

# Religious Naturalism

## A Better Mouse Trap?

**Michael Barrett**

**T**he proposition that if a man builds a better mouse trap the world will beat a path to his door was voiced by nineteenth century American thinker R.W. Emerson, often seen as a precursor of modern religious naturalism. But if religious naturalism, as some suggest, is an example of Emerson's better mouse trap, why aren't more people beating a path to that door? Why isn't that school of thought more widely known?

The answer seems to be that religious naturalism is a thing of the future, at this stage no more than a cultural undercurrent, albeit one that is gaining momentum in response to a number of clearly perceptible trends: disappointment that the great religious traditions have not delivered on their promises; dissatisfaction with the prevailing neo-liberal market economics of growth and consumption; and a growing understanding of humankind's critical dependence on the natural world.

There are those who hold that a religious naturalist world-view will almost inevitably come into its own in the coming decades, not so much because it will be preached or promoted, but as an adaptive reaction to crises that before too long will be confronting humanity worldwide.

### **What do we mean by 'religious naturalism'?**

'Naturalism' is a view of the world and man's relation to it in which only natural, as opposed to supernatural or spiritual, forces and

laws are recognised. 'Naturalism,' like 'nature,' implies a view of the whole world including life itself and all of earth's evolved bio-diversity, and by extension human society and culture.

The term 'religious' is used here not to refer to any particular faith, philosophy or cultural system, but to suggest the kind of affective experience – emotional or 'spiritual' feelings of awe, wonder, respect, reverence or at-one-ness that can be evoked by nature.

Religious naturalism seems to be a way of thinking, feeling, seeing the world, perhaps a way of living, in which some people – including a number of contemporary philosophers and scientists – experience a deeply felt sense of being bound in commitment to the natural world. The titles of some of their books hint at important aspects of this distinctive world-view: *Religion is not about God* (L. Rue, 2005), *When God is gone everything is holy* (C. Raymo, 2008).

### **The historical background of religious naturalism**

The roots of the religious naturalism world-view can be traced back to the ancient classical world, and on through the renaissance and enlightenment eras, but notably Spinoza among the philosophers of the past is generally recognized as an important forerunner of religious naturalism.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in America and Britain, religious naturalism di-

verged along two paths: a mainstream non-theistic approach, as seen for example in the work of agnostic pragmatist George Santayana, and a theistic approach in which, as suggested earlier, the transcendentalist Emerson was a significant influence.

Up until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, religious naturalism continued to develop, influenced variously by the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, the mysticism of Teilhard de Chardin, and the emergentist philosophy of Samuel Alexander. In America, religious naturalism flourished in the work of philosophers such

as Henry Nelson Wieman and Bernard Meland, whose thinking is set out in some detail in Jerome Stone's *Religious Naturalism Today: The Rebirth of a Forgotten Alternative* (2008).

Stone notes that throughout the development of religious naturalism, a key issue has been the use and meaning of the 'God' word, with most religious naturalists falling into one of four categories: those who think of God in terms of the totality of the universe, such as Samuel Alexander; those who think of God as the creative process within the universe, such as Wieman; those, mainly humanists, who think of God as the sum of human ideals (in the 1920s and 1930s, religious naturalism was developing in parallel with the humanism movement); and those who would not use the 'God' word but are nonetheless religious persons. A contemporary example whose work is discussed below is the scientist Ursula Goodenough, who describes herself as a 'religious non-theist.'

Most mainstream religious naturalists would take the position that science and religion are two complementary views of life and the world – 'non-overlapping magisteria' in the

**Religious  
naturalism seems  
to be a way of  
thinking, feeling,  
seeing the world,  
perhaps a way of  
living, in which  
some people [...] experience a  
deeply felt sense  
of being bound in  
commitment to the  
natural world.**

words of palaeontologist Stephen Jay Gould – and we can experience a deeper reverence for nature, and a sense of the sacred in the emergence of life in the universe, precisely because of our burgeoning scientific understanding.

In 1954, the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science was founded in the United States, and in 1966 the Institute established its quarterly publication *Zygon*, the Journal of Religion and Science. In recent years the Institute's conferences, and *Zygon* articles, have contributed to a current resurgence of interest in religious naturalism.

At the same time a steady stream of books – including those mentioned below – have been written by authors who in varying degrees identify themselves as religious naturalists.

### **Nature is enough**

A leading contemporary religious naturalist writer is the philosopher Loyal Rue. In the first part of his most recent book *Nature is Enough* (2011), he examines the notion of the meaning of life and the emergence of meaning in the world and in the mind. In the second part, entitled 'religion naturalised, nature sanctified,' Rue affirms the naturalist's belief that outside of nature, or prior to nature, there is nothing meaningful to talk about. If God exists, then God is a natural being, or a natural process, or nature itself.

"But this does not mean," he writes, "that naturalists cannot be genuinely religious. If we mean by 'religious' a set of attitudes and sensibilities (rather than a set of metaphysical doctrines or an institutional allegiance), then we might bring ourselves to accept the fact that some people find their intellectual and emotion-

al responses to the natural world to be recognizably religious.”

Rue admits that in the immediate future religious naturalism is unlikely to grow into a recognizable movement or tradition, but makes a confident prediction: “I fully expect the day to arrive when religious naturalism will prevail as the most universal and influential religious orientation on the planet. The source of my confidence in this prediction is the epic of cosmogenesis itself. Given a chance, this story is too compelling, too beautiful, too edifying, and too liberating to fail in captivating the imagination of a vast majority of humankind.”

### **The sacred depths of nature**

One of the best-known religious naturalist writers is Ursula Goodenough, distinguished biologist and professor at Washington University and former president of IRAS (the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science).

In her book *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (1998), often cited as a notable example of mainstream religious naturalism thinking, she writes as a scientist about the origins and evolution of life on earth, and the development and functioning of organisms. But she writes poetically and personally about awareness and emotion, about value and meaning, and about the religious feelings of wonder, awe, and reverence for nature that she experiences in her work as a practising scientist.

Identifying herself as a ‘religious non-theist,’ she shares Loyal Rue’s position that all religions evolved to address two fundamental human concerns – the cosmological (‘how things are’), and the ethical (‘which things matter’). In this view the role of any religion is to integrate the cosmology and the ethics into a compelling explanatory narrative that should serve to guide us in the conduct of our lives.

### **Reinventing the sacred**

Most mainstream religious naturalists take the view that traditional ideas of the sacred, as associated with the supernatural, are no longer

acceptable, not merely because they are not believable, but also because they are core doctrines of religions that can be dangerously divisive. And yet an undeniable human yearning for the sacred highlights the importance of redefining the sacred. We need, and value, whatever helps to give meaning to our lives.

In his book *Reinventing the Sacred* (2008), theoretical biologist Stuart Kauffman redefines the sacred in terms of creativity. His research in self-organising systems supports the view that natural law alone is not adequate to describe the evolution of complex systems, much less human life, agency, or values.

He takes the God word to be a symbol that we invented as a way of denoting a radical creativity which for some four billion years has been a feature of the natural universe, the earth’s biosphere, its emergent biodiversity, and now human life. This creativity, supplementing natural law and requiring no supernatural creator, deserves in its own right our wonder, awe, and reverence and, he suggests, could serve as our new sacred.

Notable among a range of books that set out in various ways to describe aspects of the religious naturalism world-view are philosopher Donald Crosby’s *A Religion of Nature* (2002), philosopher Karl Peters’ *Dancing with the Sacred* (2002), and physicist Chet Raymo’s *When God is Gone Everything is Holy* (2008).

These and other religious naturalist writers share a number of core ideas that are driving the current resurgence of interest in religious naturalism: the need to re-define the sacred for the twenty-first century; the importance of accepting and honouring our contemporary understanding of how the world and life itself emerged according to natural forces and laws; and the epic of evolution as a cosmological narrative with real potential to unite people of different cultures in conscientious stewardship of the earth.

### **The epic of evolution**

This notion of a potent cosmological mythic narrative, capable of generating and sustaining

a new planetary ethic, and thus helping to unite us in the face of crises that many now see as almost inevitably confronting humanity in the coming decades, is central to the religious naturalism world-view.

The phrase *epic of evolution* was highlighted in 1978 by socio-biologist E.O. Wilson, and the narrative of a universe evolving in a continuous fourteen billion-year process, from big bang to self-conscious human life and culture, was further developed in *The Universe Story* (1992), a seminal work by cosmologist Brian Swimme and cultural historian Thomas Berry.

They describe their vision of the epic of evolution as “a new type of narrative, one that has only recently begun to find expression ... that has as its primary basis the account of the emergent universe as communicated to us through our sciences... This is the only way of providing in our times what the mythic stories of the universe provided in their times for tribal people and for the earlier classical civilisations.” They assert that “the narrative of the universe, told in the sequence of its transformations, and in the depths of its meaning, will undoubtedly constitute the comprehensive educational context of the future.”

The AAAS (American Association for the Advancement of Science) entitled their 1997 annual conference *The Epic of Evolution*, and published a university level text that included papers on cosmic origins, the emergence of life, the rise of our species, and the evolution of culture, society, religion and ethics. In 2006, astrophysicist Eric Chaisson’s book *The Epic of Evolution* set out our scientific understanding of

**It seems unlikely  
that traditional  
religions,  
with their  
belief systems  
undermined by  
science, and their  
values eroded in  
a secular society,  
would be capable  
of influencing  
significant  
numbers of  
people towards a  
radical change of  
aspirations and  
life-style.**

the universe as it evolved through transformational epochs, from elementary particles, to galaxies, stars and planets, and on to chemistry, life, and human culture.

Over the past two decades religious naturalist writers have drawn on the epic of evolution, proposing that this mythic narrative of humanity’s place in, and critical dependence on, the natural world offers a cosmology grounded in modern science on which humankind could forge a new ethical paradigm.

### **A looming crisis**

It seems inevitable now that a crisis of significant proportions is going to arise from a number of interacting trends in popu-

lation, resources and environment that have been well understood for several decades. The human population of the planet is on track to increase by up to forty per cent, to around ten billion, by the turn of this century. Aspirations for materially improved life-styles on the part of a population of that size will make formidable, perhaps impossible, demands on the world’s finite resources.

A well-rehearsed litany of consequences can be predicted: resource-hoarding by rich countries; breakdown of civil order in poor countries that fail to cope with food and energy shortage, water depletion, loss of productive land, collapse of health systems, all resulting in chaotic movement of population and, potentially, in territorial conflicts or wars.

It seems unlikely that traditional religions, with their belief systems undermined by science, and their values eroded in a secular society, would be capable of influencing significant

numbers of people towards a radical change of aspirations and life-style.

### **Adaptation in the face of change**

The writing of religious naturalists is underpinned by a persuasive logic: that although the cosmological myths and narratives of the great religious traditions are no longer sufficiently compelling to ensure that we control and adapt our behaviour, what is lacking in those narratives – what was not available to Jesus, Muhammad, or the Buddha – is a true understanding of the place of our planet and its biodiversity, including human life, in the context of the evolving universe.

Today we have begun to understand our place in nature, and we know that for some four billion years life on earth evolved in fits and starts, explosions of biodiversity and extinctions, but what remained constant was the rise of increasingly complex levels of consciousness.

Consciousness and its evolution are not yet understood by science, but it seems more than plausible that consciousness must have emerged and developed in the process of successful adaptation in response to the challenges of surviving in a changing environment.

And we know that when changes in their physical environment threatened the viability of animal species, they ensured their survival by adapting their behaviour. Similarly, when the human cultural environment has changed – when major shifts have occurred in the global ‘zeitgeist,’ the spirit of the age – history shows that in response we have successfully adapted our ideals and aspirations, our lifestyles and behaviour.

### **Some grounds for optimism?**

Humanity still ponders the big questions posed down the centuries by the philosophers of the classical era, the medieval theologians, the religious mystics, the enlightenment thinkers, the pre-modern scientists – the only questions worth spending any time on: *What am I? Where is this? How come? So what?*

Today we are beginning to know something of *what* we are, and *where* this is: of our genetic inheritance of some four billion years of evolving life; of the hundred billion neurons networked in our brain, and the colony of trillions of cells that constitute our body; and we are mapping our universe, imaging stars in galaxy clusters at the far edge of the observable universe, and looking back some fourteen billion years to seek answers to the *how come?* question.

But crucial to survival as we trash our planet in a frenzy of consumption and waste is the *so what?* question. How are we to conduct our lives? We’re desperately in need of a new ethical system to match our new mythic cosmology – the epic narrative of evolution.

Might a philosophy of religious naturalism turn out to be Emerson’s ‘better mouse trap’? Not many people have beaten a path to that door yet, but perhaps religious naturalism, grounded in the epic of evolution, stands a better chance than traditional schools of religious thought of giving us a vision of the world that could help us cope with the coming global crisis. •

*Michael Barrett was born in 1937 and grew up in England in a catholic family. He was educated at a benedictine school and at Cambridge University in the 1950s. A lifelong interest in communication led to a varied career in media, education and development in a number of countries including Canada, culminating, after some years in Africa, as an associate director at Oxfam. In retirement he lives with his wife in Oxford, England.*

This article was originally published under the title *Religious Naturalism*, in *Sofia*, journal of the ‘Sea of Faith’ network, no. 112, June 2014. Currently, under the title *Religious Naturalism: An Idea Whose Time Has Come*, the paper is on the main website of the non-profit Religious Naturalism Association (RNA). It can be found at [religiousnaturalism.org](http://religiousnaturalism.org) in the Home page sidebar under *What is religious naturalism / Open forum – views on RN*.

RNA was formed as a non-profit in the USA in mid-2014, and information about it is on their organisation website:

[religious-naturalist-association.org](http://religious-naturalist-association.org)