter of *Dancing with the Sacred* he speaks of losing his wife to cancer. It is sometimes assumed that creativity is an unambiguous good, but this hardly seems obvious, as creativity can be as diabolical as it is divine. This is especially clear when we look at the broad swath of natural history, where the creative process of evolution has produced not only butterflies and pandas but also parasites and viruses. Creativity is equally ambiguous when we move to the human realm, where human creativity produces technologies that lead to both weal and woe, to both penicillin and atom bombs.

When we say that God is the creative process, then, are we saying that God is good? Peters seems to lean this way when he refuses to regard cancer as evil, even when it led to the death of his wife. Yet, in the preceding chapter, he recognizes that the creative process is also a destructive process. While it may be considered redemptive (in the sense that the new and beautiful can arise out of the old), this creative God is more akin to Shiva than to the God of latter-day Christianity. So, God is either beyond the categories of good and evil or simply accepted as the author of both.

I do not find any of these directions very promising. Although the categories of good and evil are problematic in a naturalistic context, it seems to me that cancer must still inevitably be considered an evil, at least in the sense that it is something to be avoided and, if not avoided, eradicated where possible. We do not try to get cancer or any other disease. It is our nature to die. Does this mean that we should accept it, or is this something we must struggle against?

Furthermore, if the creative process is the cause of so much destruction, should I still consider it worthy of being called *God*? Should the God who is the author of both puppies and AIDS be worshipped? Here it seems that Peters is saddled with all of the problems of theism without any of the advantages (for example, the promise of an eternal redemption). One option might be to rethink what is encapsulated in the concept of creativity or redefine creativity in a way that eludes this problem. Perhaps the kind of creativity that is worshipful is one that is redemptive in character. Some passages that Peters writes seem sympathetic to this view. Redemptive creativity would, I think, be a more interesting notion, but it could lead to a dualism in Peters's worldview.

ESCHATOLOGY, HOPE, AND BELIEF

These reflections on God and creativity lead naturally to the topic of eschatology. One thing that I find striking about Peters's work is the distinct lack of eschatological categories. At first glance, this seems appropriate. Traditionally, eschatology makes sense only if there is something beyond nature to hope for. Because naturalism denies there being anything beyond nature, a naturalist, even a religious one, would have no need for eschatology.

But this clearly is a partial truth, for there is currently an abundance of literature on eschatological themes from a scientific or naturalistic perspective. Indeed, physicist Frank Tipler (1994) speaks explicitly of physical eschatology as a scientific discipline devoted to predicting the final fate of the universe, while computer scientists and others speculate on the possibility of a physical immortality (see Kurzweil 1999). Because of this, I suspect that the reason lies elsewhere and suggest that Peters shares with other naturalists a worldview that is in some ways similar to, and perhaps even simply the inversion of, natural theology. In the classical approaches to natural theology, the primary task is to prove the existence of God and to explicate God's attributes. A natural theologian thus uses the argument from design, or teleological argument, to show that God exists. Because naturalism is the mirror of natural theology, it does the opposite, using the lack of design to show that God does not exist. Although the worldviews are opposites, they are alike in their commitment to giving a complete view of the world as it exists now and has existed in the past.

This leaves any interesting discussion of the future in a humanly relevant sense profoundly absent. I say "profoundly absent" because the category of the future is of the utmost importance for living the human life. Of course, the naturalist may recognize this and simply respond that, while the future may be important to us, we cannot really know what it holds, so there is not much point in talking about it. It is here, I think, that traditional naturalism leads us particularly astray, for the most important of

human categories—freedom, community, politics, the meaning of death—have an inescapably future-oriented component that, I argue, frustrates traditional categories of naturalism.

What do I mean by this? On one level, naturalism's inability to predict the future, especially the human future, in any meaningful way suggests an important limit to the naturalist project narrowly conceived. The naturalist can fairly confidently predict that in about four billion years our Sun will enlarge to such an extent that it will fry the earth, but he or she is as clueless as the rest of us as to what the future holds for the human race a hundred years from now—and this is true even if we rule out the various possible doomsday scenarios. More generally, the naturalist might simply say that whatever happens in the future will be consistent with currently understood natural laws or with ones that will be discovered in the future. As I have already pointed out, this can be a particularly vacuous nostrum.

On a second, deeper, level, however, naturalists often seem incapable of providing the kind of eschatological vision that human beings need. It is not enough to say that the world and human beings are made up of natural objects or that death is simply the dissolution of the body. The prime question from the human, existential standpoint is *What should I hope for?* Should I hope for the continued expansion of free-market democracy across the globe? or for something greater than this? Should I hope for greater expansion of love and understanding in the human community? Or is love found only in small, fleeting moments that, once lost, can be cherished before being forgotten?

The category of hope is problematic for the person who wishes to stay within the confines of safe, predictable reason, but hope inevitably involves some kind of faith in the future, since hope engages us in the making of the reality that we envision. It might be argued that democracy was not a rational ideal to hope for in 1776 (of course, some *did* argue this, sometimes with solid reasoning). Global justice may not be a rational ideal to hope for in the twenty-first century. But what choice do we have? Hope seems to have a logic all its own that compels us to believe in things even when we have reason not to. Is immortality, even a merely physical one, something that can and should be hoped for? Should we be technological optimists or return to a Taoist rural idea? These are centrally religious questions, ones that should beckon to the religious naturalist.

Peters does touch on some of these issues. His commitment to the environment, to loving community, and to justice is clear throughout the text. I would like to see him push these themes farther. What truly may be hoped for? In a dialogue between the naturalist and the theist, there may be grounds for mutual interchange and enrichment as well as for greater clarity of where the differences lie. It seems to me that, at least under our current understanding of science, the naturalist vision is ultimately a tragic one. Our planet will eventually burn to a crisp, the universe will ulti-

mately fry or, more likely, freeze. Either way, the eventual outcome for human and all terrestrial life looks bleak. For the religious naturalist, in the end does even God die? How then do we understand the metaphor of the dance? Certainly the tune is not a dirge—there is too much that is good and joyous and beautiful in life for that! But the naturalist seems committed to a dance that is both beautiful and mournful. Jazz may be the genre of postmodern life as we creatively co-create ever new possibilities and wonders. But if the naturalist is right, another genre may better represent the human condition over the long term.

This may seem a bleak note on which to conclude, but I do not mean it to be so. Peters has done us the service of painting the picture that religious naturalism reveals, and he does so in a way that engages both the heart and the mind. If the religion-and-science dialogue is to move forward, it must take the challenge and promise of religious naturalism seriously. In such a dialogue, everyone stands to profit.

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