# *Naturalism*—as *Religion*, within *Religions*, without *Religion*

*with Willem B. Drees, "Naturalism and Religion: Hunting Two Snarks?"; Ursula W. Goodenough and Jeremy E. Sherman, "The Emergence of Selves and Purpose"; Matthew D. MacKenzie, "Spiritual Animals: Sense-Making, Self-Transcendence, and Liberal Naturalism"; Curtis M. Craig, "The Potential Contribution of Awe and Nature Appreciation to Positive Moral Values"; Mark E. Hoelter, "Mysterium Tremendum in a New Key"; Charles W. Fowler, "The Convergence of Science and Religion"; Todd Macalister, "Naturalistic Religious Practices: What Naturalists Have Been Discussing and Doing"; Paul H. Carr, "Theologies Completing Naturalism's Limitations"; James Sharp, "Theistic Evolution in Three Traditions"; Alessandro Mantini, "Religious Naturalism and Creation: A Cosmological and Theological Reading on the Origin/Beginning of the Universe"; and Willem B. Drees, "When to Be What? Why Science-Inspired Naturalism Need Not Imply Religious Naturalism."*

## NATURALISM AND RELIGION: HUNTING TWO SNARKS?

*by Willem B. Drees*

*Abstract.* Lewis Carroll's poem *The Hunting of the Snark* has as its subtitle *An Agony in Eight Fits*. Agony: struggle, violent and painful contest, the pangs of death. Many think of confrontations over naturalism and religion as a struggle, to be or not to be. Others think the situation is not that bad. Perhaps religion and naturalism may co-exist. Some even speak of "religious naturalism." In the poem, the hunt for the snark fails. The hunters do not know where to look, nor what to look for. Do we know how to understand the key terms, naturalism, religion, and religious naturalism? This exploration serves to introduce the articles in this thematic section, drawing on the 2021 conference of IRAS. Its title, "Naturalism—*as* Religion, *within* Religions, *without* Religion," asks about the way naturalism might function, as a replacement of religion, as an incentive for reform, or as a reason to reject religion.

*Keywords:* IRAS; naturalism; nature; religion; religions; religious naturalism

### The Hunting of the Snark

*The Hunting of the Snark* is a poem by Lewis Carroll, the author of *Alice in Wonderland*. Lewis Carroll was the penname of the mathematician

Willem B. Drees is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy of the Humanities, Tilburg University, Tilburg, the Netherlands; e-mail: w.b.drees@tilburguniversity.edu.

[*Zygon*, vol. 56, no. 4 (December 2021)]
*www.wileyonlinelibrary.com/journal/zygon*

© 2021 The Authors. *Zygon*® published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of Joint Publication Board of Zygon ISSN 0591-2385
This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and is not used for commercial purposes.

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (1832–1898). He was also an ordained deacon of the Anglican Church though he avoided the priesthood that would have come a year after his initial ordination. The lengthy poem was published in 1876. A crew of ten is hunting a snark: the Bellman, the Baker, the Barrister, the Billiard-maker, the Banker, the Boots, the Broker, the Bonnet-maker, the Butcher, and the Beaver. Each of them is confident where to go and what to look for, but their quest is chaotic and unsuccessful. Let me quote from the Bellman, when he calls the hunters into action (Carroll 1876; Gardner 1974., 68).

> 'The rest of my speech' (he explained to his men)
> 'You shall hear when I've leisure to speak it.
> But the Snark is at hand, let me tell you again!'
> Tis our glorious duty to seek it!
> 'To seek it with thimbles, to seek it with care;
> To pursue it with forks and with hope;
> To threaten its life with a railway-share;
> To charm it with smiles and soap!
> For the Snark's a peculiar creature, that won't
> Be caught in a commonplace way.
> Do all that you know, and try all that you don't:
> Not a chance must be wasted to-day!'

Their equipment is rather diverse: thimbles and care, forks and hope, railway-shares, smiles and soap.

Multiple meanings have been read into Lewis Carroll's poem. The snark has been understood as representing material wealth; the poem would be about craving social advancement. Or it is a satire on unsound business adventures, or on business in general. Or an expression of existential anxiety. It has also been read by F.C.S. Schiller as a pragmatist critique of Hegelian philosophers, or philosophers, in a fanciful piece in the Christmas 1901 issue of *Mind*, as the hunting of the snark stands for the quest for the Absolute. The poem is in eight fits—why eight? Because, if rotated by 90°, eight is the symbol for infinity. And all the names begin with a B, which makes clear that "we are dealing here with the most ultimate of all question, viz., 'to be or not to be,' and that it is answered in the universal affirmative—B at any cost!" (Schiller, in Gardner 1974., 106). But perhaps we should accept a more modest understanding of the poem, as presenting to us "with infinite humor the impossible voyage of an improbable crew to find an inconceivable creature" (Gardner 1974., 21).

Though the lack of clarity makes for a fascinating poem, to me it also illustrates the confusion that may arise over words, as different persons use those in different ways. I think that may happen in an exchange on naturalism and religion too. It may be that we talk past each other, as words mean different things to different speakers. My intention in this introductory contribution is not to give a definitive definition of the key terms, naturalism and religion, as if all would adhere to my definition. The intention is to discuss some of the various meanings, thereby offering an initial exploration of the territory and alerting the reader to potential multiplicities in meaning. I will focus on nature and naturalism, and on religion.

## NATURE'S SCOPE: LARGE, SMALL, OR ALL

One sometimes wonders what remains of all the serious lectures at scholarly conferences. Of a conference—and I even do not recall which one—I remember just one question, raised during a discussion. The question was: "Are cows natural?" Perhaps the question appealed to me as a Dutchman. All that we consider natural has been shaped and reshaped by humans. We talk of actively developing nature, for example, in the flood plains of the main rivers, and do so not just for nature's sake (whatever that may be), but also out of our own interest to manage floods.

Let me offer another anecdote, this time playing out in the United States. I had the pleasure of participating in a workshop in Princeton at the Center of Theological Inquiry. During a break, we visited Longwood Gardens near Philadelphia. At dinner that evening, the conversation turned to this trip. John Polkinghorne, a British gentleman, was enthusiastic. Those gardens were magnificent; it had been a great day out in nature. Holmes Rolston, an American environmentalist philosopher, disagreed. What we had witnessed today was torture. We saw plants that had been forced into unnatural shapes. For Polkinghorne, a well-kept *park* was a great example of nature, whereas for Rolston the archetypical image of nature is *wilderness*.

Schematically, three ranges of "nature" may be discerned. Nature as wilderness, not touched by human hands, is the most restrictive one. There is a broader usage that includes beyond wilderness our green and blue environment, including cows and parks. And "nature" is used in an encompassing sense, "all there is." In that sense, our cities and laptops are nature too. Some who work with a most restrictive view of "nature" distinguish nature and culture, potentially putting parks and cows on the side of culture. But for evolutionary thinkers who see everything as having emerged from conditions that pre-date human existence, such a dichotomy of nature and culture is problematical. To such thinkers, humans, parks, and cities are no exception to nature; we include it all under "biocultural evolution."

In practice, we easily move back and forth between various ways of using "nature," both an encompassing one, and one that stresses the contrast with modern culture and technology. If "naturalism" is used in opposition to supernaturalism, nature stands for all that is; the term is encompassing. But the term is also used with a more limited scope. Some food is considered more natural than other food. Star Island, a small rocky island in the Atlantic where the 2021 IRAS-conference took place, is an opportunity to experience nature—the ocean, the rocks, the birds—as we are away from cities and cars. Experiences of awe and beauty, or of being lost in the vast expanses of the universe, or being frightened by a thunderstorm, relate to gazing at the stars and at the sun setting over the ocean. This is not about the world we made, our cars and skyscrapers, but about a more restrictive idea of "nature." On the website Religiousnaturalism.org, the photograph I encountered was of an impressive landscape-mountains, a lake. And on the religious-naturalist-association.org website, major images showed a sunrise or sunset. Natural scenes that evoke emotions, that nourishes us spiritually, seems to involve withdrawal from busy civilization, from technological culture. And morally, we may be concerned about the destruction of "nature," thinking of wilderness and oceans, of green and blue nature. But in discussions on naturalism, adherents may also argue that nature is all there is (rejecting a supernatural realm)—which uses nature in a way that encompasses human culture and cities. Is everything natural, nature being a synonym for reality, or is nature more distinct, something to be protected and admired?

Another contrast might be between nature as experienced and nature as known through science. A classic example was once given by the astronomer Arthur Eddington in the early twentieth century. In his study, so he told his readers in the Introduction to his Gifford Lectures *The Nature of the Physical World*, there are two tables.

> One of them has been familiar to me from earliest years. It is a commonplace object of that environment which I call the world. How shall I describe it? It has extension; it is comparatively permanent; it is coloured; above all it is *substantial*. … My scientific table is mostly emptiness. Sparsely scattered in that emptiness are numerous electric charges rushing about with great speed; but their combined bulk amounts to less than a billionth of the bulk of the table itself. Notwithstanding its strange construction it turns out to be an entirely efficient table. (Eddington 1929, xif.)

The distinction between the two tables was picked up by Wilfrid Sellars (1963) as a distinction between the manifest and the scientific image. The one is the world we live in, the world we experience. The other image is mediated by scientific theories and instruments. The solid table is undisputable; the scientific image of the table is provisional. If we speak of naturalism with respect to paintings, "natural" signals correspondence to the world as experienced. If we speak of naturalism in relation to religion, we may get into a discussion on the question whether anything might transcend nature and the reach of empirical knowledge. We may need to be alert when arguments shift from an understanding of nature as experienced, to another, nature as envisaged via science.

One more distinction. The word "nature" is used in two rather different ways when we speak of "the nature of nature." One might paraphrase this phrase as "the essence of reality." The second word is about that which is there. The first is about its fundamental characteristics, its essence. Thus, in some contexts, "nature" is a term that may carry this load of essence, contrasting superficial appearance and real characteristics of reality.

## NATURALISM: MULTIPLE VARIETIES

The multiple ways of using the word "nature" have their consequences for the many ways in which "naturalism" is understood within philosophy. Let me begin with one example, from the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* A.C. Danto defines naturalism as

> a species of philosophical monism according to which whatever exists or happens is *natural* in the sense of being susceptible to explanation through methods which, although paradigmatically exemplified in the natural sciences, are continuous from domain to domain of objects and events. Hence, naturalism is polemically defined as repudiating the view that there exists or could exist any entities or events which lie, in principle, beyond the scope of scientific explanation.

Such a naturalism is

> ontologically neutral in that it does not prescribe what specific kinds of entities there must be in the universe or how many distinct kinds of events we must suppose to take place. … it is a methodological rather than an ontological monism …, a monism leaving them [philosophers] free to be dualists, idealists, materialists, atheists, or nonatheists, as the case may be. (Danto 1967, 448)

Though he calls this position methodological naturalism, this use of the designation is somewhat unusual, as his naturalism allows for idealism as well as materialism; it might even be open to a dualism of body and soul, as long as everything is amenable to science-like studies. Others might consider methodological naturalism more closely linked to our current understanding of reality. A new phenomenon is approached as something not yet understood. Future understanding should draw on current science, or take place by a development of science that covers the new phenomenon while also explaining all phenomena that had been explained before.

Naturalism may be treated as a consequence of the success of modern science. But some advocate an ontological understanding of naturalism that is *a priori*, and not explicitly related to science. Historically, Spinoza's metaphysics might be an example. In contemporary naturalism, Jerome Stone, historian and advocate of religious naturalism, introduces naturalism as monism, in opposition to a theistic dualism of reality.

> Negatively, it [naturalism] 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 this life. (Stone 2003, 89)

In the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, Owen Flanagan discusses fifteen possible meanings of naturalism, with "And I could go on" at the end. His main focus is on the relationship between philosophy and science. Two pairs from his list (Flanagan 2006, 431):

> (4) Both science and philosophy are licensed only to describe and explain the ways things are.
> (5) Both philosophy and science are, in addition to the businesses of description and explanation, in the business of giving naturalistic justifications for epistemic and ethical ideals and norms.

> (14) Naturalism is, first and foremost, an ontological thesis that tells us about everything that there is.
> (15) Naturalism is, first and foremost, an epistemic thesis, which explains, among other things, why we should make no pronouncements about 'everything that there is'.

Are we limited to description and explanation, or do naturalists see science as justifying moral and epistemic norms? Are we speaking on all there is, or should we give up on speaking about all there is, restricting ourselves to speech about that which is epistemically accessible?

## RELIGION: MULTIPLE MODALITIES

A similar multiplicity of understandings regards the other key terms, "religion" and "religious." Though people know for sure for themselves what these terms mean, disagreements may easily arise. Is religion about an institution, a Church? Established doctrines, a theology? A community, social life. Or experiences of awe and beauty, inspiring reverence? Or belief in the ultimate goodness of the universe? The meaningfulness of all our individual lives?

Eric J. Sharpe offered in *Understanding Religion* (1983, 95) a map by speaking of four "modes" of religion. Somewhat condensed, one may discern four dimensions.

> Existential: *Faith* in the sense of *fiducia*, 'trust';
> Intellectual: *Beliefs*, statements to which one gives conscious assent *(assensus)*;
> Institutional: *Organizations*, within which (1) and (2) are held, maintained and transmitted; and
> Ethical: *Conduct* vis-à-vis the members of (3) and others.

Within a single tradition, the emphasis may differ from person to person. The scheme can be disputed. The experiential is subsumed under the existential, it seems, and ritual practice under institutional organization. It can be a great pastime to develop more classifications and typologies, but it suffices for now.

Over time, the institutional and intellectual emphasis seems to have become less prominent. Thus, sociologists of religion may speak of "believing without belonging," playing down institutional membership. And of "belonging without believing," emphasizing identity and community rather than an emphasis on beliefs, on intellectual claims.

I am currently reading works of the professors of philosophy of religion of Leiden University since 1876, the year when the faculty of theology in this public university was no longer controlled by the Dutch reformed church. The first was a highly metaphysical thinker, a Calvinist Spinozist; he treated religion as an intellectual system. His successor treated religion as a matter of philosophical anthropology, as trust in the ultimate goodness of the universe. According to him, substantial theological beliefs were merely the product of poetic imagination. His successor, a famous historian of religions, was looking for the common element in all religions, within an evolutionary scheme that had his own liberal Christianity as the highest form of religion. Later ones were agnostic in their theology, philosophically influenced by Immanuel Kant, seeking the basis for religion in practical philosophy, in its role in life, or—with Friedrich Schleiermacher—in a third dimension, alongside theoretical and practical philosophy. Each reflected on the essential characteristics of religion and these were all religiously liberal in affiliation, but nonetheless they offered rather different ideas about what religion is.

Religion used to be primarily about belonging, mostly to the same tradition as one's parents belonged to. Somewhere in the later decennia of the twentieth century, this belonging became an optional and individual matter. Thus, nowadays one can claim to be religious or spiritual, without belonging to a particular community. What it means to be "religious" has changed (Woodhead 2013). In an earlier contribution, I spoke of the shift from acceptance of the authority of a Holy Book and of priests and preachers, to emphasis on authenticity, on one's own life orientation (Drees 2015).

A distinction may be made between religion and religions, the singular and the plural. There are multiple religions, different traditions, more or less well-delineated. Years ago, I came across a French magazine, which had on its cover "the seven world religions." They covered Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and Eastern Orthodox Christianity. I found this intriguing. Judaism—a world religion? It does not have membership by choice, but by birth. But even more: why three streams of Christianity as three distinct religions?

Some people speak of *religion*, in the singular. Are you religious? It would be odd if we were to do so for language. Do you speak language? Nobody speaks language; one always speaks a language—English, Dutch, or whatever. Linguists can study the common features of languages, but in that sense, language is an abstraction relative to the languages of humans. In a similar sense, scholars can study religion as they study elements common to the religions. However, the term "religion" has moved from such an analytic context to the sphere of human practice and self-understanding. It has become a category that has acquired a meaning of its own. It thereby has come to stand for a particular form of religion alongside other particular religions—one can understand oneself as a Muslim, a Christian, a Hindu, a Buddhist, or as someone who is "religious" (or spiritual). Someone may understand oneself to be religious, while not belonging to a religion.

Such a use of the singular "religion" seems to me relatively recent phenomenon, which correlates with a change in what it means to be religious. However, one might see it already with the rise of psychology of religion, for example, William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). And even the preface of A.D. White's *History of the Warfare of Theology with Science in Christendom* (1896, xii) can be read thus, when he emphasized that he does not see a struggle between science and religion, but one against Christian sectarianism and dogmatic theology:

> My conviction is that Science, though it has evidently conquered Dogmatic Theology based on biblical texts and ancient modes of thought, will go hand in hand with Religion; and that, although theological control will continue to diminish, Religion, as seen in the recognition of "a Power in the Universe, not ourselves, which makes for righteousness, and in the love of God and our neighbor, will steadily grow stronger and stronger."

It may well be that such a generic understanding of "religion" may well be a condition for modern "religious naturalism"—not bound to a particular tradition, but only to science and a generic morality. But while aspiring to offer a nontraditional religion, "religious naturalism" also may become "a religion," a particular position.

Among the many definitions of religion, a favorite of mine is Clifford Geertz's anthropological understanding of religion. According to him, religious symbols and practices integrate the ways in which we experience and orient ourselves in the world with our understanding of reality.

> Sacred symbols function to synthesize a people's ethos—the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood—and their world view—the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order. (Geertz 1966, 3)

Religions integrate models *of* the world, a worldview, and models *for* the world, a vision. "Naturalism" seems to be merely the first, a worldview. How does it become an ethos, a model for the world, a religious attitude? If the naturalist worldview inspires an ethos, one might speak of religious naturalism. At least, upon a *functional* understanding of religion. Such an appropriation as "religious" might be less attractive to others who adhere to a substantial concept of religion, involving a transcendent deity, or draw on a particular tradition with its convictions and ritual practices.

## Preview

"Nature," "naturalism," and "religion" are understood in multiple ways. That is also be the case in the various articles in this thematic set, which has its origin in the conference held by IRAS, the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science, June 27–July 3, 2021, at Star Island, NH, on "Naturalism—*as* Religion, *within* Religions, *without* Religion." Following this introduction, the first contribution is one by Ursula Goodenough and Jeremy Sherman. Goodenough's book *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (1998) has been a major stimulus for modern religious naturalism. She is also the founding president of the Religious Naturalist Association. Building on work by Terrence Deacon, Sherman and Goodenough present a wide-ranging scientific view of the origin of life, the evolution of the rich variety of life-forms, and among those, the emergence of humans with culture and symbolic language. Along these lines, they advocate a science-inspired religious naturalist orientation.

The next five articles can be read as developing elements of such a religious naturalism. Matt Mackenzie speaks of humans as "Spiritual Animals," as by nature we seek to make sense of our world and aspire to self-transcendence. The effort to realize human flourishing is understood in a liberal naturalistic framework. He develops his ideas in response to work by Owen Flanagan, one of the plenary speakers at the IRAS conference. Craig Curtis considers experiences of awe and reverence toward nature. Based on data from various surveys, he argues that a naturalistic view may promote such experiences and attitudes. Mark Hoelter draws on Rudolf Otto's understanding of religion (1917), as experiences that suggest an encounter with an overwhelming, fascinating, and frightening, mystery. This is analyzed in terms that draw on modern studies of the brain. Charles Fowler seeks the convergence of science and religion by drawing on what is normal for mammals of our body size. Thus, biology and statistics are expected to provide normative orientation. Todd MacAlister, himself a key player in the Religious Naturalist Association, turns from experiences and beliefs to religious life, as he considers practices that could be appropriate to religious naturalists.

The next four articles show sympathy for science-inspired naturalism, but are in various ways not satisfied by an encompassing religious naturalism. Paul Carr draws on authors who are naturalist and organicist in their philosophy of nature, but whose approach, according to Carr, allows for a meaningful understanding of the religious promise of life after death. James Sharp considers three voices on theistic evolution, from the Christian theologian Keith Ward, the former chief rabbi, in the United Kingdom, Jonathan Sacks, and the Muslim scientist Nidhal Guessoum. Alessandro Mantini offers a view of the interplay of science and theology in the sphere of metaphysics, thereby understanding nature as creation. My own contribution at the end of this package makes the case that naturalism is appropriate when interpreting our scientific understanding of reality, while in philosophical anthropology and in life, whether religious or nonreligious, more dualist and pluralist views might be more appropriate.

## References

Carroll, Lewis. 1876. *The Hunting of the Snark*. London: Macmillan. Reprinted in Martin Gardner: *The Annotated Snark*. London: Penguin Books, 1974.

Danto, A. C. 1967. "Naturalism." In *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 5, edited by Paul Edwards, 448–50. New York: Macmillan.

Drees, Willem B. 2015. "From Authority to Authenticity: IRAS and *Zygon* in New Contexts." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 50:439–54.

Eddington, A. S. 1929. *The Nature of the Physical World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Flanagan, Owen. 2006. "Varieties of Naturalism." *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, edited by Philip Clayton, 430–52. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gardner, Martin. [1962] 1974. *The Annotated 'Snark': The Full Text of Lewis Carroll's Great Nonsense Epic 'The Hunting of the Snark' and the Original Illustrations by Henry Holiday, with an Introduction and Notes*. London: Penguin Books.

Geertz, Clifford. 1966. "Religion as a Cultural System." In *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, edited by M. Banton, 1–46. London: Tavistock.

Goodenough, Ursula. 1998. *The Sacred Depths of Nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

James, William. 1902. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co.

Sellars, Wilfrid. 1963. *Science, Perception and Reality*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Sharpe, Eric J. 1983. *Understanding Religion*. London: Duckworth.

Stone, J. 2003. "Varieties of Religious Naturalism." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 38:89–93.

White, A. D. 1896. *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*. New York: Appleton & Co.

Woodhead, Linda. 2013. "How Religious Identity Has Changed." *Blog on the website 'Pandeamonium'*. http://kenanmalik.wordpress.com/2013/08/15/religion-is-not-what-it-used-to-be/.