

What is Religious Naturalism?

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Religious naturalism, a once-forgotten option in religious thinking, is making a revival. Very close to religious humanism, perhaps overlapping it, it seeks to explore and encourage religious ways of responding to the world or at least ways that are analogous to what we traditionally call religious. The difference between religious naturalism, as I am defining it, and the humanism of classical humanists such as John Dietrich during the time of the Humanist Controversy (1920's) or the Humanist Manifesto of 1933 is a richer sense of our response to the world. Words like "mystery" and "openness" are more likely to be used by religious naturalists. In the debates between humanists and theists (classical or revisionary) religious naturalism as a viable option has often been forgotten, but no longer.

Who are the religious naturalists? Formerly not a self-conscious movement, recently some thinkers have chosen the term. Historical roots go back at least to Spinoza and include Henry David Thoreau, and some poets including Whitman and Robinson Jeffers. Former religious naturalists included Samuel Alexander, Santayana, Dewey, Mordecai Kaplan, Ralph Burhoe and such Chicago theologians as Wieman, Meland, and the later Bernard Loomer. Recent religious naturalists include William Dean, Willem Drees, Charley Hardwick, Henry Levinson, Karl Peters, myself, and perhaps Gordon Kaufman.

This article seeks to do three things: 1) provide a generic notion of religious naturalism, 2) sketch my own specific brand of religious naturalism, and 3) raise some questions which religious naturalists need to think about.

I

Religious naturalism is a type of naturalism. Hence we start with naturalism. This is a set of beliefs and attitudes that focuses on this world. On the negative side it involves the assertion 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. On the positive side it affirms that attention should be focused on the events and processes of this world to provide what degree of explanation and meaning are possible to this life. While this world is not self-sufficient in the sense of providing by itself all of the meaning that we would like, it is sufficient in the sense of providing enough meaning for us to cope.

Religious naturalism is a set of beliefs and attitudes that affirm that there are religious aspects of this world which can be understood within a naturalistic framework. There are some happenings or processes in our experience which elicit responses which can appropriately be called religious. These experiences and responses are similar enough to those nurtured by the paradigm cases of

religion that they may be called religious without stretching the word beyond recognition. Charles Milligan, life-long student of American religious naturalism, puts it, by religious naturalism "I take to be any naturalistic world view or philosophy in which religious thought, values and commitments hold an important and not merely incidental part. Or perhaps more simply, where religious discourse plays an integral role."

Charley Hardwick, whose *Events of Grace* is a recent naturalistic theology, utilizes a similar approach. Drawing on the philosopher Rem Edwards, he finds four basic features in naturalism.

These are: (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 so that every natural event is itself a product of other natural events.

The term "nature," of course, has many meanings. I take it that here nature includes the worlds of culture and human history.

Hardwick adds that there are two additional features which most naturalisms have included. "These are: (5) that natural science is the only sound method for establishing knowledge, and (6) that value is based solely in the interests and projects of human beings." Hardwick finds these last two as problematic and unnecessary for the basic definition of naturalism. I am in agreement with him on this. For my part I am strongly committed to the value of science, but find that assertions like number five are often used to denigrate partially verified information or to downplay the value of appreciation or insights couched in pictorial images. Further, we should expand beyond our anthropocentric approach to values. My growing appreciation of the nonhuman world and of the increasing difficulty of nurturing this appreciation and how this relates to our environmental crises have helped me question assertions like number six. Just because human values are anthropogenic, at least in part, does not mean that they should be exclusively anthropocentric.

Hardwick goes on to indicate the implications of naturalism for religious thinking. He holds that both classical and revisionary theisms generally have three things in common. These 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." On Hardwick's view a naturalist theology, or roughly what I have called religious naturalism, involves the denial of these three theses and a reconception of religion involving an alternative view.

There are two related and overlapping views that it is helpful to distinguish from religious naturalism. The first is empiricism. Religious naturalism often has an

empirical orientation, although the nature of this empiricism varies widely. Bernard Meland and others have a broad conception of empiricism, what I have called a "generous empiricism." Further, thinkers such as William James and Douglas Clyde Macintosh are empiricists in religious epistemology but develop notions of God which do not fit the generic definition of religious naturalism as developed here and thus need not be included in this study. Finally, it should be clear religious naturalism need not be committed to an empiricist foundationalism.

The second view which overlaps religious naturalism is materialism or physicalism. Hardwick claims that a consistent and honest empiricism will be a physicalism. This is not, of course, the old fashioned mechanism, but it is still an insistence on the physical basis of all reality. There is a strong leaning towards physicalism in my own thinking. However, this is a philosophically strong position to maintain. Both for reasons of conversation with indigenous and neopagan religious thinkers who have experienced what they term spirits who are not part of this material world and also in order not to preclude my own growth in this area by dogmatically foreclosing the possibility of such experiences, I do not unequivocally affirm physicalism. However, I do suspect that at the end of the day whatever spirits there are will be found to have a material basis. The world is full of patterns which can be replicated across time and space, but I have always found them to have a physical reality when they exist.

A third orientation which is not religious naturalism is religious humanism. This is a controversial claim which should not be overdrawn. For instance, I find that there were writers earlier in this century who are often labeled humanists, albeit religious humanists, who could better be seen as religious naturalists. These include George Burman Foster of *The Place of Religion in Man's Struggle for Existence* and Edward Scribner Ames in his book *Religion*. It seems to me that they are close to Shailer Mathews who carefully distinguished himself from humanism. As Marvin Shaw points out, these are not merely verbal disputes, but involve basic attitudes and orientations.

However, observers from differing points on the theological spectrum have pointed out that from a distance religious naturalism and humanism take very similar positions on most religious issues when seen from the perspective of traditional monotheism. Further many religious naturalists identify themselves as religious humanists. Without wishing to insist on this label, I do want to point out that some of us find a significant difference of basic stance between some varieties of religious naturalism and that of many humanists, religious or otherwise. "The issue is that of openness to resources beyond and challenges beyond the humanly manageable." Religious naturalism, as I like to use the term, "has a greater sense that we are not masters of our fate, that we need to recognize the worth of, to nurture and be nurtured by this-worldly grace and judgment." However, George Santayana, a key writer who properly is called a religious naturalist if only for his influence, does not simply fit into the difference between humanism and religious naturalism as I wish to draw it. Thus, I shall

take as my differentiation of religious naturalism from religious humanism, an affirmation of the reality of some aspects of our experience which can be called sacred or divine and which are significantly different from the human although contained within the natural world. Thus Foster, Ames and others have a naturalistic conception of the divine which is nonhuman in significant respects. Granted that many writers do not make this same distinction, it shall be of value in this study.

I believe that this distinction between religious humanism, at least in its earlier period in the 1920's and 1930's, and religious naturalism is a useful distinction, focusing not so much on the nature of the world and certainly not on God or a divine ground as on an appropriate response to aspects of the world. Religious naturalism is, I believe, a richer response. Whether this is a helpful distinction and whether contemporary religious humanists find themselves in the religious naturalistic camp remains an open question.

II

Having sketched religious naturalism, in general, I would like now to outline my own variety. I have elaborated this in *The Minimalist Vision of Transcendence*. The following is a brief, slightly modified statement of this view.

The key word that I now use in articulating this approach is "sacred." I learned this word and how to use it by attending services as a child and early adolescent in a liberal Protestant church. We did not use this word often, but when we did it always carried a notion of respect. You held something sacred by treating it with respect. We referred to Sunday as a sacred day. Of course, we were explicitly taught that all days were holy, but that by observing one day a week as sacred it helped us realize that all days were holy. This non-dogmatic yet traditional upbringing is here noted, although its degree of importance calls for further reflection. Later through graduate study in both the Christian tradition and the major religions of the world I became familiar with the classical texts and theorists concerning the sacred.

Now I wish to select four events from my experience which I have learned to think of as sacred. I will briefly depict them. What I wish to emphasize is their overriding importance in my life.

I remember the day my father died. I was sitting in my apartment feeling rather sad when my daughter, at that time about eight years old, came home from school. When I told her what had happened, she said, "Oh, Dad" and put her arm around me. It was one of the most comforting and supportive moments of my life.

After Martin Luther King was murdered, some residents both Black and White, of the city of Evanston, Illinois organized marches to put pressure on the city

council to pass an open housing ordinance. At that time it was perfectly legal in that place to refuse to rent or sell a house to anyone, including Blacks and Jews, because of their race or ethnic origin. Now I was quite busy as a father, breadwinner and graduate student. Yet I felt that this was the right moment to pressure the city council. Also my wife and I felt that this was a way to educate our two children by direct participation in values that we held dear.

One summer evening walking in a park after dinner my wife and I heard a presence just over our heads and looked up just in time to see a kestrel catch a junco in midair and carry it in its bloody claws to eat on a nearby telephone pole. It gave us both a thrill at the excellence of the hunter and a vivid realization that this struggle so close to us was yet quite other than our concerns.

For close to forty-five years, as I write this, my life has been entwined with that of my wife. Through shared joys and struggles I have always felt that my life has been made real by her companionship. I have not deserved her, but I am very grateful for her. We both say that we have learned what "we" means.

These four events have been paradigms, that is, events which have clearly illuminated things for me. I have learned to think of them as sacred. Reflection on them has helped shape my philosophy of life. I have described these four events partly to illustrate my path. An early religious training provided a set of ideas which helped me reflect upon some very personal experiences, ideas which were transformed in the process of interaction with these events. Inherited language and lived experience have always been in transaction. I have described these four events also to call forth analogous events for the reader, events which will be quite different and yet perhaps may share some features with my experience.

Gradually I have developed a technical theory of sacredness. It goes something like this. The word "sacred" is a word we use to describe events, things, processes which are of overriding importance and yet are not under our control or within our power to manipulate. In this sense these four events and others are sacred. But there are further twists.

The stance for living which flows from this emphasis on the sacred is essentially that of openness, of readiness for the appearance of sacred events. Disciplined preparation and loyal commitment to the sacred are called for but need to be balanced by a recognition that the sacred is essentially unmanipulable. Thus Confucian focusing of heart and mind needs to be balanced by a Taoist openness to the spontaneous play of the sacred.

1) Given my commitment to a philosophy of naturalism, sacred events are not understood as manifestations of something deeper. Rather the overriding importance is the "depth" or "height." All of the world religions, as I understand them, speak of going beyond the surface understanding of life. My naturalistic outlook suggests to me that the deeper vision we seek to attain is not of another

realm or of invisible spirits, but rather a revised insight into importance of things. There is a "depth," not apart from, but right in the midst of things.

2) There are no clear boundaries around the sacred. Some events are clearly sacred. Others are perhaps boundary line cases. It is not always possible know whether some events or places are sacred. Perhaps this means that all things are sacred, although I am not sure that we are capable of sustaining such a sense.

3) The sacred is not a separate sphere of life. It is not to be found separate from the pursuits of truth, justice, beauty and selfhood. It is more like the caffeine in the coffee than like a cherry on top of a sundae.

4) Religion could be thought of as a self-conscious acknowledgment of the sacred. In that case there is no clear separation of the sacred and the secular, yet there is still a role for the deliberate recognition of the presence of sacred things. Religious communities and their traditions, what we sometimes disparagingly call "organized religions," are attempts to nurture and pass on the sense of the sacred. Each tradition has what Mordecai Kaplan calls its *sancta*, the times, persons, events which the tradition recognizes as sacred. That is what they are at their best. All of these communities are in danger of being at their worst, for in representing the sacred they are in continual danger of claiming to be sacred, to be of overriding importance themselves.

5) Spirituality can be thought of as the attempt to cultivate an awareness of the sacredness of things and an attempt to live out the revised sense of the importance of things which sacredness brings. Like organized religion, spirituality has its perversions, including self-importance, lukewarmness and lack of discipline. These may be corrected or worsened through organized religion.

6) It seems that almost always sacred things have a dual aspect. They both challenge and support the people that acknowledge their sacredness.

7) My own vision is that the sacred is probably plural in nature. As I sense it, sacred events and processes are just that--plural. I am among the most radically pluralistic of religious naturalists.

Over the years I have found a formula by Shailer Mathews helpful in thinking theoretically about the divine. His *The Growth of the Idea of God* gives one version of this: "For God is our conception, born of social experience, of the personally-evolving and personally responsive elements of our cosmic environment with which we are organically related." In my own *The Minimalist Vision of Transcendence* I have modified this formula to read: "the transcendent is the collection of situationally transcendent and continually challenging aspects of the world." This formula, besides replacing the term God with "the transcendent," and dropping the anthropocentric language focusing on

personhood, emphasizes the plural aspect of the formulation of Mathews and also brings out the dual aspect of the sacred as challenge and support. A short version of this which I now favor for its brevity is that sacred things are things of overriding importance.

Sacred things are plural but they have enough similarity that we can apply the same adjective, "sacred," to them. There are no trees which exist apart from the instantiation of "treeness" in a particular Mountain ash in my backyard or the sycamore I see from my kitchen. There is enough similarity between the ash and the sycamore and even the swamp cypresses near the Cache River that we may apply the abstract term "tree" to them. Thus all trees are analogous. Likewise there is enough analogy to all instances of the sacred that we may call them all, in English, "sacred." This, of course, indicates that the term "sacred" will have boundary-line examples, gradations, and all the vagaries, vagueness, ambiguity and historical contingency of human terms.

It may be that at times of devotion we may imaginatively unify the sacred, just as we may think about "trees" in general or "snow" or "water." But these general terms, useful as they are, are abstract and are never instantiated apart from the particularities and contingencies of very specific trees. Joyce Kilmer may have written that he "may never see a poem lovely as a tree," but it would be a very specific maple or pinyon pine that he would see when he saw a tree.

It is possible that there is an interconnectedness among sacred things that is not captured in my pluralistic language. It may be that there is a web or matrix nature to the sacred. I am agnostic about this possibility, although I feel sympathetic towards the notion as conveying more of the plurality of the sacred. Indeed the sacred may be a patchwork or mosaic.

This recognition of the possible plurality of the divine opens the door to a new appreciation of indigenous and neopagan polytheistic sensitivities. Although there are both monotheistic and Enlightenment sensibilities which would discourage this, I find that this opens up exciting new possibilities. It may turn out that religious naturalism has very old roots and is indeed quite conservative after all!

One obvious retort to all this talk of polytheism is that it is all very mythological, that it overlooks the drive of reason to unity and opens the door to conflict among the divine principles. This is a very large subject which I have touched on elsewhere. Suffice it to say that mythological language is not a problem for polytheism alone. It should be clear by this date that mythology is both a danger and an opportunity, as Santayana pointed out long ago. This pluralistic emphasis does overlook the drive of reason toward unity, but that is only one aspect of reason, and a respect for individuality and plurality is also a principle of rationality unless it is trapped in monotheistic or rationalistic overdrive. Finally, the notion that polytheism implies a struggle among the gods is just not born out by a

careful look at the religious mythologies of the world. There are stories of strife, but also of harmony. A jealous Jehovah or zealous Fundamentalist of whatever stripe can likewise give birth to militant struggle. Polytheism has no corner on internal strife and the strife in polytheism has been overblown. In fact a genuine polytheistic sensibility can undergird a helpful tolerance and embracing of diversity. The sense of the sacred can also undergird a sense of righteous indignation or resistance. But no religion, monotheistic, polytheistic or religious naturalistic can substitute for sensitive, informed and intelligent judgment in specific situations which may call for appreciative tolerance, indignation or resistance.

8) This version of religious naturalism, like all versions, must speak to issues of social justice, environmental care, and repudiation of idolatry. It can speak to them and it can speak as well or better than traditional theism. The sacred is found in the human and the non-human others and its overriding importance undermines all the idols which our minds create.

III

There are some questions which need to be answered by a religious naturalist. The differing answers have led to different varieties of religious naturalism. Among these questions are the following.

The first set of questions concern whether all or only part of the world can be considered divine. First, some places or events are especially evocative of a sense of the sacred. If we do not experience the sacred sometimes is that because that time and place is not sacred or because we are not attuned to it or because it has not manifested itself? Is there any aspect of the world that is profane? Second, if the divine refers to all of the world, it is usually power which 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 aspects of the world, it is morally unambiguous but limited in power. Involved in this issue is whether our moral sensibilities should be central to our response to the divine or a subordinate aspect. Should we worship the morally ambiguous? Should we worship anything less? Third, is the divine merely ideal or is it also creative and sustaining? Is it the source of human good? Is our fundamental stance based on our own efforts or may we have a receptivity to nature's grace? Is there a naturalistic analogue to forgiveness, justification or sanctification?

Fourth, is the divine best conceived as unitary or plural? Or is a web or matrix which combines unity and plurality better? Is the religious analogue to religious naturalism monotheism or polytheism? Or is this a false dichotomy, and an alternation between monistic and pluralistic understanding and response the better approach?

Fifth, which values or experiences can be designated as divine or sacred? Are certain values or experiences the only ones which are sacred or are they paradigmatic, functioning as windows onto a wide range of such values? Sixth, do human values and ideals need transformation? What is the basis for a prophetic critique of reigning ideologies?

Seventh, can religious naturalism be related to traditional religious communities? Can it exist within the more traditional faith communities? Does it create its own communities and traditions as with Reconstructionist Judaism, the Unitarian Universalists or the Fellowship of Religious Humanists? Or is it primarily a stance for the individual?

Eight, religious naturalism has grown up on monotheistic soil with both Jewish and non-Christian provenance. What is the relationship of religious naturalism to non-Western traditions? What is its relation to some traditions which sometimes seem akin to naturalism? Specifically, what is its relationship to indigenous traditions, to Buddhism, to Taoism, to neo-Confucianism, to neo-paganism?

Ninth, is "religious naturalism" itself an appropriate and useful label?

Conclusion

Nowhere in this paper do I give a defense of either religious naturalism in general or of my own version. I think there is a time for statement of a position without a defense and brevity suggests that this is such a time.

This document is very much a tentative memorandum. I invite any of my readers to give me comments, queries, and criticisms, constructive or otherwise.