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Religious Naturalisms

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on recent developments in religious naturalism in the twenty-first century, building on Jerome Stone's 2008 study of its resurgence in the mid-twentieth century. I introduce religious naturalism as a synthesis of naturalistic ideas that often depart from traditional forms of religious thinking, defining it as a capacious, ecological religious worldview grounded in the observational conviction that nature is ultimate. I also describe different models of religious naturalism, focusing on the key ideas found in the influential publications of contemporary religious naturalists (e.g., Ursula Goodenough, Donald Crosby, Loyal Rue, among others). While acknowledging specific points of emphasis, I also feature shared perspectives among these thinkers, including the rejection of traditional supernaturalism, a challenge to the ontological and epistemic exceptionalisms that have set humans over and against other forms of animal life, as well as against the ecological systems upon which they depend. These insights show religious naturalists reflecting meaningfully on the emergence of matter (and especially life) from the Big Bang forward, and promoting an understanding of myriad nature as complex processes of becoming, including human beings. As a collective, these influential writings show the interdisciplinary nature of religious naturalism, specifically illuminating its unique focus in integrating scientific knowledge with religious meaning and valuing. A final section features a younger generation of religious naturalists who focus on the social, ethical, and political implications of religious naturalism in applying its tenets to such topics as racism, eco-injustice, and democratic valuing in the Anthropocene era.

FULL ARTICLE

Introduction

As described by Jerome Stone in Religious Naturalism Today: The Rebirth of a Forgotten Alternative, religious naturalism explores "religious ways of responding to the world on a completely naturalistic basis without a supreme being or ground of being" (2008: xi). In this text, Stone traces the origins of religious naturalism back to Spinoza, a Dutch Jewish philosopher of the seventeenth century, and provides a survey of some key historical figures and models of religious naturalism (both philosophical and theological) in describing its resurgence as an important form of thought in the early twentieth century. According to Stone, religious naturalism's historical development includes the ideas and publications of such prominent philosophers and humanists as George Santayana, John Dewey, and Roy Wood Sellars, influential philosophers of religion and theologians associated with the Chicago School (e.g., Henry Nelson Wieman, Bernard Meland, and Bernard Loomer), and eminent Jewish thinkers such as Mordecai Kaplan and Jack Cohen.

In this article, I focus on recent developments in religious naturalism that have occurred within the past twenty years, introducing religious naturalism as a synthesis of naturalistic ideas that often depart from traditional forms of religious thinking. Accordingly, the diverse perspectives associated with religious naturalism today constitute the very best of interdisciplinary studies, including insights from traditional fields of inquiry (philosophy, theology, history, metaphysics, physics, biology, history) as well as newer ones emerging from ecology, animal studies, and literary/cultural criticism. In The Routledge Handbook of Religious Naturalism, Donald Crosby and Jerome Stone articulate an important theme I share in describing the work of many contemporary religious naturalists: "thinking deeply about nature and our place as human beings in nature is an urgent and salutary activity for each of us and for the institutions of our societies, no matter what our personal religious or secular outlooks may be in this time of rampant species endangerment, global climate change, and looming ecological crisis" (Crosby and Stone 2018: 2). Building on this notion, I define religious naturalism as a capacious, ecological religious worldview grounded in the observational conviction that nature is ultimate. As suggested by Donald Crosby, religious naturalism is associated with a materialist metaphysics, or a view of reality that regards all existence as diverse forms and functions of matter:

> It is meant to take into account all that we have learned (and much we still have to learn) in physics about the nature and capabilities of matter since Newton's time, but it does not restrict its conception of matter to what can be described or explained by the discipline of physics. Rather than being reductionistic in this sense, it is emergentist or expansionist in its character. Approaches to a proper understanding of matter require the resources of all fields of thought, from physics, to chemistry, to biology, to psychology, to sociology, to philosophy, to art, to religion, and to the experiences of everyday life.
>
> --(Crosby 2018: 118)

Figure 1. Nature as ultimate. Photograph courtesy of Oonan/Getty Images.

In this context, religious naturalism can be viewed as a religious worldview that is scientifically credible and emotionally satisfying. As such, it is not common naturalism (or cold, heartless reductionism) as that has been expressed by Richard Dawkins and Peter Atkins, who assume reality to be self-explanatory, and no further explanation is needed. For religious naturalists, the universe is not reducible to the categories of analysis used to explain it. At the same time, religious naturalism is not another form of natural religion, or a form of apologetics using scientific and natural investigations to support religious claims or doctrines in traditional theology. Rather, there is a primary focus on the materiality of existence, inclusive of human nature and human culture, which challenges some widely held paradigms about the nature of "nature."

The qualifier "religious" in religious naturalism affirms the natural world as the center of humans' most significant experiences and understandings. In other words, religious naturalism does not posit any ontologically distinct and superior realm (God, soul, heaven) to ground, explain, or give meaning to this world. Rather, attention is focused on the events and processes of this world to provide what degree of explanation and meaning are possible to this life. This point is underscored by Michael Hogue's inclusion of religious naturalism in an American tradition of immanental thinking that compels us to "think against the grain of the ontological and epistemic exceptionalisms that have set humans over and against other forms of animal life and human culture, society, and economy over and against the ecological systems upon which they depend" (2018: 78). These insights compel religious naturalists to reflect meaningfully on the emergence of matter (and especially life) from the Big Bang forward, promoting an understanding of myriad nature as complex processes of becoming.

Various Models of Religious Naturalism

Contemporary models of religious naturalism are best associated with the ideas and publications of American scholars Ursula Goodenough, Donald Crosby, Loyal Rue, Jerome Stone, and Chet Raymo, among others. While this list is not exhaustive, these figures have been at the forefront of religious naturalism's popularity in the twenty-first century. These thinkers are primarily trained in fields as diverse as biology, philosophy of religion, and physics, and their respective works feature specialized forms of knowledge and points of emphasis. As a collective, however, their influential writings show the interdisciplinary nature of religious naturalism, specifically illuminating its unique focus in integrating scientific knowledge with religious meaning and valuing.

Religious naturalism and the epic of evolution (Ursula Goodenough)

One exemplary model of religious naturalism is Goodenough's approach in The Sacred Depths of Nature (2000). In this study, Goodenough provides an elegant interface of biological theories with perennial, human questions constituting the very best of religious valuing and appreciation. Whether addressing such topics such as evolution, emotions, sexuality, and death, Goodenough's aim is to present an "accessible account of our scientific understanding of Nature and then suggest ways that this account can call forth appealing and abiding

religious responses" (Goodenough 2000: xvii). Goodenough begins each chapter with a scientific description of a phenomenon critical to life, such as how DNA codes for proteins or how natural selection works, followed by a brief section ("Reflections") in which she shares the thoughts and feelings such scientific knowledge stirs in her. For example, after offering a technical scientific account of the life that emerges from the underlying chemistry of biomolecular structures, Goodenough writes:

> Life can be explained by its underlying chemistry, just as chemistry can be explained by its underlying physics. But that life emerges from the underlying chemistry of biomolecules is something more than the collection of molecules. As we will see, once these molecules came to reside inside cells, they began to interact with one another to generate new processes, like motility and metabolism and perception, processes that are unique to living creatures, processes that have no counterpart at simpler levels. These new, life-specific functions are referred to as emergent functions. The origin of life is but the first of many emergent functions we will encounter […]. Emergence. Something more from nothing but. Life from nonlife, like water from wine, has long been considered a miracle wrought by gods or God. Now it is seen to be the near-inevitable consequence of our thermal and chemical circumstances.
>
> --(Goodenough 2000: 28–9)

Goodenough makes accessible to the general reader an account of science that is far from dry and boring. Rather, she invites nonscientists to share in an aesthetic appreciation of life described by science. Reading Goodenough's text brings one to a fuller awareness that life is no less meaningful because of our increasingly scientific understandings of it.

Goodenough associates religious concerns with fundamental existential questions about human existence, and how we find meaning and value within this sphere of existence. In doing so, Goodenough conceptualizes religion as addressing two basic human concerns: how things are (cosmology) and which things matter (values discourse, morality, ethos) (Goodenough 2000: xiv). (This is a point that Goodenough borrows from Loyal Rue, another major religious naturalist.) Consequently, her religious naturalism is inspired by the scientific account of cosmic evolution, a story that has important things to say about the universe, where humans came from, and our place in the larger scheme of things. According to Goodenough, this particular story is brand new in the timescale of human life on Earth. However, it is a story that

> tells us of the sacredness of life, of the astonishing complexity of cells and organisms, of the vast lengths of time it took to generate their splendid diversity, of the enormous improbability that any of it happened at all […]. We are called to revere the whole enterprise of planetary existence, the whole and all of its myriad parts as they catalyze and secrete and replicate and mutate and evolve.
>
> --(Goodenough 2000: 170)

For Goodenough, an individual's experience qualifies as "religious" if it entails emotions such as awe, wonder, gratitude, or joy, regardless of whether or not one associates these emotions with traditional religious creeds, deities, or supernatural phenomena. Central here is Goodenough's conviction that whether or not people can agree on the existence of a personal god, science and religion both elicit a similar sense of awe, mystery, and wonder. Goodenough's religious naturalism is thus rooted in her detailed understanding of phenomena such as

atoms and stars, the complex workings of a cell, and the astonishing evolutionary emergence of human self-awareness or the human capacity to inquire into its own nature. Such understanding underscores her religious naturalism as a scientifically based reverence for every aspect of the natural world, including ourselves.

While acknowledging that the beauty of Nature elicits religious emotions in many of us, Goodenough also notes that the science underlying evolution and cell biology may often appear distant, coldly deterministic, and far from inspirational to others. After addressing the science of Big Bang cosmology, Goodenough shares in one reflection of her own encounter with nihilistic despair as an adolescent as she pondered the night sky. She thought about how each star is dying and the fact that "our Sun too will die, frying the Earth to a crisp during its heat-death, spewing its bits and pieces out into the frigid nothingness of curved spacetime" (Goodenough 2000: 10). Such thoughts overwhelmed her, as she recalled a bleak emptiness overtaking her whenever she thought about what was really going on out in the cosmos or deep in the atom. How Goodenough came to terms with such feelings reveals an illuminative dimension of her religious naturalism. Her narrative describes a shift in her epistemic positioning in which she displays epistemological humility—a common position among religious naturalists. Generally speaking, epistemological humility is evident when thinkers acknowledge that our theoretical knowledge is always limited, and they are careful not to overstep the boundaries of the limits of knowledge at any given moment. It is being humble about what we think we can know, and yet letting such limitations drive our intellectual curiosities. Epistemological humility often includes the capacity to tolerate complexity and welcome contradictions in all of one's explorations of the world around one. Goodenough exemplifies a form of epistemological humility in the passage below:

> But, since then, I have found a way to defeat the nihilism that lurks in the infinite and the infinitesimal. I have come to understand that I can deflect the apparent pointlessness of it all by realizing that I don't have to seek a point. In any of it. Instead, I can see it as the locus of Mystery […]. Mystery. Inherently pointless, inherently shrouded in its own absence of category. […] Mystery generates wonder, and wonder generates awe. The gasp can terrify or the gasp can emancipate.
>
> --(Goodenough 2000: 11, 13)

Figure 2. Sense of mystery, wonder, and awe. Photograph courtesy of Vikrant Agarwal/EyeEm/Getty Images.

As suggested in this passage, Goodenough's covenant with mystery helps her to revel in, rather than retreat from, the paradoxes she encounters everywhere as both a scientist and a finite human being. In the last analysis, Goodenough's religious naturalism posit humans as narrative beings who need stories to help us orient our lives and in the cosmos; for her, the epic of evolution is such a story that informs humans of our "nature, our place, our context" (Goodenough 2000: 174). With this theoretical orientation, Goodenough also seeks to outline the foundations for a planetary ethic based on honoring the continuance of life.

Religious naturalism and human flourishing (Loyal Rue)

Goodenough's basic view of religion in The Sacred Depths aligns well with Loyal Rue's approach in his influential work on religious naturalism: Religion Is Not About God: How Spiritual Traditions Nurture Our Biological Nature and What to Expect When They Fail (2005). In this text, Rue considers how to understand religion in light of current scientific studies, and asks what is required if religion is to play its role in meeting the urgent global challenges that face us today. For Rue, religion

> is about manipulating our brains so that we might think, feel, and act in ways that are good for us, both individually and collectively. Religious traditions work like the bow of a violin, playing upon the strings of human nature to produce harmonious relations between individuals and their social and physical environments. Religions have always been about this business of adaptation, and they will always remain so. This is not to say, however, that any particular religious tradition will remain adaptive. Religions sometimes outlive their adaptive utility and occasionally, therewith, become positive threats to human survival.
>
> --(Rue 2005: 1)

Rue agrees with strict naturalism that one order of reality exists, and while acknowledging different approaches to this claim, he describes his own as consilient scientific materialism (Rue 2005: 14, 16). For him, consilient science is a coherent, unified meshwork of ideas that renders intelligible the full scope of human experience. Rue builds his argument by first assembling a theory of human nature, using insights from a variety of disciplines, including scientific fields (specifically, evolutionary psychology, anthropology, brain studies, and evolutionary biology) to help describe the structural adaptive mechanisms in humans as a species, which he associates with the origins and use of religion in human lives. In this framework

> human beings are star-born, earth-formed creatures endowed by evolutionary processes to seek reproductive fitness under the guidance of biological, psychological, and cultural systems that have been selected for their utility in mediating adaptive behaviors. Humans maximize their chances for reproductive fitness by managing the complexity of these systems in ways that are conducive to the simultaneous achievement of personal wholeness and social coherence.
>
> --(Rue 2005: 77; emphasis in the original)

Rue then surveys the major religious traditions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism—to show how each, in its own way, has guided human behavior to advance the twin goals of personal fulfillment and social coherence. Rue's study is not hostile to either the idea of God or to the religious life in general, as he acknowledges that both can coexist with the idea of religion as a natural phenomenon. In arguing that humans invent religion, and that religious traditions try to manage human nature in ways of achieving fundamental human purposes, Rue underscores his religious functionalism.

At the end of his study, Rue considers the prospects for religious traditions in light of contemporary challenges. As the historically structured religions are increasingly faced with a dual crisis of intellectual plausibility and moral relevance, they are being rendered less capable of shaping behavior in ways that are usefully adaptive. Rue warns that when religions outlive their adaptive utility, they become positive threats to human survival. He concludes his study with a capacious rendering of the value religious naturalism holds in the contemporary world:

> Religious naturalists will be known for their reverence and awe before Nature, their love for Nature and natural forms, their sympathy for all living things, their guilt for enlarging the ecological footprints, their pride in reducing them, their sense of gratitude directed towards the matrix of life, their contempt for those who abstract themselves from natural values, and their solidarity with those who link their self-esteem to sustainable living.
>
> --(Rue 2005: 367)

Figure 3. Religious naturalists and sustainable living. Photograph courtesy of Getty Images.

This final section is comparable to Goodenough's aspiration for a planetary ethics, in that both Rue and Goodenough are concerned about the inviolable sacrality of myriad nature, inclusive of human life itself.

Religious naturalism and the problem of evil (Donald Crosby)

Donald Crosby's wholesale commitment to honoring nature in its variegated splendor and facticity demonstrates another innovative approach to religious naturalism. Crosby has written several significant volumes devoted to his religion of nature (2002, 2008, 2013) in which humans are an essential part of the natural world, but not in control of it. Crosby asserts:

> In the perspective of religious naturalism, human beings are integral parts of nature, one particular species of life amid the vast numbers of such species and their members that presently dwell or have previously dwelt on this planet. Humans are linked with other creatures in an evolutionary history based on a common DNA template, and they are bound together with them in intimate, crucial relations of ecological dependency.
>
> --(Crosby 2013: 2)

As is also true for Goodenough and Rue, Crosby's religious naturalism asserts that humans' inescapable entanglement with other natural processes has profoundly religious and moral significance for how we act and what we choose to do from one minute to the next.

For our purposes, Crosby's model of religious naturalism's is particularly helpful in demonstrating the applicability of religious naturalism to a provocative religious issue: the problem of evil. In Living with Ambiguity: Religious Naturalism and the Menace of Evil, Crosby explores how a naturalistic vision can enable us to interpret, respond to, and cope with the diverse forms of evil in the world (Crosby 2008). Evil is a "religious" term used to describe those aspects of nature that are experienced as destructive, or perceived negatively, from the vantage point of nature's sentient creatures. Crosby opens his study with a naturalistic account of life that most of us would recognize as familiar:

> I'm sitting on my back porch enjoying the wonders and beauties of nature. Birds are singing in the trees, squirrels are scampering about, the camellias are in bloom, the sky is a brilliant blue, and the grass is moist and glistening after a recent rain. All seems peaceful and at rest. But in the pond below my backyard a blue heron has just caught a frog in its menacingly sharp beak, and somewhere nearby a red-tailed hawk is eagerly tearing and consuming the flesh of a small bird it has captured and killed. The faint wail of sirens can be heard in the distance. Is there a fire? Has there been an automobile accident? Has someone just suffered a stroke or been shot? Are fire trucks, ambulances, and/or police cruisers speeding to the rescue or, in the case of the police cars, to apprehend a criminal?
>
> --(Crosby 2008: ix)

This scene captures what Crosby describes as the necessity of living with ambiguity, or embracing life in which both good and bad things occur without the need for any overarching metaphysical explanations. Of course, some things occur due to choices humans make (moral evils), while others occur in the natural unfolding of life itself (natural evils). What is crucial here for Crosby is a view of nature as a

"progressive, ever-changing, ever-evolving system and series of such events, whether viewed within the span of any particular period of time or over epochs of infinitely unfolding cosmic time. Nature thus understood is an inexorable blend of permanence and change, continuity and novelty, creation and destruction, order and disorder, oneness and manyness" (Crosby 2008: 23). With this in mind, Crosby argues that an ambiguity of goods and evils in human life, in nature as a whole, and in any conceivable or desirable realm of existence, is inevitable. He further asserts that we should not minimize the terrible things that happen both in nature and human history. Nor are we to overlook the good things. Both happen. Moreover, we should not think it will turn out best in the end. In fact, there is no end.

According to Crosby's religious naturalism, it is futile for people to seek recourse in powers, presences, states, or realms thought to wholly transcend the combination of goods and evils, or to wish life to be entirely devoid of evil. Rather, he brings the reader face to face with a central problem of religious faith: how to live a constructive, meaningful life in the face of intractable ambiguities. His religion of nature confronts this problem and offers a comprehensive, sustainable, and fully adequate way of conceiving and living a religious life. Crosby's response is that we need not despair. We can live a relatively fruitful life with something less than absolutes. We can enjoy the sunsets and the oceans. We know we are not going to last long, but that is all right. The world itself is messy, replete with physical and moral evils. Crosby thus argues adamantly against the superimposition of supernaturalism to address the messiness and ambiguities of life. He writes:

> Religious naturalism removes the supposed thumbtack from the ceiling. It makes no reference to a supernatural realm or to a God, gods, goddesses, or spirits thought to exist in such a realm. It sees no need for a supernatural ground or support for the world. For it, the world exists through its own immanent principles, resource, and powers. Without God, it does not collapse intro ruin.
>
> --(Crosby 2008: 3)

Crosby further argues that nature itself, without notions of God, gods, animating spirits, or supernatural beings or realms of any kind, is both metaphysically and religiously ultimate, and thus an appropriate and compelling focus of religious commitment and concern. For example, Crosby notes: "We need look no further than nature itself to find in the splendor, dynamism, and rejuvenating powers of the natural world—and within ourselves as remarkable creatures of nature—reliable sources of both sustaining and demanding hope, purpose, and value for the living of our lives" (Crosby 2008: xi; emphasis in the original). For Crosby, this is true, notwithstanding the radical ambiguities of nature, or its intricate mixtures of goods and evils. A key element of Crosby's study is his notion of metaphysical perspectivism. This empirically driven position contends that the world we inhabit has a plurality of entities, each with its own individuality and particularity of expression. Accordingly, everything that exists in the world has a distinctive perspective on everything else. As Crosby writes: "All the elemental particles, atoms, molecules, compounds, inorganic and organic entities and combinations of those entities, including human beings and their histories, cultures, and societies, and all of the actions, reactions, functions, qualities, and traits of these particular things and their relations are included. No two perspectives or systems of them are exactly alike" (67–8).

Crosby's notion that humans' perspectives are included with, and inflected by, the perspectives of other existents in the universe compels us to ask about the nature and distinctiveness of human agency among other forms. Humans can and should look within the whole of nature to bring about moral good and to avoid needless suffering and harm. But we must also be aware that our actions are a relatively small part of an enormous system, and we must be on guard lest we overestimate the importance of human lives and actions within that system. In making such claims, Crosby is very clear in suggesting that any alleged connection between an ultimate cosmic purpose and finite human purpose is not at all clear, and by no means necessary. As a matter of fact, he asks quite bluntly: Why must human purposes be validated by cosmic purpose to be satisfying, meaningful, or real? (Crosby 2008: 96). Crosby's religious naturalism thus features a pristine realism: "It offers us no pap, no panaceas, no empty promises. It does not build castles in the air. Instead, it brings up plumping down to earth. It says, 'Find your courage, strength, and meaning here. You are a child of the earth, and there is no other place to go'" (108). For Crosby, to be (including human) is to be finite. And to be finite is to be vulnerable. With human freedom comes responsibility, and with responsibility comes the possibility of making a significant positive difference in what is accomplished and how things turn out. This is the bright side of the moral ambiguity that is made manifest and inevitable by our possession of personal freedom. In citing his wife Pamela, Crosby asserts: "We humans can be sources as well as beneficiaries of the numerous forces for good at work in the world. The power and effectiveness of those forces is to some appreciable degree dependent on us, not on a supernatural being" (112).

Figure 4. Pluralities of perspectives. Photograph courtesy of Georgette Douwma/Getty Images.

Social, Ethical, and Political of Value Religious Naturalisms (Carol Wayne White and Michael Hogue)

The collective set of ideas offered by Goodenough, Rue, Crosby, and others religious naturalists demonstrate that humans are, by our very constitution, relational, and our wholeness occurs within a matrix of complex interconnectedness. As Goodenough writes:

> We have throughout the ages sought connection with higher powers in the sky or beneath the earth, or with ancestors in some other realm. We have also sought, and found, religious fellowship with one another. And now we realize that we are connected to all creatures. Not just in food chains or ecological equilibria. We share a common ancestor. We share genes for receptors and cell cycles and signal-transduction cascades. We share evolutionary constraints and possibilities. We are connected all the way down.
>
> --(Goodenough 2000: 73)

Moreover, the advances of science, through both biology and physics, have served to demonstrate not only how closely linked human animals are with nature but also that we are simply one branch of a seemingly endless natural cosmos. As Crosby reminds us:

> Nature requires no explanation beyond itself. It always has existed and always will exist in some shape or form. Its constituents, principles, laws, and relations are the sole reality. This reality takes on new traits and possibilities as it evolves inexorably through time. Human beings are integral parts of nature, and they are natural beings through and through. They, like all living beings, are outcomes of biological evolution.
>
> --(Crosby 2008: ix–x)

Figure 5. Humans are natural entities. Photograph courtesy of StockStudioX/Getty Images.

For religious naturalists Carol Wayne White and Michael Hogue, these general tenets can help advance socially- and political, ethically-oriented models of practice. White's religious naturalism, for example, encourages contemporaries to think about our common humanity and the ethics of honoring our inescapable connections to each other and to other natural processes. In Black Lives and Sacred Humanity, Toward an African American Religious Naturalism (2016), White confronts both human–human forms of injustice and ecological forms of injustice that occur when we fail to recognize these basic truths. Specifically, White suggests that for many blacks oriented toward naturalism, humanism, and social justice, a thorny but important issue arises: the traditional exclusivity of the category of the human, or what some of us have recognized as lacunae in conceptualizing the human. She points to the theoretical violence perceivable in Western humanistic discourses, as acutely recounted in feminist, liberationist, and decolonial critiques. These perspectives have unmasked the normative human subject as primarily conceptualized as, and associated with, the lived experiences of white males of European descent, into whose ranks African Americans and other minoritarian subjects have not traditionally been admitted. In short, all human subjects have not traditionally been included in what is "properly" human (White 2016: 34–5).

Using the best available insights from scientific studies, White conceives of the human as an emergent, interconnected life form amid spectacular biotic diversity, which has far-reaching ethical implications within the context of ecology, religion, and American life. First, her African American religious naturalism contributes to an intellectual legacy that has attempted to overcome the deficient conceptions of our myriad nature couched in problematic binary constructions. In doing so, her religious naturalism not only presents human beings as biotic forms emerging from evolutionary processes sharing a deep homology with other sentient beings, it also emphasizes humans valuing such connection. While challenging racially constructed views that have persistently placed Blacks and other "racialized groups" outside of the circle of humanity, White's religious naturalism also rejects a view of our humanity solely as an individualistic phenomenon—some type of communal ontology is implied (White 2016: 35).

Figure 6. Human diversity as natural. Photograph courtesy of FatCamera/Getty Images.

Moreover, White argues that understanding the deep history of the cosmos is thus profoundly important for any basic understanding of the materiality of being human, of being alive in the manner we currently find ourselves. Big Bang cosmology, for example, shows the world evolving naturally, based on the interconnection and interaction of all of its fundamental components. She shares Loyal Rue's contention that humans are "ultimately the manifestations of many interlocking systems—atomic, molecular, biochemical, anatomical, ecological—apart from which human existence is incomprehensible" (Rue 2005: 25). White thus reminds her readers that humans are by-products of other natural processes and intimate participants with them—in short, we are material beings through and through. She considers, for example, Michael W. Fox's compelling account that "our bodies contain the mineral elements of primordial rocks; our very cells share the same historically evolved components as those of grasses and trees; our brains contain the basic neural core of reptile, bird, and fellow mammal" (Fox 1978: 227).

Religious naturalism's specific appeal for White, then, is the extent to which it challenges a binary differentiation that has functioned to demarcate certain spheres of life as superior and others as inferior, justifying the exploitative practices of the former. Her religious naturalism targets a specific Western version of this ordering, which has strengthened and made stable imposed dualisms that have traditionally mapped themselves onto older hierarchical privileges of light over darkness, male over female, human over nature, mind over body, and God over Creation—all of which have led to the formation of unjust racially-, environmentally-, sexually-, and theologically-based relationalities.

Michael Hogue's American Immanence: Democracy for an Uncertain World (2018) creatively explores issues of sovereignty and race within the Anthropocene age, all while offering a powerful indictment of contemporary social, political, economic, and environmental realities. Hogue's focus on this tradition of American immanence as the starting point for addressing a political theology can be seen as a variant of religious naturalism. With it, he rejects the logics of a metaphysics of inside and outside, and rather seeks to draw out the potential democratic, implications of the pragmatic naturalist, radically empirical, and process relational lineages of American immanence. In Hogue's rendering, this tradition approaches moral values as emergent, provisional, and negotiated rather than antecedent, absolute, and imposed. This tradition also rejects the symbol of God as unitary, sovereign, supernatural, and metaphysically transcendent, and clears the way for symbolizing the divine and sacred as diffused, vulnerable, natal, and immanent. By affirming the wonder and sublimity of the diverse expressions of creativity and agency in the universe, this tradition of American immanence lures humans toward more vital and more resonant ways of being in the world, more existentially and spiritually enlivening modes of life.

Hogue's study aims not so much at definitive answers or systematic argumentation but rather consideration of "a morally catalytic, spiritually invigorating, communally grounded, radically democratic intervention into the root contexts, causes, and conditions of our complex challenges" (Hogue 2018: 6). Hogue envisions a truly democratic society of vulnerable subjects, convincing the reader that it is also possible to theorize such a capacious, cosmic community. American Immanence critiques the "alleged ontological opposition between the workings of nature and the thinking of human minds, oppositions reflected in and reinforced by the substance-quality structure of logic and

the subject-predicate structure of language, an opposition which Alfred North Whitehead referred to as the 'bifurcation of nature'" (77–8). Hogue's study contributes uniquely to the efforts of other materialist studies that are challenging the ontological and epistemic exceptionalisms that have set humans over and against other forms of animal life and human culture, society, and economy over and against the ecological systems upon which they depend (12, 106–7). Hogue's vision is a "vulnerable politics for vulnerable creatures in a vulnerable world in a cosmos without a center. And since the prospects of our common life have been made more uncertain by climate wickedness and the Anthropocene paradox, the need for democracy is as urgent as it has ever been" (178). Hogue takes on the challenge via his pursuit of following a path from justice to beauty in which contingent, vulnerable entities aim differently than what may have been envisioned earlier: "What we aim for is what holds us together, and what holds us together is what we aim for—the more beautiful world whose possibility we feel more deeply than we know" (184).

Figure 7. Vulnerable politics for a beautiful world. Photograph courtesy of Massima Rivera/Getty Images.

Conclusions

These brief sketches of the variety of religious naturalisms all share one basic conviction: any truths we are ever going to discover and any meaning in life we should uncover are revealed to us through the natural order. With varying degrees of emphasis, the models of religious naturalism shift attention back to humans as natural processes, encouraging humans to question our values, behaviors, and use of resources. They also demand that we conceive and enact new forms of relationality with each other and with the more than human worlds that are an integral part of our existence here. Accordingly, as a new religious orientation, religious naturalism encourages willing participation in "movements of scientific inquiry, movements of cultural expression, movements for global distributive justice, movements to eliminate needless suffering, and movements to preserve the ecology of our home planet" (Wildman 2014: 54).

Religious naturalists share Chet Raymo's conviction that we are part of an interacting, evolving, and genetically related community of beings bound together inseparably in space and time. As such, "each of us is profoundly implicated in the functioning and fate of every other being on the planet, and ultimately, perhaps, throughout the universe" (Raymo 2008: 98). We acknowledge that certain possibilities may occur when human organisms begin to align our actions with the deeper mystery that we are not at the center of all that is. As Wesley Wildman reminds us, religious naturalists reject "manipulative or unreflective supernatural authorization of moral claims and of the individuals and groups that make them" (Wildman 2014: 53). With appreciable awareness of how deeply embedded we are with myriad nature, and how our destiny is entangled with others natural processes, contemporary religious naturalists continually revise, correct, or even forfeit older perspectives as newer forms of knowledge become available.

Further Reading and Online Resources

Hogue, M. (2010), The Promise of Religious Naturalism, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

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Glossary Terms

Consilient science
The term used by Loyal Rue in his religious naturalism theory that is associated with a coherent, unified meshwork of scientific and naturalistic ideas, which renders intelligible the full scope of human experience and natural reality.

Epic of evolution
The scientific account of cosmic evolution used in religious naturalism, or a cosmic narrative that has important things to say about the universe, where humans come from, and our place in the larger scheme of things.

Epistemological humility
When thinkers acknowledge that our theoretical knowledge is always limited, and they are careful not to overstep the boundaries of the limits of knowledge at any given moment. It is being humble about what we think we can know, and yet letting such limitations drive our intellectual curiosities.

Evil
Events in the natural order and humanly constructed worlds that are caused by human choices, which are experienced and perceived as destructive to sentient creatures. These occurences diminish the quality of life for human and other sentient creatures.

Religion
Addresses two basic human concerns: how things are (cosmology) and which things matter (values discourse, morality, ethos).

Religious naturalism
A capacious, ecological religious worldview grounded in the observational conviction that nature is ultimate.

Supernaturalism
The belief in gods, deities, and other metaphysical realities that stand beyond the natural order. Traditional belief in an immaterial, transcendent God or set of gods that grounds reality.