

Introduction

Once almost extinct, religious naturalism is now making a return to the intellectual scene and is gaining renewed scholarly attention. Jerome A. Stone, in his book *Religious Naturalism Today—The Rebirth of a Forgotten Alternative*, explores this neglected option through an analysis that begins with the twentieth-century figure George Santayana and the British emergence theorist Samuel Alexander. Stone provides a comprehensive historical survey of religious naturalism, bringing out the similarities and differences between a variety of thinkers, and shows how this form of naturalism has become a viable religious option.

Religious naturalists seek to develop a middle path between scientific reductionism and supernaturalism, neither of which is seen as tenable. For a religious naturalist, nature provides the definitive foundation for a religious way of life. Nature is both metaphysically and religiously ultimate, meaning that there is nothing above and beyond the natural domain. In addition, several religious naturalists maintain that traditional religion, with its distinction between God and nature, is uniquely responsible for the current ecological crisis. The idea here is that traditional religions have failed to appreciate the intrinsic value of nature. Several religious naturalists therefore propose new images of God that are closely related to the workings of nature. Such new images, they argue, can inspire people to adopt more beneficial attitudes toward the natural world and its ecosystems.

My aim is to critically evaluate religious naturalism as a position in the dialogue between science and religion, and to see what possibilities there are for developing and moving this perspective forward.

The Religious Naturalists to Be Discussed

The religious naturalists discussed and critically evaluated in this book construe both naturalism and religion in a number of different ways. In

this discussion we find expressions of what is commonly referred to as hard naturalism and soft naturalism.¹ Some opt for a more restrictive (harder) form of naturalism, suggesting that science is the primary, if not the only, source of knowledge. Science therefore sets the boundaries for what can exist. On this more restrictive side of the spectrum are Willem B. Drees and Charley D. Hardwick, whom I will analyze. Both define naturalism in more materialist and physicalist terms, and both see naturalism as an approach continuous with, and intimately linked to, the empirical sciences. Hence, they both understand naturalism to be an approach that takes the methodologies and discoveries of science very seriously.

On the soft side of the spectrum we find those naturalists who maintain that reality is layered, and that consciousness, values, and meaning are fully natural yet irreducible features of reality. There is nothing supernatural about such phenomena, but they transcend the boundaries of empirical inquiry. This form of naturalism is found in the writings of Donald Crosby, Ursula Goodenough, Stuart Kauffman, Gordon Kaufman, Karl Peters, and Loyal Rue. These thinkers will also be analyzed. Despite some significant differences, it should be noted that hard and soft naturalists both agree that we live in a fully natural world, devoid of supernatural and extranatural beings. Indeed, as Crosby puts it, “The antithesis of religious naturalism is any kind of supernaturalism.”²

Different forms of naturalism bring with them and enable a diversity of ways to religiously and spiritually engage with nature. There are those who take nature itself to be religiously significant, and those who do not. Hardwick, on his physicalist view, thinks that there is nothing in nature that is religiously significant or that calls for religious attitudes of awe and wonder. Yet he maintains that humans can experience “events of grace,” unexpected events that offer the possibility of self-transformation so as to become existentially open to the future. Drees, whose position lies somewhere between religious naturalism and religious agnosticism, places the religious significance on the limit-questions pertaining to the ultimate issues of human existence. Examples of such questions are “Why do we exist?” and “Why is there something rather than nothing?” For Drees, limit-questions create space for a religious interpretation of reality.

Those who subscribe to a soft version of naturalism maintain, contrary to Hardwick, that nature, either as a whole or certain aspects of it, can provide a sound religious foundation for naturalism. Crosby, who prefers to call his perspective “Religion of Nature” or simply “Naturism,” maintains that nature as a whole is to be regarded as humanity’s religious object,

worthy of the awe and reverence traditionally directed toward God. Others, such as Peters, Kaufman, and Kauffman, instead take particular aspects of nature to be religiously significant. God, on these views, is identified with the biological processes of nature, which give rise to unexpected and novel phenomena. The emergent process, which is celebrated as God, involves both goods and evils, life and death. In this way, God is constructively imagined as the creativity in the universe. Given the unexpectedness and intrinsic unpredictability of this creative process, it is said to invite a sense of mystery and awe for the hidden dimensions of nature.

We can see here that different forms of naturalism generate different views regarding the religious significance and potentiality of nature. It will also be seen that some religious naturalists employ God-talk, while others refrain from it. Those who focus on the concept of “creativity” often associate this with God, and hence rely on traditional religious language. Others, like Drees, Crosby, and Rue, do not employ God-language in their naturalistic interpretations of religion. Crosby instead talks about Nature with a capital “N” as the ultimate religious object. Likewise, Rue, who focuses on the “Epic of Evolution,” constructs a form of religious naturalism that seeks to establish harmony between humanity and Nature.

Religious naturalists who focus their religious attention on nature tend also to express ecotheological views. Thinkers such as Peters, Kaufman, Kauffman, and Rue suggest that traditional and dualistic conceptions of God have facilitated an underappreciation of the natural world. However, rather than rejecting religion, they seek to engage with religious discourse constructively and to formulate new images of God, the Sacred, and the Divine consistent with naturalism. The hope is to motivate religious believers to act in an ecologically responsible manner. Ecological awareness is not a determinative issue for *all* religious naturalists. But, for a significant number, it seems to form a central pillar in their proposal and is therefore given extra consideration in this book.

Current Research on Religious Naturalism

Through an overview of some of the significant research contributions on this emerging perspective, we can gain a better understanding of what the term “religious naturalism” connotes. It is important to point out from the start that religious naturalism is a pluralistic perspective and it cannot be reduced to one standpoint, or a single principle or belief. Indeed, to more

fully understand this perspective, it is better to view it in terms of *family resemblance*. As Willem Drees writes, “Religious naturalism is an umbrella term which covers a variety of dialects, of which some are revisionary articulations of existing traditions whereas others may be more purely naturalistic religions indebted almost exclusively to the sciences. There is family resemblance, with affinities and disagreements, not unity.”³ This family resemblance and plurality is clearly reflected in the research that has been done so far on this religious option. I have already mentioned Jerome Stone’s extensive contribution to this research area. In his seminal book *Religious Naturalism Today*, as well as in several of his articles, Stone has brought out the distinctiveness of this naturalistic religiosity. Religious naturalism “is the attitude and belief that there are religious aspects of the world which can be conceived within a naturalistic framework.”⁴ This perspective, by virtue of being naturalistic and religious, entails a negative and a positive side. Negatively and naturalistically, it excludes the idea of an “ontologically distinct and superior realm.”⁵ Positively, this perspective maintains that our religious focus should be “on the events and processes of this world to provide what degree of explanation and meaning are possible to this life.”⁶ This definition offered by Stone captures well two central belief-components for religious naturalists.

Another helpful overview comes from Michael Cavanaugh and his article “What Is Religious Naturalism? A Preliminary Report of an Ongoing Conversation.” Cavanaugh defines religious naturalism as “a belief in the natural order as understood by ongoing *scientific investigation*, supported by a strong and positive feeling about the wonder and efficacy of that natural order.”⁷ Cavanaugh adds an important dimension to this definition, namely the strong reliance on *science* in order to understand the structures and workings of nature. This is, I believe, a defining feature of contemporary religious naturalism. Science functions in two ways within this naturalistic framework: as a critique of traditional expressions of religion (supernaturalism, in particular), and as a way to offer a description of reality that can elicit responses of awe and wonder. The “epic of evolution” serves as a religious metanarrative for many spiritually inclined naturalists. Science for these naturalists is not merely a fact-producing enterprise; it can also shed light on (while not being able to offer conclusive answers to) the ultimate questions regarding purpose, values, and human existence.

In the article “Religious Naturalism and Science,” Willem Drees has carefully outlined several ways of positively construing the relationship between religion and naturalism. Drees suggests that speaking of “*religious* naturalism may thus be justified if the attitudes and responses are sufficiently

religious.”⁸ Drees introduces a variety of thinkers that he suggests represent contemporary religious naturalism. He mentions Gordon Kaufman’s Christian interpretation of naturalism, and Charley Hardwick’s Christian physicalism, but also those naturalists that seek to develop a religious alternative independent of existing traditions, such as Loyal Rue, Ursula Goodenough, Jerome Stone, and Donald Crosby.⁹ Drees recognizes the diversity within religious naturalism but concludes that the common core of this emerging movement is its ambition to maintain a religious attitude that is consistent with science, naturalistically conceived.

Donald Crosby has provided a survey of religious naturalists in his article “Religious Naturalism,” which appears in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion*. Similar to both Stone and Cavanaugh, Crosby defines religious naturalism as the antithesis of supernaturalism and ontological theism. Crosby, similar to Cavanaugh and Drees, stresses the importance of the natural sciences for this worldview: “Religious naturalists take seriously the *methods and findings of the natural sciences*. They seek to develop religious outlooks consistent with these methods and findings, and to avoid the sorts of conflict between science and religion that have plagued religious traditions of the West in the past. They are also religiously inspired by the discoveries of science and especially by scientific descriptions of cosmic, terrestrial, and biological evolution.”¹⁰ As we will also see, several thinkers that I discuss emphasize the ethical potential and relevance of religious naturalism for the current ecological crisis. In *The Promise of Religious Naturalism*, Michael S. Hogue situates this religious approach within a posttraditional setting. Hogue, through his appreciative criticism, maintains that the primary aim of contemporary religious naturalism (focusing on Jerome Stone, Loyal Rue, Donald Crosby, and Ursula Goodenough) is to develop a morally and religiously significant response to the perils of the ecological situation.¹¹ This ecological crisis, Hogue argues, is “morally degrading and spiritually and religiously deadening.”¹² It is indeed a problem not just for humanity but for the “whole future of life.”¹³ Hogue further claims that the well-being of nature should be understood as a *religious* concern, as the crisis of ecology is functionally equivalent to a spiritual crisis. Thus with regard to contemporary religious naturalism Hogue concludes that the ecological emphasis is intrinsically intertwined with the religious goal.

The motivation to develop an adequate religious response to the environmental situation is of primary concern for several religious naturalists, but it should be pointed out that this is not a major concern for all naturalists discussed herein. For Charley Hardwick and Willem Drees, the ecological

crisis is not a determinative factor in their naturalistic reinterpretations of religious discourse. However, for Karl Peters, Gordon Kaufman, Stuart Kauffman, Ursula Goodenough, and Loyal Rue, the primary aim of religious naturalism is to develop new images of God and the Sacred that can motivate people to act in an ecologically sensitive manner. I will therefore assess those forms of religious naturalism that take into account the ecological crisis, such that religious images are considered on the basis of their ecological adequacy. I will also critically discuss those forms of religious naturalism that take, for example, the harmony between religion and science to be of primary concern.

As stated above, “religious naturalism” is an umbrella term that covers a wide range of perspectives and beliefs. Indeed, not all thinkers to be discussed herein are comfortable with the label of “religious naturalism.” Stone has discussed this issue. He notes that Hardwick, Goodenough, and Crosby have identified their views as forms or expressions of religious naturalism.¹⁴ Hardwick refers to his view as “naturalistic theism.”¹⁵ However, he also describes his perspective as a form of religious naturalism, but one that “is constrained by physicalism.”¹⁶ Goodenough freely employs the concept of “religious naturalism” to describe her approach to religion, and the idea that science “can call forth appealing and abiding religious responses.”¹⁷ Crosby prefers to label his approach “religion of nature,” yet he acknowledges his view to be “one of at least four general categories of religious naturalism.”¹⁸

Karl Peters does not use the term “religious naturalism” to describe his perspective. Seeking to reform Christian faith through a naturalistic framework, Peters chooses to call his perspective “Christian naturalism” and “naturalistic theism.”¹⁹ This, I suggest, should not be understood as a rejection of religious naturalism. Instead, he embraces the term “Christian naturalism” because he approaches naturalism from a specific tradition. Yet, given that Peters seeks to modify religion according to a naturalistic framework, and given his strong belief in science’s ability to uncover the sacredness of nature, it seems appropriate to conclude that his perspective belongs to the general category of religious naturalism.²⁰ The same thing should be said about Gordon Kaufman, who labels his view “biohistorical naturalism.” This term is powerful for Kaufman as it helps to stress our embeddedness in evolutionary history and the becoming of the universe.²¹ Nevertheless, like other religious naturalists, Kaufman stresses the need for religion to change in light of the advancements in science, and the ability of science to point us toward the religious dimensions of nature.

Drees explicitly affirms a naturalistic understanding of reality, but he is rather hesitant when it comes to adopting the term “religious naturalism” for his view. He writes, “Am I a religious naturalist? Others have used that label for me. I am not sure that I like the label, as it seems to constrain, whereas I want to explore. . . . Even if I am not sure whether I am a religious naturalist, I am most interested in understanding what religious naturalism might mean, may become, and will offer.”²² As mentioned earlier, Drees’s perspective can be located somewhere between religious naturalism and religious agnosticism. I maintain, though, that Drees, in the way that he seeks to naturalistically reconceive religion, can be considered a religious naturalist.

Stuart Kauffman is an interesting case in this debate, as he employs neither the term “religious naturalism” nor the general term “naturalism.” Kauffman’s stance on ontology is overall less clear.²³ However, he denies the existence of a creator God, and claims that whatever exists must be compatible with the laws of physics.²⁴ He furthermore affirms strong emergence, which suggests that whatever has emerged in nature has its origin in something physical.²⁵ In this way, Kauffman seems to affirm a form of naturalism. Moreover, as he seeks to naturalize God and reinvent God as the Sacred creativity in the universe, I think it is fair to consider him a religious naturalist.

Metaphysical Grounding Problems

We will throughout this book discuss several metaphysical problems that challenge the plausibility of a religiously naturalistic outlook on reality. Broadly speaking, metaphysics is in the business of bringing into light and analyzing the variety of ontological assumptions that we employ, consciously or unconsciously, in philosophy, theology, the natural sciences, and everyday life.²⁶ Metaphysics is a way of finding out if a way of talking is compatible with the available ontological resources of a metaphysical system. For example, we might want to investigate if a certain form of moral language is compatible with a particular ontology. Is it coherent for a naturalist to employ notions such as “right” and “wrong” given her ontology? Is it possible for a naturalist, who maintains that all of reality is natural, to hold moral and ethical properties to be real? Is it possible for a Christian to employ agential language regarding human creatures if God is omniscient? That is, does a theistic framework rule out free will for human creatures and therefore agential language?

I suggest that a conflict between a set of beliefs and a metaphysical framework can be referred to as a *metaphysical grounding problem*. That is, it is not possible to ground one's beliefs or vocabulary within the relevant ontological framework. I will explore and analyze some of the potential metaphysical grounding problems facing religious naturalism. In chapter 2, I outline two versions of naturalism, referred to as monistic and pluralistic naturalism. In outlining the different ontological, epistemological, and semantic commitments, I seek to show and analyze potential grounding problems for religious naturalists. I will put both monistic and pluralistic naturalism to the test and evaluate how successful they are when it comes to grounding higher-level language within their framework.

Chapter Overview

I will provide a critical evaluation of religious naturalism as a position in the dialogue between science and religion. While this book provides an overview of the most important issues and central arguments within religious naturalism, it should be stated from the start that I will not be able to discuss each one of these issues or arguments in full detail.

Chapter 1 sets the stage for the book by describing how religious naturalists view the authority of science and the ways in which they construe naturalism as compatible with a religious appreciation of nature. This chapter also explores the relationship between religious naturalism and traditional religion, and outlines a constructive proposal for how to understand the function of religious language within this emerging perspective.

As the term "naturalism" is ambiguous, and used in multiple ways by religious naturalists, chapters 2 and 3 probe more deeply into this concept. It will be seen that some religious naturalists lean toward a softer version of naturalism, while others venture into more reductive outlooks. These positions are described under the headings of pluralistic and monistic naturalism. It is argued that both encounter significant metaphysical grounding problems, which consequently puts religious naturalism on a shaky foundation.

How should we understand the religious component of religious naturalism? Chapter 4 seeks to respond to this question by outlining both realistic and antirealistic approaches to religious discourse and the nature of religion. As will be seen, a pragmatic version of religious realism seems to be the dominant position among proponents of religious naturalism. Chapter

5 goes on to critically evaluate the three approaches to religious discourse and identifies significant problems in each of them.

In light of the problems of both monistic naturalism and pluralistic naturalism, this book evaluates alternative ontological frameworks for moving religious naturalism forward. The first alternative ontology is discussed in chapter 6, and centers on alternative ways of understanding philosophical naturalism. Both liberal naturalism and agnostic naturalism are critiqued, because it remains unclear from these perspectives why we should prefer naturalism to other ontological frameworks. Pragmatic naturalism is also deemed unsuccessful not only as it fails to appreciate the seriousness of some philosophical problems, but also because of the way that it undermines the authority of science and naturalism as such. I therefore conclude that none of these alternative naturalisms can help religious naturalism in moving forward.

While some propose new formulations of naturalism to ease the seeming tension between science and religion, others focus more directly on finding new conceptions of God consistent with the findings of science. Chapter 7 evaluates one such attempt, namely panentheism. The conclusion of this chapter is that panentheism, defined in conjunction with either emergence theory or against the background of process philosophy, implies dualism. The panentheistic alternative seems unsuccessful, and thus proponents of religious naturalism should look elsewhere. Fiona Ellis's attempt to combine Christian theism with naturalism is also evaluated. This approach, in a similar way to panentheism, seems unable to explicate God's action within nature.

Having looked at various alternative naturalistic ontologies and panentheistic frameworks, this book offers panpsychism as the final and most promising framework for religious naturalism. Chapter 8 explores the metaphysical, religious, and ecological benefits of panpsychism, and suggests that it should be seriously considered by proponents of religious naturalism. In this chapter I further argue that emergence theory and panpsychism are not mutually exclusive but reciprocally enriching. I also show how some religious naturalists already seem to be expressing panpsychist ideas. Chapter 9 concludes this book by further exploring the promises of panpsychism for the science-religion dialogue.