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."

NATURALISTIC RELIGIOUS PRACTICES: WHAT NATURALISTS HAVE BEEN DISCUSSING AND DOING

by Todd Macalister

Abstract. Beyond philosophical perspectives on how naturalism can be considered as a focus of religious orientation, a number of naturalists have been exploring things that might be done as spiritual/religious practices. This article gives an overview of types of practices that have been considered—both in published descriptions of what authors have suggested can be done, and what naturalists have said they are doing as parts of personal practice. It will discuss themes in activities and reasons for engaging in practices, and ways that acts may contribute to well-being.

Keywords: mindful; naturalism; religious naturalism; ritual; query

Introduction

As a religious orientation includes more than beliefs and values, a question comes for those who consider naturalism as a focus of religious attention, in "What can or should we do?" This may lead to related questions, like "What are we already doing?," "What might we add or do more of or do differently?," and "Why should we do anything at all?" Answers relate to

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roles that practices can play as parts of religious life. Many views on this fit with a theme that was described by William James—that "Not God, but life, . . . a larger, richer, more satisfying life, is, in the last analysis, the end of religion" (James 1902, 497).

This article gives an overview of types of practices that naturalists have said they are doing or have discussed as things that could be done. It is not intended to be comprehensive but, instead, shows a range of activities that have been described.

A lot of variety exists. As Loyal Rue stated, "All religious naturalists are united by a reverence for nature, but they are not united by any distinctive patterns for expressing their reverence. . . In this respect, religious naturalism is rather like Hinduism," where "traditions honor human diversity in the religious life by encouraging individuals to seek paths of piety that suit their own dispositions and temperaments" (Rue 2012, 135). As Daniel Strain described, these expressions are occurring and being considered as "we naturalists stand at the beginning of a new movement to rediscover the sacred in the natural. This movement is just starting to make its way in building its own traditions" and, for a number of naturalists "the primary spiritual practice is the very building of our personal practice itself" (Strain 2018, 356).

Descriptions of practices in this article are drawn from written works by naturalist authors and from statements made in online conversations hosted by the Religious Naturalist Association, the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science, and some other venues. (As a point of style, when descriptions are from publications, author names are cited, and when descriptions are from online conversations, for privacy reasons, no names are stated and speakers are identified simply as "a naturalist.")

As will be discussed, practices may be done for a number of reasons, which, for the purposes of this article are organized as:

Practices to orient the mind
Personal growth or transformation
Putting values into practice
Community

Practices to Orient the Mind

A number of naturalists have described practices that can alter pace or mood, and shift attention away from daily concerns and toward more spiritual perspectives. As Ellen Idler described it, these can offer a transcendent or "sacred" time, apart from the "profane time" that we live most of our lives in (Idler 2008, 3). For example, Rue described gazing at the flames of a campfire or the rippling patterns of water, saying "What I seek, primarily, is the stimulation of wonder and insight . . . I have discovered that these reflective occasions always have a renewing, refreshing effect on me. I

have discovered that they invariably alter my attitudes and my perspective on the events of the day" (Rue 2012, 136–37).

Many have described finding these types of moments when spending time in natural settings. As one naturalist put it: "My dad took me out backpacking, and spending time in nature became one of my favorite things. I find great inspiration and purpose in considering my place in nature, and connect with that a moral imperative toward environmentalism and social justice." Another said, "when I want to look in, I look up. A night of simple stargazing can be as powerfully calming and contemplative as any meditation." One spoke of taking "trips (monthly or bi-monthly) to woods, parks, lakes or other nature sites - for reflection".

Taylor discussed how some speak of surfing as "going to church" and refers to the sea as "Mother Ocean" or the "green cathedral." He described surfers talking in mystical terms "about being one with the wave and feeling as if . . . they were no longer spectators in the ocean but part of it" and how some spoke of riding a wave as showing "the order of a universe at equilibrium with all natural forces in balance" (Taylor 2007, 934–35, 937, 940).

A related activity is gardening. One naturalist said that "Composting reminds me of how the death of one life gives the raw materials for another life to be sustained," and how, for him, "the spreading of compost that I have helped create is a form of communion with the natural processes of earth that help sustain life. It is almost a kind of ceremony each time I spread a new batch."

Michael Barrett, building on ideas from Donald Braxton, discussed how "a scientifically informed mindfulness" might be seen as a distinctive feature of a religious naturalist orientation, and as an attitude that can be nurtured; where, with "reverent investigation of natural wonders," naturalists will tend to notice and appreciate such things as the interconnectedness of all life, the fragility of life and its ecosystems, and the human need for personal wholeness and social cohesion (Braxton 2007; Barrett 2015, 333).

One approach to this was described by Raymo, where, along with enjoying the walk he took to work each day—on a path through woods and a field and across a stream—he took time to learn about the plants and animals that lived in this area, and the history of how it came to be as it now is. Over time, as he noticed details, he could also see how these were parts of the whole, and how he was also part of this local ecosystem. Quoting an Irish naturalist, he spoke of "stopping often, watching closely, listening carefully" and how . . . "Step by step, year by year, the landscape I traversed became deeper, richer, more multidimensional . . . Ultimately, almost without my willing it, the path became more than a walk, . . . it became *the* Path, a *Tao (Way)*, a thread that ties one human life and the universe together" (Raymo 2004, 3).

Another approach involving mindfulness, described by Stone, involves alternating between the big picture and the small picture (Stone 2017, 77). As one naturalist described his response to this: "I can look at a flower or an insect on its own terms; and then, as a separate process, I can think of those things as part of a bigger picture. One can alternate back and forth, and be grateful and thoughtful about both the general and the specific."

Some have described using mental prompts as a technique for being mindful in ways that are appreciative and include a sense of connection. For example, one naturalist described how, at breakfast, "when we have cereal, I go through a little ritual asking where each of the ingredients (corn or oats, walnuts, milk, bananas, etc.) came from, and feeling a connection with the people who produced it. It gives me a very spiritual feeling. . . When I'm doing a construction project, I invoke a similar ritual . . . I'm usually repairing or adding to something that was originally done by someone else, and I find meaning in thinking about when and how they did the original task."

A theme in these and related practices involves attitudes—of noticing, appreciating, and caring in ways that are consistent with Loyal Rue's view that "what makes a naturalist a *religious* naturalist is that a religious naturalist takes nature to heart" (Rue 2012, 110). These also include an ongoing willingness to stop, shift focus, and respond to sights, sounds, or other sensations that one might encounter in the course of a day. One naturalist spoke of how, while, for many, spiritual life includes practices that are done intentionally, some others "experience it in some generalized it-comes-to-me way" and added that "being out of doors or in the presence of art are common contexts where it 'comes to me'."

Some naturalists have described forms of art as "my religion," as spiritual feelings can occur when creating or responding to music, paintings, poetry, and other media. Some create works with naturalist themes. For example, Schildkret described gathering stones, seeds, fruits, and flowers that can be found in natural settings and assembling them on the ground in mandala-like configurations that highlight objects in a local ecosystem. This is then photographed and left; where it may, or might not, be seen by passers-by, and in time will be blown apart and decompose (Schildkret 2018). A photographer spoke of using his camera as a tool to cultivate awe.

One naturalist described how his poetry can "open a way into contemplation." A novelist described a theme that she has used and intends to continue, "that only through combining science and spiritual awareness, physics and metaphysics will the truth about existence become clear." Sam Guarnaccia created an orchestral score to accompany a telling of the naturalist story of creation.

Naturalists may also be moved as observers of art, where, at times, being at a concert, museum, or play can feel like and be described as a spiritual

experience. Some collect and share photographs, poems, or songs that express naturalist themes.

Many naturalists have mentioned meditation as an occasional or regular practice. A number of approaches have been used as a means to adjust patterns of thinking or obtain "deeper awareness of a religious ultimate" (Crosby 2012, 144), including techniques that involve mindful awareness, repetition of a mantra, or deep reflection on some focus of concern, and approaches that can include walking in natural settings, as well as sitting.

Donald Crosby discussed how prayer can be a significant symbolic act. He mentioned several types of prayer and discussed how naturalists do not pray to nature, but can express thankfulness, concern, aspiration, empathy, or regret. After considering several types of prayer, he said, "The only one of these inappropriate to Religion of Nature is the prayer of petition" (Crosby 2014, 142).

Pamela Crosby discussed how, with recognition that life is precious, "religious practice might involve meditations and rituals of gratefulness for nature as our nurturing home and celebrations of its mysterious abundance and dynamism" (Crosby 2018, 296). One example of this was described by Donald Crosby, who suggested that, before drinking a glass of water, we might stop and reflect on its central importance to our existence (Crosby 2014, 91). Many say words before meals to show gratitude for food. Some have made a ceremony of first plantings in a garden in Spring.

Sasha Sagan spoke of the value of rituals, and of how "We all deserve holidays, celebrations, and traditions. We all need to mark time. . . . We all need to bid hello and goodbye to our loved ones" (Sagan 2019, 7). She noted that many rituals are done as responses to aspects of nature, with words and actions to mark astronomical events (with daily cycles of sunrise/sunset and annual cycles that include solstices and seasons) and biological events (including life transitions of birth, coming of age, and death). Naturalists often observe these events in ways that adapt what has been done in traditional religions. For example, at weddings, funerals, and the birth of a child, words and actions may reflect themes in a naturalist orientation. One naturalist said: "I've had the honor to baptize most of my grandchildren: standing in the ocean with their parents, I dab some water on their little foreheads and say something like I baptize you in the name of the Earth."

Likewise, some traditional religious holidays may be adapted to naturalist themes; where during the December "holiday season," naturalists may focus on the winter solstice, and the return of Spring may be marked alongside Easter, Purim, and other observances. Also, some new holidays are beginning to be observed, as some naturalists gather to celebrate Earth Day or the birthdays of Charles Darwin or John Muir.

Rituals also include retelling of central stories; where, as the story of escape from Egypt is told at Passover, and stories about Jesus are told at

Easter, some naturalists participate in ritual retelling of "The Great Story" (of the origin of the cosmos, Earth, and humans). One version of this is the Cosmic Walk, where a spiral path is put in a large outdoor space or room, and participants start at the center and (often with candlelight and music) slowly walk out, and stop at markers along the way—to reflect on steps that occurred from the Big Bang to formation of matter, galaxies, and solar systems, and emergence and evolution of life on Earth (Crosby 2014, 147–59). As Berry put it, this can help to ground us, and reinforce a sense of what we are and what we share with all other people, "We now need to tell this story, meditate on it, and listen to it" and also, often, "to be reminded of it, for every being in the universe is what it is only through its participation in the story" (Berry 1991, 9).

Some naturalists go on pilgrimages—with a journey to a place where naturalist ideals were realized or inspired (such as the Galapagos Islands, Yosemite, and Walden Pond). One described spending a week at a retreat, where people from different backgrounds discussed what in their traditions could contribute to making Earth sacred to humans again. Another, after attending a conference, said "The whole experience is a pilgrimage to me. . ." as he said it involved a challenge, with some sacrifice, plus rituals and routines, and gave "a complete break from day-to-day life, and an opportunity to be exposed to new ideas and forge connections."

Personal Growth or Transformation

Eric Steinhart discussed how, since nontheistic natural religions do not involve divine persons, they will not be religions of worship. Instead, they may aim toward self-realization, "to move a human animal into some ideal state and to keep it in an ideal state," which will involve techniques of self-modification (Steinhart 2018, 342–43). Strain made a similar point, stating that "Spiritual practice is a process of spiritual transformation. That is, the transformation of our essential nature" toward a more flourishing and fulfilled life. Achieving this requires sustained activity over time, which can be challenging and may require great effort (Strain 2018, 354–56). Consistent with this, Jay N. Forrest distinguished between a spiritual practice, which "refers to the collective things that one is doing to develop one's spirituality," and spiritual practices, which "are the individual things themselves, like meditating, journaling, walking, etc" (Forrest 2017).

Several objectives in spiritual growth have been described. Donald Crosby discussed how developing moral principles, based on insights from nature, can be part of practice (Crosby 2014, 64). Another naturalist echoed this, saying "My religious goal is transformation away from my egoism toward a generous life of love and caring work for Earth and her precious creatures." Some other naturalists have discussed how practices

can contribute to development of religious attitudes, such as appreciation and caring.

For many, meditation is done as an ongoing practice. For some, ongoing learning is a focus. As one naturalist put it, "The more we learn about something, the more likely we are to come to care about it, and, the more we care about it, the more likely we might be to protect it." Also, the more we learn about human nature and ways that biology can affect behavior, the better able we become to understand and accept why people do the things we do, which can contribute to compassion and reduction of conflicts. And as learning can enhance understanding of the interconnections among all people and forms of life, it can contribute to what Mikael Stenmark discussed as making the world "existentially intelligible," and to providing a context for transformation from a state of alienation to greater harmony with Ultimate Reality (Stenmark 1997, 495).

These and related topics are frequent focuses of online discussions at the Religious Naturalist Association and some other venues, and some participants have described these discussions as valued parts of their spiritual practice.

Pamela Crosby discussed a focus on "query" as a type of ongoing learning and way of applying knowledge. With no view of a deity guiding events or setting rules, she feels that "Religious naturalists must have the astute reasoning, resourcefulness, imagination, and moral insight that can effect substantial beneficial changes" (Crosby 2018, 297). This approach is designed to develop an "interrogative temper" and mature judgment that prepares individuals to consider varied aspects of challenges, judge options, and make choices that consider impact from several perspectives. A related approach, described as "reflective practices," involves regular reflection on one's actions.

Putting Values into Practice

Many naturalists try to act in ways that respond to their care about the natural world, including the people who are part of it. Some of this may be no more complicated than just trying to be a good person and act in ways that are helpful and kind. As one naturalist put it, "I value and practice the common moral decencies and ethics excellences. They let us live in rightfulness and society with fellow human beings."

Some, also, involves values that are of priority interest to naturalists. As Pamela Crosby described, respecting a "sacred relationship of humans with the natural world, including all of its creatures" can prompt actions, based on values, that include "seeking ecological sustainability and social justice" (Crosby 2018, 303). Another naturalist described specific actions that could come with this, where "respect for the interdependence for all

living things" . . . can prompt "animal rescue, habitat protection, and establishment and protection of green spaces."

Other activities that have been described include "giving comfort or resources to those in need," "personal actions in support for sustainable relationships with the environment: recycling, reusing, reducing," and "making consumer choices based on sustainability considerations." One naturalist said that he participates in ecoprotective public events (such as climate change marches) and donates to groups like the Sierra Club. One said she was part of a church group "which is active in social justice, including Black Lives Matter, and environmental justice."

Some other types of actions reflecting values include sharing or teaching what has been learned—through giving talks, leading classes, writing articles, leading trips to natural settings, and joining in live or online conversations. Some, also, have taken roles in spiritual leadership or support—as religious naturalist-oriented ministers in churches or chaplains in hospitals.

Community

While many practices are done mainly for personal spiritual experience or growth, a number of practices may also be done to connect with or contribute to communities. This can be done in groups that identify specifically as spiritual or religious naturalists, as well as groups at churches or temples in traditional religions, and in groups that identify as secular, humanist, or atheist, and/or groups that have no overt religious orientation, such as nature conservation groups, groups that work toward social justice, and informal groups of family and friends.

One format used in some naturalist groups includes elements in Jewish or Christian religious services, where people join together (which, in recent times, has included gathering online, as well as in-person) and a leader discusses a topic of spiritual relevance, often accompanied by music and poetry, and followed by informal socializing with food and drink. As occurs at churches and temples, some members take leadership roles, some contribute to activities that enable group gatherings, and others participate as parts of the audience.

Some gatherings include specific types of practices. For example, the Spiritual Naturalist Association has regular group meditation sessions, and some members of the Religious Naturalist Association join in small group gatherings that begin with nature hikes, visits to museums or concerts, or social action marches, followed by food and conversation. Both groups also have online platforms where group members can converse, ask questions, and share ideas.

These and related activities combine aspects of practices described previously with an added sense of belonging that can come with being part of

a community. Several have mentioned connection with likeminded others as part of what is sought and gained. Among comments made when people joined the Religious Naturalist Association, were "I . . . seek membership to align myself with fellow humans who feel the same as I do" and "It's just so validating to know that we're not alone in this way. . ."

Due to current limits in explicitly naturalist groups (with small numbers in geographic locations), many naturalists are active members of Christian, Jewish, or other established religious groups. Some sing in the choir, teach Sunday School, or organize or join in group activities.

A number of naturalists are active in Humanist groups. Some find community, in ways that can be parts of spiritual practice, in groups that use hiking, kayaking, gardening, or other activities to give contact with and contribute to maintenance of natural places. For example, one naturalist described how he and his wife joined in group walks at Audubon Society preserves, and said "I learned quite a lot and loved how much these people loved and noticed nature's details. Over the years we've loved our community/'family' of fellow kindred spirits."

Some types of practices may also be shared in informal gatherings of families and friends, where a number of naturalists have described saying short prayers or words of thanks before starting meals or ritual types of greetings or goodbyes. This occurs in more structured ways to mark life transitions, when people gather to celebrate a birth or coming of age and at weddings and funerals. In these, naturalist images and themes may be featured as ways of marking connection with what is seen as sacred.

Conclusions

Most practices described in this article are things that individual naturalists, on their own, have suggested or done (often building on ideas from other naturalists, and sometimes inventing personal practices). In this, practices are mainly a bottom-up collection, not a top-down following of naturalist traditions or leaders. One reason for this reflects a stage in growth; whereas an orientation that is in an early stage of development, there are no long-standing traditions and existing naturalist groups have provided few guidelines for practice. Another reason may be active support for individualized approaches to practices. This is appreciated by many, but has drawbacks and limits for those who would like greater structure and more guidance in what to do. It also does not provide a focus for shared identity or activities that can be part of glue that can contribute to holding a group together.

A number of the practices that naturalists described are adaptations of traditional religious practices, which fits with the observation that, throughout history, emerging religious orientations have often adapted

practices from established traditions. As was discussed, this includes types of holiday celebrations, meditation, prayer, rituals, and group gatherings.

It is also worth noting that, in addition to these practices being done by naturalists who see themselves as spiritual or religious, they are also often done by naturalists who describe themselves as atheist, humanist, or secular. Among many ways of discussing what might make a practice spiritual or religious, or not, Forrest noted that activities such as walking, making tea, sitting in silence, or drumming could be spiritual or wholly secular. He defined a spiritual practice as "an activity that expands or deepens one's awareness of union and communion with reality" and said that, for a Christian, this reality would be God and, for a naturalist, it would be nature.

Two themes can be seen as being distinctive to, or particularly prominent in, practices that have been discussed and done by naturalists. One is related to having the natural world as a focus of attention. As was discussed, spending time, with mindful awareness, in natural settings can shift attention away from daily concerns and, in showing beauty, order, and meaning, can prompt perceptions of wonder and awe. With an attitude of caring, this can prompt feelings of gratitude, in appreciating nature as being essential to all of life, which, in turn, can prompt actions to help protect natural environments and preserve long-term balance and sustainability. It can also contribute to a sense of connection to, and feeling part of, the natural world, and to attitudes of humility and compassion.

Another distinctive theme is the interest many naturalists have in learning, and in and developing ways of observing and inquiring that show interconnections among all things and how parts relate to the whole, and varied perspectives that can offers insights that are relevant to how we understand and live our lives. In contrast to traditions where core wisdom is grounded in revelations from the past and where guidelines may be expressed as specific rules, naturalists embrace what can be gained with further exploration, with insights from the sciences, arts, and humanities, and embrace the complexity, uncertainty, and limits in what can be known. In this, spiritual growth can involve practices that contribute to seeking a type of wisdom that includes what Pamela Crosby described as "an interrogative temper."

Beyond the many practices that naturalists have been doing as parts of personal spiritual experience and growth, few practices have yet been suggested or adopted as activities that can contribute to uniting or strengthening identification with naturalist groups. Some aspects of this have begun. For example, as mentioned earlier, a number of naturalists celebrate the winter solstice as a focus in the December "holiday season," and Earth Day as a focus in celebration of the coming of spring. As occurs in most cultures and religious traditions, many naturalists gather and perform

rituals in association with births, coming of age, weddings, and funerals and, in these, use naturalist themes in words that are spoken. Online conversations, classes, meditation sessions, and occasional in-person gatherings occur among members of the Spiritual Naturalist Society and Religious Naturalist Association.

More can (and, to strengthen groups, should) be developed in the future. Naturalist groups can do more to articulate shared values, and ways that they aspire to contribute to good in the world. They can go further in offering options for ritual acts that affirm identity and give reminders of core messages. They can provide more frequent and regular occasions for people to join and act together in communities.

Some goals in what can be done were well-stated by Sagan, "I want to create moments that make us feel united with other Earthlings, without the dogma that divides us. Religion, at its best, facilitates empathy, gratitude, and awe. Science, at its best, reveals true grandeur beyond our wildest dreams. My hope is that I can merge these into some new thing that will serve my daughter, my family, and you, dear reader, as we navigate—and celebrate—the mysterious beauty and terror of being alive in our universe" (Sagan 2019, 17–18).

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