

Religious Naturalism

Michael Barrett wonders whether religious naturalism might be ‘a better mousetrap’.

What does ‘religious naturalism’ mean?

The nineteenth century American thinker Emerson, seen by some as a precursor of modern religious naturalism, wrote: ‘If a man builds a better mousetrap, the world will beat a path to his door.’ However, if religious naturalism is an example, as I suggest, of his ‘better mousetrap’, why aren’t more people beating a path to that door? Why isn’t religious naturalism more widely known?

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

‘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. So no gods or spirits, souls or miracles. ‘Naturalism’, like ‘nature’, implies a view of the whole world, including evolved life itself, and all of earth’s bio-diversity, and by extension, human society and culture.

‘Religious naturalism’, then, seems just to be a way of thinking, and feeling, and perhaps a way of living, in which some people – including some philosophers, scientists, and theologians – experience, in the light of modern science, a deeply felt sense of being ‘bound’ into, and dependent on, the natural world.

The background of religious naturalism

Among all the great thinkers of the past, from Aristotle to Whitehead, the name most often recognised as an important forerunner of modern religious naturalism is Baruch Spinoza. In his view, encapsulated in his much-quoted ‘Deus sive natura’ (God *or* nature), God is in some way self-creating, not distinct from the world but identical with it.

Rather than trace the burgeoning of modern religious naturalism all through the enlightenment era, it is more useful to focus on the development of this way of thinking in late 19th and early 20th century USA and Britain. Around that time religious naturalism diverged down two parallel paths: a non-theistic mainstream approach, expressed for example by agnostic pragmatist George Santayana, and a theistic approach in which, as suggested earlier, Emerson is often cited as an important influence. Some of Emerson’s transcendentalist ideas, such as his notion of a ‘universal soul’ within or behind life, would today rule him out as a mainstream religious naturalist.

In the mid-20th century modern religious naturalism flourished among thinkers in the United States. Henry Nelson Wieman, professor of philosophy of religion at Chicago University in the 1930s-40s, adopted what he called ‘a theistic stance, but without a supernatural God’. Influenced by the British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, Wieman’s concept of God was that of a process which, in his words, ‘transforms humans as they cannot transform themselves’.

Another process theologian at Chicago University in the 1930s-60s, Bernard Meland, subtitled his influential book *A Search for Reality in Religion*. He wrote: ‘What we need is to ... understand in our very bones that even in our spiritual behaviour we are an expression of earth forces. We are the universe come to consciousness.’ The thinking of Wieman, Meland and others is set out in some detail in a 2008 book by Jerome Stone entitled *Religious Naturalism Today: the Rebirth of a Forgotten Alternative*.

A key influence on Wieman, Meland and others was the British emergentist philosopher Samuel Alexander who was teaching at Manchester University from the 1890s to the 1920s. In his Gifford lectures of 1916 and 1918 Alexander set out a picture of the evolving universe as understood by the science of his day (Darwin’s evolution through natural selection; Einstein’s space-time universe).

Alexander located mind, and values, and God, in the physical universe which he saw as evolving in a hierarchy of levels, from space-time, to energy-and-matter, to life, to mind. He saw the mind-body relationship as a paradigm for emergence at all levels. In 1920, highlighting the notion of a 'creativity' inherent in nature, he wrote of mind: 'Mental process is not *merely* neural ... it is something new, a fresh creation.'

In his view the universe-as-a-whole is evolving towards a new level which he calls a state of 'deity'. God does not exist as an entity, possessing the quality of 'deity'. Rather, 'deity' is the future higher state towards which the universe is evolving. These aspects of Alexander's thinking, together with his interest in the concept of emergence and his focus on what we would now call 'the epic of evolution', mark him out as one of the first modern theistic religious naturalists.

Religion is not about God

Some recent books by religious naturalist writers indicate the direction in which mainstream religious naturalism thinking is moving at the present time. In his 2005 book *Religion is not about God*, Loyal Rue, professor of philosophy and religion at Luther College in Iowa, starts from the observation that as human beings our general strategy for maximising our reproductive fitness is to achieve 'personal wholeness' and 'social cohesion'. Religions, then, are best understood as cultural traditions that nurture our cognitive and emotional systems, enabling us to achieve this personal and social well-being.

He takes a mainstream religious naturalism position, rejecting supernatural explanations, and seeing the question of God's existence as quite separate from an understanding of religious phenomena. A religion is not about explaining divine reality but about, in his words, telling us 'how things are', and 'which things matter'.

'How things are' is what a religion formulates as its cosmological narrative of the origin of the universe



Meister Eckhardt 'patron saint of religious naturalism'

and the emergence of human life. 'Which things matter' are what a religion codifies as an ethics or morality, as in the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, or other examples in Islam, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

Rue writes about emergent principles of organisation at four levels of nature: physical, biological, psychological and cultural. Human nature is to be seen in the context of the epic of evolution. This naturalistic perspective is of value inasmuch as it deepens our sense of the holiness and mystery of nature.

He speculates on the future for religion as humanity faces the most threatening circumstances in the history of our species – unsustainable patterns of human population growth and material consumption that are stressing both natural and social systems. We are not living in harmony with reality, and our religious traditions have lost their power to command an adaptive response to crisis.

When God is Gone Everything is Holy

Chet Raymo, professor emeritus at Stonehill College in Massachusetts, titled his 2008 book *When God is Gone Everything is Holy: the Making of a Religious Naturalist*.

Raymo describes religious naturalism as ‘occupying the space between knowledge and mystery, between the mundane and the sacred’. The scientist and the mystic both seek a hidden essence of the world while accepting that much of what they seek will always remain unknown.

He maintains that human consciousness can accommodate both a sense of the holy and the revelations of science. The purpose of science is to get reliable knowledge about the world, even though nature is only partially knowable. The purpose of religion is to ‘celebrate the mystery of life in the universe’.

But we must be sceptical of science. He discusses, for example, the research behind geneticist Dean Hamer’s 2004 book *The God Gene*, which showed that a tendency towards ‘self-transcendence’, and therefore towards religious faith, is in our genes. Raymo points out that a tendency to believe is an entirely separate matter from the question of what we might happen to believe *in*.

His book is anecdotal and personal, recounting the experience of struggling to understand some of the big questions about life and nature. Describing himself as a Catholic agnostic, Raymo rejects the church’s supernaturalism but values some aspects of its sacramental tradition. He points out that this position has an ancient lineage, too often dismissed by the church as heresy, and names Meister Eckhardt as his ‘patron saint’ of religious naturalism.

The Sacred Depths of Nature

Ursula Goodenough is one of the best-known contemporary religious naturalist writers. A leading cell biologist, professor at Washington University, and former president of the Institute of Religion in an Age of Science, she identifies herself as a ‘religious non-theist’. Her 1998 book *The Sacred Depths of Nature* is often cited as an outstanding example of mainstream religious naturalism thinking. She writes as a biologist about the origins and evolution of life on earth, and the development and functioning of organisms. But she also writes poetically and personally about awareness and emotions, value and

meaning, and the religious feelings of wonder, awe, and reverence for nature that she experiences in her work as a practising scientist.

She shares Loyal Rue’s position that all religions evolved to address the two fundamental human concerns of ‘how things are’ and ‘which things matter’. Integrating the cosmology and the ethics, the role of religions is to make their explanatory narratives so compelling that they will command our commitment to their ethical teachings.

The re-emergence of emergence

Historically the notion of emergence has been controversial in philosophy and science, closely linked as it is with teleological direction and purpose, but it occupies an important place in the thinking of many religious naturalists.

While recognising the formidable successes of reductionist science, religious naturalists point out that by starting from ‘wholes’ and moving ‘down’ into parts – the opposite direction from the way things work in nature – reductionism can give an incomplete picture of the living world. Since the 1990s there has been renewed interest in emergence theory as an explanatory idea complementing reductionism.

In 2006 Paul Davies, cosmologist and physicist at McQuarrie University in Australia, and Philip Clayton, professor of philosophy and religion at Claremont University in America, co-edited a book entitled *The Re-Emergence of Emergence*.

Fourteen leading experts contributed chapters on what emergence means, in astronomy, quantum physics, cell biology, primatology, consciousness, brain function and mental causation, and finally the implications for re-thinking religion in the light of emergence theory.

So here are current thinkers today supporting a view held by Samuel Alexander – who was writing long before general systems theory described how wholes can turn out unpredictably to be more than the sum of their parts – that an inherent creativity in nature produces novel structures and organisational patterns, generating ‘something more’ from ‘nothing but’.

Emergence is once again at the centre of discussion not just at the micro-level of cells arising from molecules, but also at the level of the big questions in cosmology. What was there before the world? Why is there something rather than nothing?

Theoretical physicist Lawrence Krauss, formerly at Harvard and Yale, now at the School of Space Exploration, Arizona University, describes in his 2012 book *A Universe from Nothing* how very recent developments since the 1990s, in cosmology, particle theory, and gravitation, are fundamentally changing our understanding of the universe.

His conclusion from scientific theory is that ‘universes can, and indeed always will, spontaneously appear from nothing’. He recognises that theory alone cannot prove our universe emerged *ex nihilo*, but ‘it does take us one rather large step closer to the plausibility of such a scenario’.

Re-defining the sacred

Most mainstream religious naturalists take the position that traditional ideas of the sacred associated with the supernatural are no longer acceptable, not just 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 the project to re-define the sacred.

In his 2008 book *Re-inventing the Sacred* Stuart Kauffman, director of the Institute for Bio-complexity at Calgary University, re-defines 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.

Kauffman takes the god word to be a symbol that we invented as a way of describing the ‘radical creativity’ which, for four billion years, has been a feature of the natural universe, the earth’s biosphere, and now human life.

It is this creativity, supplementing natural law, requiring no supernatural creator, which, Kauffman suggests, deserves our wonder, awe, and reverence, and which can serve as our new sacred.

The Epic of Evolution

A third key idea driving religious naturalism is the suggestion that a potent cosmological myth – a narrative capable of generating and sustaining a new planetary ethic, one that could do much to help unite us in the face of such a threat – is available to us in the story of evolution.

The notion that just as the emergence of life has given rise to the physical biosphere, so evolution

moves on to the formation of a ‘noosphere’ – a layer of thought and feeling wrapping the earth like a membrane of consciousness – was developed in the 1940s by Jesuit priest and scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. His book *The Human Phenomenon*

set out to provide a mythic cosmology for the twentieth century and will have had a lasting influence on most theistic and non-theistic religious naturalists.

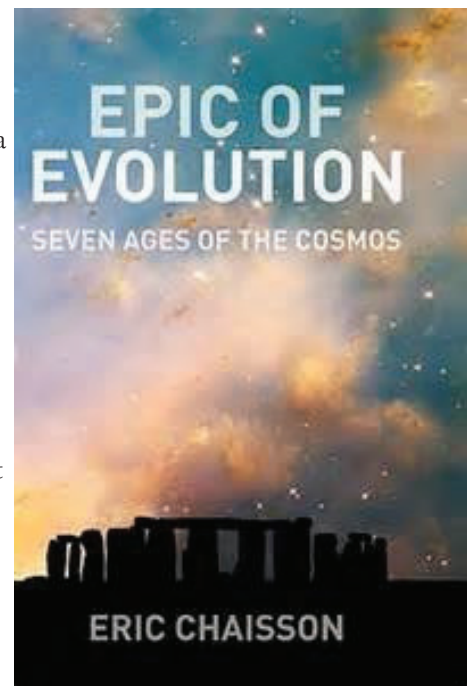
The phrase ‘epic of evolution’ was used in 1978 by Harvard socio-biologist Edward Wilson, and the narrative of a universe evolving in a continuous fourteen billion year process, from big bang to self-conscious human life and culture, was further elaborated in a 1992 book by Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry.

Their book *The Universe Story* combines the scientific approach of Swimme, a cosmologist based at the California Institute of Integral Studies, and the visionary poetic style of Berry, a cultural historian, and bridges the division in education between science and the humanities.

Their conviction is 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’.

They describe their book 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.’

In 2006 *Epic of Evolution* was again used as title of a book by astrophysicist Eric Chaisson, director of





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the Centre for Innovative Science Education at Tufts University. His book details the science behind the universe as it evolved through seven transformational epochs, from elementary particles, to galaxies, stars and planets, and on to chemistry, life, and human culture.

Over the past twenty years religious naturalist writers have drawn on this contemporary understanding of humanity's place in, and critical dependence on, the natural world, to suggest a new mythology – a foundational basis for ethical principles, underpinned by scientific knowledge, with the potential to be disseminated through education at all levels.

A looming crisis

If, as mainstream religious naturalists suggest, religion is about the holiness of the natural world rather than supernatural gods, then a looming crisis in the world is an appropriate context in which to discuss religion and ethical principles. Opinions vary on the timing and severity of the crisis, but the onset is likely to be well within the lifetime of children born in 2014.

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 a significant number of people towards a radical change of aspirations and life-style based on promises and threats of an after-life in heaven or hell. Humanity is almost certainly heading into a dangerous and unpredictable future.

In the *epic of evolution* the global village has a compelling alternative mythology already available, as well as the tools to communicate it as the basis for a new approach to education, an approach based on the imperative to co-operate with nature in the interest of survival. 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 my intuition is that religious naturalism, grounded in the epic of evolution, stands a better chance than any other school of religious thought, of giving us a vision of the world and a new model of education that could help us cope with the coming global crisis.

Michael Barrett grew up in a Catholic background, was educated at Downside and Cambridge in the 1950s, worked in media, education and development in a number of countries, and now lives in Oxford.