

Religious Naturalism: A Theology for UU Humanists Demian Wheeler

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I am profoundly grateful for the opportunity to speak with you this morning. Thank you, Kelli, Jim, and David, for the invitation.

Our quote of the week comes from Carl Sagan: “A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the Universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later,” Sagan predicts, “such a religion will emerge” (Sagan 1994: 50). Indeed, such a religion *has* emerged; it is called *religious naturalism*. And this morning I want to suggest that religious naturalism offers a compelling theological vision and spiritual orientation for twenty-first-century Unitarian Universalists—and UU humanists, in particular. I would even wager that there is no religious environment that is more hospitable to a religious naturalist worldview than Unitarian Universalism, especially its humanist flank.

What is religious naturalism, exactly? Here is my one-sentence definition: religious naturalism is a perspective that regards nature as both exhaustive of reality and worthy of deep reverence and devotion. On the one hand, nature is all there is; there is no such thing as the supernatural. On the other hand, it is both possible and desirable to live a spiritually fulfilling existence on a completely naturalistic basis. For the religious naturalist, *nature itself* is capable of evoking awe, wonder, gratitude, amazement, celebration; *nature itself* is the object of our ultimate concerns and commitments; *nature itself* is sacred—i.e. vitally and centrally important and, thus, deserving of our utmost loyalty. Religious naturalism, in short, invites us to respond—spiritually,

ethically, and even theologically—to the mystery, value, power, beauty, terror, and transcendent depths of *this* world. I will unpack this more shortly.

So, why try to forge such a strong link between religious naturalism and Unitarian Universalism? Well, for one thing, the link already exists. The UURN—The Unitarian Universalist Religious Naturalists—was founded in 2004; as far as I know, the group continues to meet annually at the UUA General Assembly. But more significantly, reverencing and caring for nature is a longstanding aspect of the Unitarian heritage, beginning with Emerson. Among the many sources of Unitarian Universalism’s “living tradition” are the “results of science” as well as the “spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.” And, of course, our Seventh Principle is “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are part.” In fact, according to a 2005 report of the UUA Commission on Appraisal, it was the rise of religious naturalism as an explicit identifier that led to the adoption of the Seventh Principle in 1984. I would also venture that a sizable number of UUs, especially those of a humanistic bent, are “anonymous religious naturalists”—i.e. religious naturalists who have never heard the good news of religious naturalism or who prefer to use a different label. Maybe you are one of them!

There is another reason why I think Unitarian Universalism is a natural home for religious naturalism: Unitarian Universalism is a *liberal* faith. What does it mean to say that our faith is *liberal*? Well, it does not *only* mean that we tend to vote for whomever is left of the Green Party candidate. Yes, religious liberals, including UUs, typically have liberal politics. Nevertheless, the adjective “liberal” is not primarily a *political* designation, but a *theological* one. Unitarian Universalism is a liberal faith because it is historically rooted in the tradition of *liberal theology*.

The theological historian Gary Dorrien points out that liberal theology has been characterized by two overriding principles (see Dorrien 2001). The first is the principle of *anti-authoritarianism*. Truth claims in religion are validated by reason and experience, not by external authorities such as the Bible or church hierarchy. The second principle of liberal theology is *integrative mediation*. Early liberal theology was known as “mediating theology” because it sought a middle path between orthodox overbelief and secular disbelief, between traditionalist religion and no religion at all. For more than two hundred years, liberal theologians have argued that one does not have to choose between being modern and being religious. Liberal theologians found a third way, demanding that our theological convictions line up with contemporary values and modern knowledge, including our scientific understandings of the universe.

In the early nineteenth century, the Unitarians were the leading representatives of American theological liberalism. They still are. I think it is fair to say that Unitarian Universalism is the foremost liberal religion in America today. And, to me, religious naturalism is the quintessential expression of a liberal theological outlook. Like UU liberals, religious naturalists are anti-authoritarian to the core, insisting on a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Like UU liberals, religious naturalists draw on a diverse array of sources such as science, poetry, art, and the world religions. Like UU liberals, religious naturalists look to the guidance of reason and experience, including the “direct experience of that transcending mystery, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.” For the religious naturalist, that transcending mystery is nature itself.

Religious naturalists and Unitarian Universalists are also fellow travelers on liberal theology’s middle path. Think about what religious naturalism is. First and foremost, it is a form

of naturalism. For the religious naturalist, nature is ultimate; there is nothing above, beyond, or in addition to nature. For that reason, the religious naturalist is vehemently anti-supernaturalistic. There are no supernatural entities of any sort, no heavenly realms or otherworldly destinies, no overarching cosmic purpose or direction, no miracles or special revelations, and no immortal souls that live on after death. Such items, as Wesley Wildman cleverly puts it, are not on the religious naturalist's "ontological inventory" (Wildman 2014: 42-43). Nor is there any anthropomorphic divine being determining or guiding the course of history. Once again, what there is, and all there is, is nature. This means that there is nothing outside of nature, and anything that *does* exist, including humans and their civilizations, is a part of nature.

All that being said, religious naturalists are not "slash-and-burn" atheists, to use Chet Raymo's hilarious label (Raymo 2008: 102)! Rather, they are *liberals*, attempting to forge a middle way between superstitious religion and evangelical atheism. Religious naturalists *are* atheistic when it comes to a personal God and all the other supernatural trappings. But they still want the bath water, to draw on Raymo again—i.e. a sense of reverence in face of the wonder and mystery of nature. Critics frequently dismiss religious naturalism as oxymoronic, assuming that religion is *inherently* supernaturalistic, and naturalism *inherently* anti-religious. However, religious naturalists challenge these widespread assumptions, affirming the promise of a nonsupernaturalistic religiosity, of a religion-friendly naturalism. In other words, for the religious naturalist, supernaturalism and secularism are not the only options; there is a third possibility, a middle road that might be described as "spiritual but not supernatural."

Lest you be scared off by the word, "spiritual" is derived from the Latin verb "to breathe." Perhaps, then, "spirituality" simply has to do with contemplating and paying attention to that

which is *brehtaking*. In that sense, *science* can actually be “a profound source of spirituality” inasmuch as it reveals just how breathtaking reality is. To quote Carl Sagan again: “When we recognize our place in an immensity of light-years and in the passage of ages, when we grasp the intricacy, beauty, and subtlety of life, then that soaring feeling, that sense of elation and humility combined, is surely spiritual” (Sagan 1996: 29). So, one does not need to be a supernaturalist to have spirituality. As the religious naturalist Jerome Stone declares, we can have “*naturalized* spirituality.” We can be “open to the treasures of *this* world, to its joys and even its heartaches,” without trying to escape to “a higher realm” (Stone 2017: 76).

Now, this does *not* mean that religious naturalists make different *claims* than other naturalists. Again, a religious naturalist is just as doggedly naturalistic as a non-religious naturalist. What distinguishes the religious naturalist is not so much a set of beliefs as it is a suite of attitudes and affections. As Loyal Rue clarifies, a *religious* naturalist is someone who “takes nature to heart,” someone who experiences and treats nature as *sacred*—i.e. as ultimately important, worthy of reverence, and beyond our control (see Rue 2011). The sacredness of nature lies in its *depth dimension*, to borrow a concept from Paul Tillich. “Depth dimension” is shorthand for nature in all its transcendent splendor and terrifying ambiguity, its incomprehensible vastness and microscopic complexity. It refers, for example, to the intricateness, beauty, and value of every detail of creation—a swirling galaxy, a DNA double helix, a Bach cantata; to the marvel of consciousness and the staggering improbability of its emergence; to the infinite processes that create, sustain, and eventually destroy all that is; to the sheer mystery of why there is anything at all rather than nothing.

In short, *nature is enough*; it is deep, sublime, powerful, vast, awesome, and mysterious enough to elicit our fidelity and religious commitment, to arouse profound spiritual feelings of wonder and thanksgiving, awe and humility. We do not need to place our faith in otherworldly gods, nor do we need to long for another life in another realm beyond nature, because *this* world and *this* life can provide ample context and support for finding purpose, value, and meaning.

That's religious naturalism in a nutshell. And religious naturalism happens to be undergoing a revival of sorts. The scholarly and popular literature on religious naturalism has increased substantially over the last twenty years. There are a handful of organizations and websites devoted to the promotion of religious naturalism. And more and more people today, especially among Gen Xers and millennials, are finding religious naturalism to be an attractive option.

Why?

Well, I have already talked at length about the *religious* promise of religious naturalism. Religious naturalism enables one to live a religious life as a naturalist, to have a robust spirituality without invoking a supernatural God or supernatural phenomena of any kind.

There are all sorts of other advantages to being a religious naturalist. To begin with, nature-centered spiritualities, like religious naturalism, enjoy a heightened *ethical* urgency and relevance in an ecologically imperiled era such as ours. To be sure, no spiritual orientation, including religious naturalism, will solve our environmental problems—e.g. global climate change. However, as Jerome Stone points out, upholding the sacredness of the whole interconnected web of being—not only human existence, but also nonhuman lives and habitats and even far-flung stars and galaxies—*will* have a pragmatic effect on our attitudes and actions (Stone 2017: xviii).

Religious naturalism also eliminates the need to brood over theodicy. Instead of trying to figure out why an all-good and all-powerful God would create a world filled with so much evil, misery, and death, religious naturalists, as Donald Crosby contends, assume a posture of realism and acceptance with respect to the ambiguities of life—“no pap, no panaceas, no empty promises” (Crosby 2008: 108).

Finally, religious naturalism overcomes the age-old conflict between religion and science—and *not* by cherry-picking the sciences in order to confirm our religious presuppositions. On the contrary, religious naturalists are interested in developing spiritual, ethical, and theological responses to the scientific worldview currently on offer—even if it challenges and alters our religious assumptions. For example, rather than attempting to reconcile evolutionary science with the premodern and inescapably anthropocentric creation myths in the book of Genesis, religious naturalism adopts the “epic of evolution” as its sacred narrative. Be that as it may, as much as religious naturalists privilege science and the scientific method of knowing, they are opposed to *scientism*, the presumption that the sciences have a monopoly on truth. Maybe philosophy, music, and even religion reveal things about nature that astrophysics and biology do not. And, as much as scientists have discovered about the natural world, nature always remains largely hidden behind a dark veil, behind a cloud of unknowing. Thus, the religious naturalist is part stubborn rationalist and part apophatic mystic, someone who embraces the facts but also honors the mystery. The religious naturalist responds religiously to the world as we empirically find it yet stands in silence and holy fear before the inexhaustible depths of nature.

I realize that I am at FUS and that I am mostly preaching—sorry, talking—to the choir! So, let me try to close on a somewhat provocative note: in order to tap its full spiritual and theological

potential, humanism needs to be grounded in something like religious naturalism. I agree with Meadville's former president and dean, William Murry, who argues that religious naturalism offers something that humanism by itself lacks, namely, a wider cosmological foundation, an inspiring sacred story (the epic of evolution), a deeper spiritual and even mystical sensibility, and a language of reverence and awe, mystery and wonder (see Murry 2007).

To be sure, religious humanists are *already* naturalists in their denial of supernaturalism and personal theism and in their emphasis on life in the here and now. This is one reason why I am pitching religious naturalism as a theology *for* UU humanists. But I am also pitching it because UU humanists tend to dismiss theology, and religious naturalism just might be the one theological perspective a UU humanist could actually adopt. To me, theology is not simply "God-talk," but critical inquiry into whatever we take to be ultimate, sacred, and transcendent. Note that the ultimate, the sacred, and the transcendent is not necessarily a God; indeed, for the religious naturalist, it is nature itself. Now, some religious naturalists do retain God as a *symbol* for the depths of nature. But *all* religious naturalists, whether they use God-language or not, regard *nature* as ultimate, sacred, and transcendent. This is why some of my UU students claim that religious naturalism can potentially bridge the theist-humanist divide within Unitarian Universalism.

I think my students are right, but this morning let me just speak to the humanist side of the aisle. Religious naturalism, in my view, provides humanists a way doing theology nontheistically and naturalistically, a way of affirming transcendence without a God or anything supernatural whatsoever. I am talking about what Ursula Goodenough calls "horizontal transcendence," the transcendence *of* the immanent (see Goodenough 2001). Just consider the mind-blowing immensity of the universe. We are merely one species among millions, in a galaxy

that is itself only one among billions. Or consider the incredible timescale of cosmic evolution. We humans are a miniscule part of a much larger story, a story that stretches from the Big Bang, to the birth of the first stars, to the formation of our solar system, to the emergence of life on earth. And we are latecomers to the story; 99.998 percent of the history of the cosmos already took place before *Homo sapiens* even arrived on the scene. Such a story, to quote Michael Hogue, “decentralizes the human species within the infinitely broader metaphysical and aesthetic rhythms of the Universe” (Hogue 2014: 3). This is to say nothing of *multiple* universes! Naturalism does not contradict humanism, but it does radically relativize humanity. It checks our anthropocentric pretensions and preoccupations, reminding us that we are, like everything else, contingent creatures of nature, connected to and transcended by something much greater than ourselves—a big history, an interdependent web, being itself.

I am a humanist; I believe it is *up to us* to establish a just society and to preserve the ecology of our home planet. There is no God out there to save us from ourselves. As the mid-twentieth-century Unitarian humanist, Eustace Haydon, rightly advised: “What the Gods have been expected to do, and have failed to do through the ages, people must find the courage and intelligence to do for themselves. More needful than faith in God is faith that humans can give love, peace and all their beloved moral values embodiment in human [and ecological] relations” (quoted in Ortman 2016). Nevertheless, anchoring these humanist commitments in a religious naturalist theology prods us to celebrate the *giftedness* of life and to acknowledge our *littleness* and *relative insignificance* vis-à-vis a nature that is transcendent—infinite, sovereign, and utterly mysterious, destructive as well as creative, unimaginably vast, ambiguous and capricious, and indifferent, sometimes even inimical, to our purposes, projects, and plans. Religious naturalism

calls for a *humble* humanism, a humanism that is based on the best of human thought but is also honest about how much we do not—and cannot—know, a humanism that takes full responsibility for the betterment of the world and the survival of humanity but also acknowledges that the universe was and will be devoid of human concerns and ambitions for all but a tiny fraction of its historical development.

So, yes, let us nurture our “heritage of forward-thinking humanism at home in the here and now.” But let us never forget that we humans are at home in nature, and nature alone. Nature is the creative passage from which we emerged, the infinite ground on which we depend, and the unapproachable abyss before which we tremble and into which we shall plunge in due course.

May it be so. Amen.

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