



# Spiritual Naturalist Society

Happiness through Compassion, Reason, and Practice

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## What is SN?



*Spiritual Naturalism* (also called religious naturalism) is a worldview, value system, and personal life practice. The term appeared by at least 1895, but as a

concept it has been around for thousands of years. A religion to some, philosophy to others, Spiritual Naturalism sees the universe as one natural and sacred whole – as is the *rationality* and the science through which nature is revealed. It advocates principles and practices that have *compassion* as their foundation, and it finds wisdom and inspiration in innumerable rich traditions and ethical philosophies from around the world.

The focus of Spiritual Naturalism is *happiness*, contentment, or flourishing in life, and a relief from suffering. It is a spirituality whereby we work to become wiser and to live better over time through continued learning, contemplative practices, and character development. It is by walking such a path that we become more capable of helping to make the world a better place, and in so doing, come closer to the flourishing ‘good life’.



### First Time Here?

Learn about Spiritual Naturalism and SNS...



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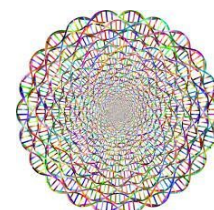
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To explain in more detail, it is helpful to take each word separately:

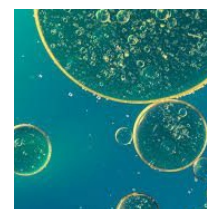
**Naturalism** is a view of the world that includes those things which we can observe or directly conclude from observations. Naturalists' conception of reality consists of the natural world as outlined by the latest scientific understanding. As for claims for which we have no evidence, we do not hold any beliefs in these and do not make any other claims about them. It is quite possible, even likely, that many things exist which we cannot detect, but we believe in a humble approach to knowledge. With humility, we can recognize that human beings are imperfect in their ability to know all things. Therefore, we are careful to limit our claims about reality to what we can experience and measure, as well as reproduce and show to others. On all else, we are content to admit "we don't know".

**Spirituality** is the other word in Spiritual Naturalism. For many, the word 'spirituality' has an association with the supernatural. However, we mean the term in its more general and original sense. The Latin root word *spiritus* meant 'wind' or 'breath', or the essence of something. As we might speak of the 'spirit of the law' or 'school spirit', the spiritual is that which is concerned with the *essence* of life – or the *essential* things in life. Thus, a person with no sense of spirituality would be a person that lives on the surface, always dealing only with the shallow or the mundane; perhaps even a materialistic person. But to have spirituality is to be concerned with the larger, deeper, and essential matters of life and to apply ourselves consciously toward them in a committed practice or 'walk'. This includes, as Socrates put it, the 'examined life', and this is what we mean by *spirituality*.

## Spiritual Naturalism and Other Worldviews

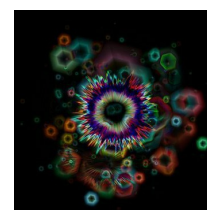
Because it is a general term that overlaps with many

## Origins of Life



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## The Present That's Simply Present



Shining a tiny light into the depths...

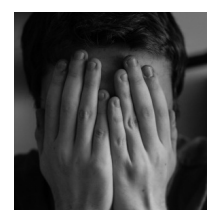
## My Evolving "Prayer" Practice



Prayer as giving

attention, being present, observing, being mindful...

## When Our Spiritual Practice Doesn't Deliver



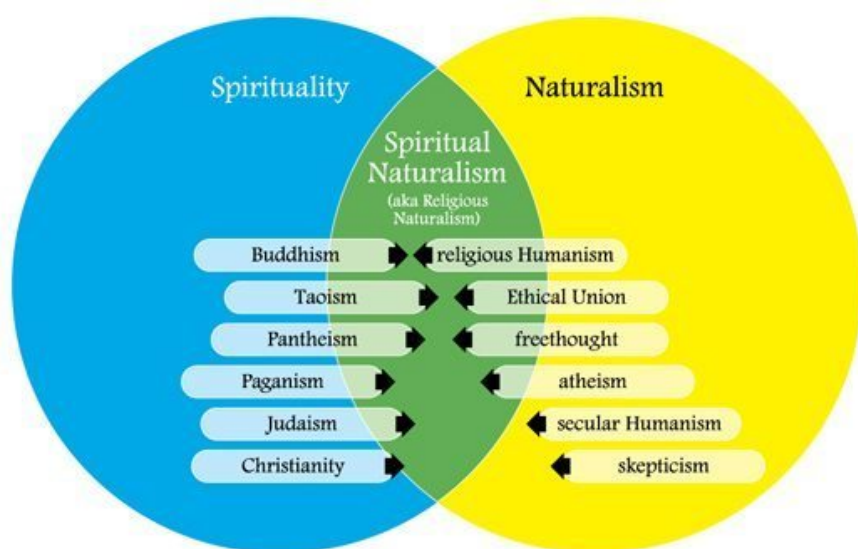
Facing the dark night of the soul

with determination...

## Always Where You Never Expect It: A Meditation on Evil



viewpoints, it is possible for a person to be a Spiritual Naturalist and several other things simultaneously. Spiritual Naturalism cuts across traditional or familiar categories. Many Humanists, Unitarians, Freethinkers, Jews, Pagans, Buddhists, skeptics, atheists, agnostics, and others may also be Spiritual Naturalists, though not all of them.



Many communities now have subsets growing toward a common naturalistic spirituality.

**Video: Spiritual Naturalism and our Society (2 minutes, 48 seconds)**



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## Opus 50: The One and the Many



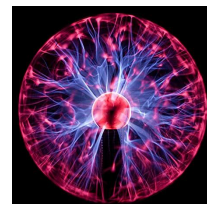
Exploring the *uni* and the *verse* of the universe...

## Coping with Being Human



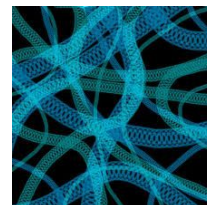
Exploring our humanness in the light of evolution...

## Naturalizing the Pagan Deities



Thinking of natural forces as spirits...

## Our Actual “Eve”



Contemplating the mother of us all...

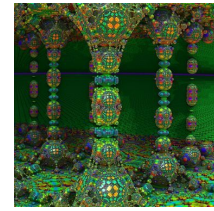
## Calming the Waters



Sailing

beyond the winds of  
desire...

## Imagine That



An

exploration of the value  
of seeing what is not  
there...

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It may help to compare Spiritual Naturalism to other  
belief systems you may have heard of:

### Christianity, Islam, and Judaism

The chief difference between Spiritual Naturalists and Christians is the former's naturalist worldview and approach to knowledge. Spiritual Naturalists prefer the methods of empiricism, logic, reason, and observation for determining what is true about our world, while Christians usually also include faith, revelation, communion, scripture, and such means as sources of knowledge. This is why naturalists do not share Christian beliefs regarding the existence of God, other supernatural entities, or an afterlife. It is also why most Christians would not consider Spiritual Naturalism compatible with their beliefs. However, when it comes to other virtues, ethics, and values, the two find many things in common. Like Christians, Spiritual Naturalists also believe in loving your neighbor, treating others as you would be treated, forgiveness, mercy, and charity. There is also a contemplative and meditative thread within the Christian tradition that can be similar to

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Spiritual Naturalist practices. There should be many worthy projects and causes which Christians and Spiritual Naturalists can work together on, in mutual love and respect for one another. The other Abrahamic faiths of Islam and Orthodox Judaism compare to Spiritual Naturalism in similar ways as Christianity, and for similar reasons. Judaism in general, because of its intimate expression within culture, tradition, and ritual, consists of many Spiritual Naturalist people that yet consider themselves Jewish. Lastly, there is a small but vibrant and growing movement of Christian naturalists, and we have at least two such people on our Advisory Board and feature descriptions of this view in our Resources and Member Archives.

## **Atheism / Agnosticism**

Since Spiritual Naturalists do not have supernatural beliefs this would make many of them either atheist and/or agnostic on the subject of gods (with exceptions mentioned below). But while all Spiritual Naturalists are atheists or agnostics, not all atheists and agnostics are Spiritual Naturalists. To be such, they would also have a focus on the principles and practices of Spiritual Naturalism, and be interested in those kinds of pursuits. Also, Spiritual Naturalists are not generally concerned with telling believers they are wrong or with religious criticism, while this may be a concern of some atheists. For those atheists and agnostics that do share its values and concerns, they could easily be Spiritual Naturalist simultaneously. Having said this, some Spiritual Naturalists may find metaphorical personifications or archetypes useful. Those who engage in this kind of deity practice may be naturalists and yet not count themselves as atheistic.

## **Humanism**

Humanism is very similar to Spiritual Naturalism, such



that nearly all Spiritual Naturalists would fall under the definition of Humanist. The modern conception of Humanist since the first Humanist Manifesto in 1933 has been those who are (a) naturalistic and (b) have a concern for their fellow human being. So, there is certainly a great deal of overlap and compatibility. However, there are some individuals for which overlap may not apply. While Humanism has a strong tradition of supporting and even helping to birth the animal rights movement, some Spiritual Naturalists may not prefer the term ‘Humanist’ because of their concern for all beings. Some Humanist gatherings may also tend to be more academic and secular in feel for other Spiritual Naturalists. On the other side, many Humanists relate more to the strictly *secular humanist* tradition, whereby they find words like ‘spirituality’ and the rituals and practices of Spiritual Naturalists to be too religious in tone. Further, many Humanist organizations focus on worthy social issues, political activity, and religious criticism, whereas Spiritual Naturalism begins with living rightly by example and with *inner* development as a starting point. The founder of the Spiritual Naturalist Society, Daniel Strain, is a past president of Humanist organizations, and currently a Humanist minister certified by the American Humanist Association.

## Unitarian Universalism (UU)

Many of Spiritual Naturalism’s modern outlooks, tolerant dispositions, ritual and spiritual practices, and tendency to take wisdom from many traditional sources may seem very UU. Indeed, many Unitarians are Spiritual Naturalists and vice versa. However, one difference with UU congregations is that they also include supernaturalists and are not expressly naturalist and empiricist in their worldview. In that regard Spiritual Naturalism is not as broad as Unitarianism, but a good number of Unitarians are also Spiritual Naturalists and

certainly a very welcome part of the Society.

## **Freethought / Skepticism / Rationalism**

Spiritual Naturalism includes a reverence for rationality – both the rational order on which the universe operates, as well as the human capacity for reason. This certainly includes freethinking, rationalism, and a healthy skepticism (not cynicism). Like these groups, we believe that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. However, Spiritual Naturalism goes further by including a focus on personal practices and wisdom teachings designed to enhance happiness in life. This additional content may not be of interest to some freethinkers, skeptics, or rationalists, but could easily be of interest to many of them. Again, in these cases there would be simultaneous overlap.

## **Buddhism**

In a way, Spiritual Naturalism could be looked at as a form of philosophical Buddhism. There are many schools and ways of conceiving of Buddhism and practicing it. Some very much include the supernatural and some are more of a ‘secular Buddhism’. Many of Buddhism’s concepts can be interpreted in naturalistic terms. Buddhism has certainly inspired the Spiritual Naturalist practices of meditation, mindfulness, compassion, and more. Therefore, there is much overlap and many people are both Buddhists and Spiritual Naturalists.

## **Paganism**

Like Buddhism, there is a spectrum of interpretation regarding many Pagan paths. On one end is a literal interpretation whereby gods and spirits are believed in supernatural terms, and on the other end, they may be seen as metaphoric personifications of fully natural forces or aspects of nature, or as useful archetypes. There could therefore be a good deal of overlap for at

least some Pagans, with *Naturalistic Paganism* or *Humanistic Paganism* even being considered a type of *Spiritual Naturalism*. Indeed, there is a historic thread in Paganism that has seen the universe as one integrated natural whole, with a value on experience as the means for learning about it.

## **Pantheism**

Pantheists also have a range of interpretation for their concepts. For those who are naturalist and empiricist in their approach, they will find consistency with *Spiritual Naturalism* as well.

**In conclusion, many varieties of Humanism, Buddhism, Paganism, Unitarianism, Freethought, skepticism, atheism, agnosticism, and pantheism fall under the realm of *Spiritual Naturalism* and would be very much at home at the SNS.**

Other varieties of these which tend to either believe in the supernatural or – on the opposite end – are adverse to anything with a ‘religion-like’ feel, would be less compatible. In either case, these groups would still be those with which *Spiritual Naturalists* would be happy to live and work compassionately and respectfully on common causes.

*“Spiritual Naturalism has been described as ‘science with awe’, but a true spirituality has to be more than that. Awe and wonder are important parts of spirituality. They inspire us to undertake the journey, but they are only the ‘window dressing’ of spiritual naturalism. A robust spiritual path will have the natural world revealed by science as its*



worldview, but it will also consist of a set of profound perspectives and wise values. It will include specific contemplative practices designed to instill that philosophy into our intuitive way of being. It will be a lifestyle that allows us to make progress. This progress will be a steady and measurable cultivation of a character that is more enlightened, more in tune with the way of the universe, more virtuous, more compassionate; and therefore more capable of experiencing the flourishing, good life. This is nothing less than a path to freedom – freedom from fear and from the bonds of circumstance as a condition for happiness.”

–Rev. Daniel Strain, SNS Executive Director

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### ***Learn about membership in the Spiritual Naturalist Society***

To learn more about Spiritual Naturalism, see the article in Wikipedia:

### ***Spiritual Naturalism at Wikipedia***

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Living



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# Religious naturalism

**Religious naturalism** (RN) combines a naturalist worldview with perceptions and values commonly associated with religions.<sup>[1][2]</sup> In this, "religious" is understood in general terms, separate from established traditions, in designating feelings and concerns (e.g. gratitude, wonder, humility, compassion) that are often described as spiritual or religious.<sup>[3][4][5]</sup> Naturalism refers to a view that the natural world is all we have substantiated reason to believe exists, and there is no substantiated reason to believe that anything else, including deities, exists or may act in ways that are independent of the natural order<sup>[6][7]</sup>

Areas of inquiry include attempts to understand the natural world and the spiritual and moral implications of naturalist views.<sup>[8]</sup> Understanding is based in knowledge obtained through scientific inquiry and insights from the humanities and the arts.<sup>[9]</sup>

Religious naturalists use these perspectives in responding to personal and social challenges (e.g. finding purpose, seeking justice, coming to terms with mortality) and in relating to the natural world.<sup>[8]</sup>



The interconnectivity of nature is a key postulate in religious naturalism.

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## Naturalism

Naturalism is the "idea or belief that onlynatural (as opposed to supernatural or spiritual) laws and forces operate in the world"<sup>[10]</sup>

All forms of religious naturalism, being naturalistic in their basic beliefs, assert that the natural world is the center of our most significant experiences and understandings. Consequently, nature is considered as the ultimate value in assessing one's being. Religious naturalists, despite having followed differing cultural and individual paths, affirm the human need for meaning and value in their lives. They draw on two fundamental convictions in those quests: the sense of Nature's richness, spectacular complexity, and fertility, and the recognition that Nature is the only realm in which people live out their lives. Humans are considered interconnected parts of Nature.

Science is a fundamental, indispensable component of the paradigm of religious naturalism. It relies on mainstream science to reinforce religious and spiritual perspectives. Science is the primary interpretive tool for religious naturalism, because, scientific methods are thought to provide the most reliable understanding of Nature and the world, including human nature.

"Truth is sought for its own sake. And those who are engaged upon the quest for anything for its own sake are not interested in other things. Finding the truth is difficult, and the road to it is rough."<sup>[11]</sup>

Therefore, the seeker after the truth is not one who studies the writings of the ancients and, following his natural disposition, puts his trust in them, but rather the one who suspects his faith in them and questions what he gathers from them, the one who submits to argument and demonstration, and not to the sayings of a human being whose nature is fraught with all kinds of imperfection and deficiency. Thus the duty of the man who investigates the writings of scientists, if learning the truth is his goal, is to make himself an enemy of all that he reads, and, applying his mind to the core and margins of its content, attack it from every side. He should also suspect himself as he performs his critical examination of it, so that he may avoid falling into either prejudice or leniency<sup>[12]</sup>

## Religious

Religious naturalists use the term "religious" to refer to an attitude – of being appreciative of and interested in concerns that have long been parts of religions.<sup>[13][14]</sup> These include:<sup>[15]</sup>

- A spiritual sense (which may include a sense of mystery or wonder or feelings of reverence or awe in response to the scope and power and beauty of the natural world)
- A moral sense (with compassion, desire for justice, and attempts to do what is right – with respect to other people, other creatures, and the natural environment)



A religious attitude towards nature

As the source of all that is and the reason why all things are as they are, the natural world may be seen as being of ultimate importance.<sup>[16]</sup>

As in other religious orientations, religious naturalism includes **a central story** – a modern creation myth – to describe ourselves and our place in the world. This begins with the Big Bang and the emergence of galaxies, stars, planets, and life, and evolution that led to the presence of human beings. As this gives insight into who we are and how we came to be, religious naturalists look to the natural world (the source of our intelligence and inclinations) for information and insights that may help us to understand and respond to important questions:

- Why do we want what we want?
- Why we do the things we do?
- What we might try to point ourselves toward?

and to try to find ways to minimize problems (in ourselves and in our world), become our better selves, and relate to others and the world we are part of.<sup>[17]</sup>

When discussing distinctions between "religious" naturalists and "plain old" (secular) naturalists, Loyal Rue said: "I regard a religious or spiritual person to be one who takes ultimate concerns to heart."<sup>[18]</sup>

He noted that, while "plain old" naturalists are concerned with morals and may have emotional responses to the mysteries and wonders of the world, those who describe themselves as religious naturalists take it more "to heart" and show active interest in this area.<sup>[19]</sup>

## History

Core themes in religious naturalism have been present, in varied cultures, for centuries. But active discussion, with use of this name, is relatively recent.

Zeno (c. 334 – c. 262 BCE, a founder of Stoicism) said:

All things are parts of one single system, which is called Nature ... Virtue consists in a will which is in agreement with Nature.<sup>[20]</sup>

Views consistent with religious naturalism can be seen in ancient Daoist texts (e.g., *Dao De Jing*) and some Hindu views (such as God as *Nirguṇa Brahman*, God without attributes). They may also be seen in Western images that do not focus on active, personal aspects of God, such as Thomas Aquinas' view of God as Pure Act, Augustine's God as Being Itself, and Paul Tillich's view of God as Ground of Being. As Wesley Wildman has described, views consistent with RN have long existed as part of the underside of major religious traditions, often quietly and sometimes in mystical strands or intellectual sub-traditions, by practitioners who are not drawn to supernatural claims!<sup>[21]</sup>

The earliest uses of the term, religious naturalism, seem to have occurred in the 1800s. In 1846, the *American Whig Review* described "a seeming 'religious naturalism'",<sup>[22]</sup> In 1869, American Unitarian Association literature adjudged: "Religious naturalism differs from this mainly in the fact that it extends the domain of nature farther outward into space and time. ...It never transcends nature".<sup>[23]</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach wrote that religious naturalism was "the acknowledgment of the Divine in Nature" and also "an element of the Christian religion", but by no means that religion's definitive "characteristic" or "tendency".<sup>[24]</sup>

In 1864, Pope Pius IX condemned religious naturalism in the first seven articles of the Syllabus of Errors.

Mordecai Kaplan (1881–1983), one of the great rabbis of the 20th century and the founder of the Jewish reconstructionism movement,<sup>[25]</sup> early advocated religious naturalism. He believed that a naturalistic approach to religion and ethics was possible in a desacralizing world. He saw God as the sum of all natural processes!<sup>[26]</sup>

Other verified usages of the term came in 1940 from George Perrigo Conger<sup>[27]</sup> and from Edgar S. Brightman.<sup>[28]</sup> Shortly thereafter, H. H. Dubs wrote an article entitled *Religious Naturalism – an Evaluation* (*The Journal of Religion*, XXIII: 4, October, 1943), which begins "Religious naturalism is today one of the outstanding American philosophies of religion..." and discusses ideas developed by Henry Nelson Wieman in books that predate Dubs's article by 20 years.

In 1991 Jerome A. Stone wrote *The Minimalist Vision of Transcendence* explicitly "to sketch a philosophy of religious naturalism".<sup>[29]</sup> Use of the term was expanded in the 1990s by Loyal Rue, who was familiar with the term from Brightman's book. Rue used the term in conversations with several people before 1994, and subsequent conversations between Rue and Ursula Goodenough [both of whom were active in IRAS (*The Institute on Religion in an Age of Science*)] led to Goodenough's use in her book "The Sacred Depths of Nature" and by Rue in "Religion is not about God" and other writings. Since 1994 numerous authors have used the phrase or expressed similar thinking. Examples are Chet Raymo, Stuart Kauffman and Karl E. Peters

Mike Ignatowski states that "there were many religious naturalists in the first half of the 20th century and some even before that" but that "religious naturalism as a movement didn't really come into its own until about 1990 [and] took a major leap forward in 1998 when Ursula Goodenough published *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, which is considered one of the founding texts of this movement."<sup>[30]</sup>

Biologist Ursula Goodenough states:



Lao Tzu, traditionally the author of the *Tao Te Ching*

I profess my Faith. For me, the existence of all this complexity and awareness and intent and beauty, and my ability to apprehend it, serves as the ultimate meaning and the ultimate value. The continuation of life reaches around, grabs its own tail, and forms a sacred circle that requires no further justification, no Creator, no super-ordinate meaning of meaning, no purpose other than that the continuation continue until the sun collapses or the final meteor collides. I confess a credo of continuation. And in so doing, I confess as well a credo of human continuation<sup>[31][32]</sup>

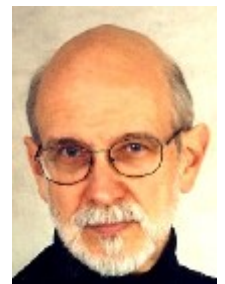


Ursula Goodenough

Donald Crosby's *Living with Ambiguity* published in 2008, has, as its first chapter, *Religion of Nature as a Form of Religious Naturalism*<sup>[33]</sup>

Loyal Rue's *Nature is Enough* published in 2011, discusses "Religion Naturalized, Nature Sanctified" and "The Promise of Religious Naturalism"<sup>[34]</sup>

*Religious Naturalism Today: The Rebirth of a Forgotten Alternative* is a history by Dr. Jerome A. Stone (Dec. 2008 release) that presents this paradigm as a once-forgotten option in religious thinking that is making a rapid revival. It seeks to explore and encourage religious ways of responding to the world on a completely naturalistic basis without a supreme being or ground of being. This book traces this history and analyzes some of the issues dividing religious naturalists. It covers the birth of religious naturalism, from George Santayana to Henry Nelson Wieman and briefly explores religious naturalism in literature and art. Contested issues are discussed including whether nature's power or goodness is the focus of attention and also on the appropriateness of using the term "God". The contributions of more than twenty living Religious Naturalists are presented. The last chapter ends the study by exploring what it is like on the inside to live as a religious naturalist.<sup>[35]</sup>



Jerome A. Stone

Chet Raymo writes that he had come to the same conclusion as Teilhard de Chardin: "Grace is everywhere",<sup>[36]</sup> and that naturalistic emergence is in everything and far more magical than religion-based miracles. A future humankind religion should be ecumenical, ecological, and embrace the story provided by science as the "most reliable cosmology"<sup>[37]</sup>.

As P. Roger Gillette summarizes:

Thus was religious naturalism born. It takes the findings of modern science seriously, and thus is inherently naturalistic. But it also takes the human needs that led to the emergence of religious systems seriously and thus is also religious. It is religious, or reconnective, in that it seeks and facilitates human reconnection with one's self, family, larger human community, local and global ecosystem, and unitary universe (...) Religious reconnection implies love. And love implies concern, concern for the well-being of the beloved. Religious naturalism thus is marked by concern for the well-being of the whole of nature. This concern provides a basis and drive for ethical behavior toward the whole holy unitary universe.<sup>[38]</sup>

## Tenets

Due to the high importance placed on nature, some religious naturalists have a strong sense of stewardship for the Earth. Luther College professor Loyal Rue has written:

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.<sup>[39]</sup>

# Varieties

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The literature related to religious naturalism includes many variations in conceptual framing. This reflects individual takes on various issues, to some extent various schools of thought, such as basic naturalism, religious humanism, pantheism, panentheism, and spiritual naturalism that have had time on the conceptual stage, and to some extent differing ways of characterizing Nature.

Current discussion often relates to the issue of whether belief in a God or God-language and associated concepts have any place in a framework that treats the physical universe as its essential frame of reference and the methods of science as providing the preeminent means for determining what Nature is. There are at least three varieties of religious naturalism, and three similar but somewhat different ways to categorize them. They are:

- A kind of naturalism that **does** use theological language but fundamentally treats God metaphorically
- A commitment to naturalism **using theological language**, but as either (1) a faith statement or supported by philosophical arguments, or (2) both, usually leaving open the question of whether that usage as metaphor or refers to the ultimate answer that Nature can be.
- **Neo-theistic** (process theology, progressive religions) – Gordon Kaufman, Karl E. Peters, Ralph Wendell Burhoe, Edmund Robinson<sup>[40]</sup>
- **Non-theistic** (agnostic, naturalistic concepts of god) – Robertson himself, Stanley Klein, Stuart Kauffman, Naturalistic Paganism.
- **atheistic** (no God concept, some modern naturalisms, Process Naturalism, C. Robert Mesle, non-militant atheism, antitheism) – Jerome A. Stone, Michael Cavanaugh, Donald A. Crosby,<sup>[41]</sup> Ursula Goodenough, Daniel Dennett<sup>[42]</sup>
- A hodgepodge of **individual perspectives** – Philip Hefner

The first category has as many sub-groups as there are distinct definitions for god. Believers in a supernatural entity (transcendent) are by definition not religious naturalists however the matter of a naturalistic concept of God (Immanence) is currently debated. Strong atheists are not considered Religious Naturalists in this differentiation. Some individuals call themselves religious naturalists but refuse to be categorized. The unique theories of religious naturalists Loyal Rue, Donald A. Crosby, Jerome A. Stone, and Ursula Goodenough are discussed by Michael Hogue in his 2010 book *The Promise of Religious Naturalism*<sup>[43]</sup>

## God concepts<sup>[44]</sup>

- Those who conceive of God as the **creative process within the universe** – example, Henry Nelson Wieman
- Those who think of God as the **totality of the universe** considered religiously – Bernard Loomer.
- A third type of religious naturalism sees **no need to use the concept or terminology of God** Stone himself and Ursula Goodenough

Stone emphasizes that some Religious Naturalists do not reject the concept of God, but if they use the concept, it involves a radical alteration of the idea such as Gordon Kaufman who defines God as creativity

Ignatowski divides RN into only two types – theistic and non-theistic.<sup>[30]</sup>

## Shared principles

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There are several principles shared by all the aforementioned varieties of religious naturalism.<sup>[45]</sup>

- All varieties of religious naturalism see humans as an interconnected, emergent part of nature.
- Accept the primacy of science with regard to what is measurable via the scientific method
- Recognize science's limitations in accounting for judgments of value and in providing a full account of human experience. Thus religious naturalism embraces nature's creativity, beauty and mystery and honors many aspects of



the artistic, cultural and religious traditions that respond to and attempt to interpret Nature in subjective ways.

- Approach matters of morality ethics and value with a focus on how the world works, with a deep concern for fairness and the welfare of all humans regardless of their station in life.
- Seek to integrate these interpretative, spiritual and ethical responses in a manner that respects diverse religious and philosophical perspectives, while still subjecting them and itself to rigorous scrutiny
- The focus on scientific standards of evidence imbues RN with the humility inherent in scientific inquiry and its limited, albeit ever deepening, ability to describe reality (see Epistemology).
- A strong environmental ethic for the welfare of the planet Earth and humanity
- Belief in the sacredness of life and the evolutionary process

The concept of emergence has grown in popularity with many Religious Naturalists. It helps explain how a complex Universe and life by self-organization have risen out of a multiplicity of relatively simple elements and their interactions. The entire story of emergence is related in the Epic of Evolution – the mythic scientific narrative used to tell the verifiable chronicle of the evolutionary process that is the Universe. Most religious naturalist consider the Epic of Evolution a true story about the historic achievement of Nature.<sup>[46][47][48]</sup> *"The Epic of Evolution is the 14 billion year narrative of cosmic, planetary, life, and cultural evolution—told in sacred ways. Not only does it bridge mainstream science and a diversity of religious traditions; if skillfully told, it makes the science story memorable and deeply meaningful, while enriching one's religious faith or secular outlook."*<sup>[49]</sup>

A number of naturalistic writers have used this theme as a topic for their books using such synonyms as: Cosmic Evolution, Everybody's Story, Evolutionary Epic, Evolutionary Universe, Great Story, New Story, Universal Story. *'Epic of evolution' is a term that, within the past three years(1998), has become the theme and title of a number of gatherings. It seems to have been first used by Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson in 1978. 'The evolutionary epic,' Wilson wrote in his book On Human Nature, 'is probably the best myth we will ever have.' Myth as falsehood was not the usage intended by Wilson in this statement. Rather, myth as a grand narrative that provides a people with a placement in time—a meaningful placement that celebrates extraordinary moments of a shared heritage. The epic of evolution is science translated into meaningful story"*<sup>[50]</sup>

Evolutionary evangelist minister Michael Dowd uses the term to help present his position that science and religious faith are not mutually exclusive (a premise of religious naturalism). He preaches that the epic of cosmic, biological, and human evolution, revealed by science, is a basis for an inspiring and meaningful view of our place in the universe. Evolution is viewed as a spiritual process that it is not meaningless blind chance.<sup>[51]</sup> He is joined by a number of other theologians in this position.<sup>[52][53][54]</sup>

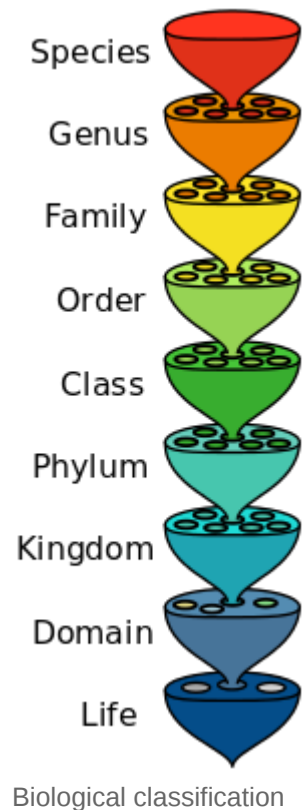
## Notable proponents and critics

### Proponents

Support for religious naturalism can be seen from two perspectives. One is individuals, in recent times, who have discussed and supported religious naturalism, per se. Another is individuals from earlier times who may not have used or been familiar with the term, "religious naturalism", but who had views that are compatible and whose thoughts have contributed to development of religious naturalism.

People who have been supportive of and who discussed religious naturalism by name include:

- Chet Raymo
- Loyal Rue
- Donald A. Crosby
- Jerome A. Stone
- Michael Dowd



- [Ursula Goodenough](#)
- [Terrence Deacon](#)
- [Loren Eiseley](#)
- [Philip Hefner](#)
- [Ralph Wendell Burhoe](#)
- [Mordecai Kaplan](#)
- [Henry Nelson Wieman](#)
- [George Santayana](#)
- [Gordon D. Kaufman](#)
- [Stuart Kauffman](#)
- [Stanley A. Klein](#)
- [C. Robert Mesle](#)
- [Karl E. Peters](#)
- [Varadaraja V. Raman](#)
- [Ian Barbour](#)
- [Robert S. Corrington](#)

People from earlier times, who did not use the term, religious naturalism, but who had compatible views, include:

- [Lao-Tzu](#)
- [Albert Einstein](#)
- [W.E.B. Du Bois](#)
- [Aldo Leopold](#)

## Critics

Religious naturalism has been criticized from two perspectives. One is that of traditional Western religion, which disagrees with naturalist disbelief in a personal God. Another is that of naturalists who do not agree that a religious sense can or should be associated with naturalist views. Critics in the first group include supporters of traditional Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religion. Critics in the second group include:

- [Richard Dawkins](#)<sup>[55]</sup>
- [John Haught](#)<sup>[56]</sup>

## Prominent communities and leaders

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Religious naturalists sometimes use the social practices of traditional religions, including communal gatherings and rituals, to foster a sense of community, and to serve as reinforcement of its participants' efforts to expand the scope of their understandings. Some other groups mainly communicate online. Some known examples of religious naturalists groupings and congregation leaders are:<sup>[57]</sup>

- [Religious Naturalist Association](#)<sup>[58]</sup>
- [Spiritual Naturalist Society](#)<sup>[59]</sup>
- [Unitarian Universalist Religious Naturalists](#)<sup>[60]</sup>
- [Religious Naturalism Facebook Group](#)<sup>[61]</sup>
- [World Pantheist Movement](#)—largely web-based but with some local groups<sup>[62]</sup>
- [Universal Pantheist Society](#) founded 1975 —*Pantheism is an intercepting concept with religious naturalism*<sup>[63]</sup>
- [Congregation Beth Or](#) a Jewish congregation near Chicago led by Rabbi David Ole<sup>[64]</sup>
- [Congregation of Beth Adam](#) in Loveland Ohio led by Rabbi Robert Bar<sup>[65]</sup>
- [Pastor Ian Lawton](#), minister at the Christ Community Church in Spring Lake, West Michigan and Center for Progressive Christianity<sup>[66][67]</sup>

Religious Naturalism is the focus of classes and conferences at some colleges and theology schools.<sup>[68][69]</sup> Articles about religious naturalism have appeared frequently in journals, including *Zygon*, *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, and the *International Journal for Philosophy and Religion*.<sup>[70]</sup>

## See also

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- [Creation Spirituality](#)
- [Creativity \(religion\)](#)
- [Daoism](#)
- [Epic of evolution](#)
- [Epicureanism](#)
- [Fitra](#)
- [Liberal naturalism](#)
- [Liberal religion](#)
- [List of new religious movements](#)
- [Naturalistic pantheism](#)
- [Philosophical theism](#)
- [Postsecularism](#)
- [Process theology](#)
- [Spiritual naturalism](#)
- [World Pantheist Movement](#)
- [Zygon \(journal\)](#)

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- 1992 – [Brian Swimme](#) – *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era* HarperCollins, 1992, ISBN 0062508350

Reading lists – [Evolution Reading Resources](#) [Books of the Epic of Evolution](#) [Cosmic Evolution](#)

## External links

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- [Religious Naturalist Association](#)
  - [Religious Naturalism](#)
  - [Religious Naturalism Resources](#) Boston University
  - [The Great Story](#) leading RN educational website
  - [Naturalism.org](#)
  - [The New Cosmology](#)
  - [SacredRiver.org](#)
  - [The Spiritual Naturalist Society](#)
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# Spiritual naturalism

**Spiritual naturalism**, or **naturalistic spirituality** combines mundane and spiritual ways of looking at the world.<sup>[1]</sup> Spiritual naturalism may have first been proposed by Joris-Karl Huysmans in 1895 in his book *En Route* – "In 'En Route' Huysmans started upon the creation of what he called 'Spiritual Naturalism,' that is, realism applied to the story of a soul. ..."<sup>[2]</sup>

Coming into prominence as a writer during the 1870s, Huysmans quickly established himself among a rising group of writers, the so-called Naturalist school, of whom Émile Zola was the acknowledged head...With *Là-bas* (1891), a novel which reflected the aesthetics of the spiritualist revival and the contemporary interest in the occult, Huysmans formulated for the first time an aesthetic theory which sought to synthesize the mundane and the transcendent: "spiritual Naturalism".



Joris-Karl Huysmans

Long before the term spiritual naturalism was coined by Huysmans, there is evidence of the value system of spiritual naturalism in the Stoics. "Virtue consists in a will that is in agreement with Nature".<sup>[3]</sup>

## Contents

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- Buddhism

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## Definitions

### Spirituality

Spirituality (from the Latin root *spiritus* 'breath, spirit', from *spirare* 'breathe'<sup>[4]</sup>) is an overarching concept related to religion and "affecting the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things".<sup>[5]</sup> With many different definitions as scholars try to pin down exactly what it is they are defining, it has tended to have a more positive connotation than religion broadly in recent years

because of its "association with personal experiences of the transcendent".<sup>[6][7]</sup> It is seen as more positive because of trends toward privileging individuality, and so many different definitions are given it by many different people, any one of them unlikely to satisfy everyone.

In fact, the term is so broad and so dependent on who is using how, why, when, and in what context, that some have given up on trying to give it a comprehensive definition and just say that it means something different to all who use it.<sup>[8]</sup> Perhaps a less necessarily contextual definition is found in the words of K. I. Pargament, who sees spirituality as a "search for the sacred" of each individual.<sup>[9]</sup>

## Naturalism

Naturalism (from Latin *natura* 'birth, nature, quality'<sup>[4]</sup>) is "the idea or belief that only natural (as opposed to supernatural or spiritual) laws and forces operate in the world".<sup>[5]</sup> It has been especially prominent in America,<sup>[10]</sup> and has been a valuable tool in scientific endeavors to discover the natural laws of the universe as it believes that everything can be explained through the language and explanatory power of empirical scientific experimentation. It is not, however, necessarily a lack of religion; given a definition of religion that includes searching for the truths of the universe, naturalism is eminently describable as such. Scholar Jerome A. Stone gives the definition as "affirm[ing] that attention should be focused on the events and processes of this world to provide what degree of explanation and meaning are possible to this life".<sup>[11]</sup>

The spiritual variety of naturalism finds ways to reconcile the feelings of awe and religious experience with the idea that everything is natural and can be studied using methods applicable to studying nature, including the place of humans in the universe.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Origins

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Spiritual Naturalism is a variety of philosophical and religious worldviews that are naturalistic in their basic viewpoint but have a spiritual and religious perspective also. Chief among modern forms of Spiritual Naturalism are religious naturalism, religious humanism, dualist pantheism, and humanistic religious naturalism.<sup>[13]</sup> The term may also apply to the beliefs of some (naturalistic) pagans, process thinkers, many Taoists, a number of Hindus, and a variety of non-affiliated independent thinkers who base their spiritual experience directly on Nature itself rather than traditional deities and the supernatural (i.e. Epicureans). Some liberal Jewish congregations, nontheist Friends, and Unitarians<sup>[14]</sup> have similar orientations in their adoption of Religious Naturalism beliefs.

Although the overall movement toward these attitudes remains relatively small and loosely organized, various forms of Spiritual Naturalism have existed since time immemorial, with the pantheistic philosophies of Taoism and similar Eastern nature-mysticisms being perhaps the most notable example. At present, there is a growing interest in adopting a Spiritual Naturalism rational alternative for the modern world because many are losing their belief in more traditional spiritual avenues. This is demonstrated in the recent rapid growth of Religious Naturalism, pantheism (particularly of an avowedly naturalistic variety) and some liberal Christian perspectives.<sup>[15]</sup> Theologians such as John Shelby Spong and Paul Tillich have embraced thinking that is non-secular naturalist.

Crucial challenges for the spiritual naturalism movement in its various forms currently involve developing and promulgating a conciliatory understanding of the somewhat ambiguous terms *spirituality* and *naturalism*. The difference in interpreting the difference between religious and spiritual, humanist and naturalist and free will and determinism also needs a consensus. In addition the individualistic nature and thinking of many of the adherents preclude organizing cohesive communities. However recent authors (Ursula Goodenough, Chet Raymo, Karl E. Peters, Loyal Rue and Stuart Kauffman) are highlighting the paradigm via their naturalistic writings.

In addition a few modern theologians with liberal orientations have rejected some of the historical claims of some biblical doctrines and supernaturalism and moved to progressive forms of Christianity and Judaism akin to theistic naturalism. Examples are: Mordecai Kaplan, John Shelby Spong, Paul Tillich, John A. T. Robinson, William Murry and Gordon Kaufman. Some of those into process theology may also be included in this movement.

## Orientation

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Spiritual Naturalism has advocates that cover the religious spectrum including neo-theism (neo-Christianity, process theology), non-theism, and not-theism, though the advocates are by no means limited to these orientations. The majority probably are agnostic or atheistic while many prefer not to be categorized.<sup>[16]</sup> There is a vast difference in opinions on how to address the question of a deity of some kind, if at all. There are those who see God as the creative process within/of the universe, those who define God as the totality of the universe (The All), some who use God in metaphoric ways, those who have no need to use the concept or terminology of God even as a metaphor, and some who are atheistic proclaiming there is no such entity whatsoever and rebel against usage of the term.

Spiritual Naturalism is chiefly concerned with finding ways to access traditional spiritual feelings without the inclusion of supernatural elements incompatible with science and a broad naturalism. Adherents believe that nature, in all its diversity and wonder, is sufficient unto itself in terms of eliciting the intellectual and emotional responses associated with spiritual experience, and that there is no need for faith in the traditional anthropomorphic concept of 'god' or similar ideas.<sup>[16]</sup>

Adherents of Spiritual Naturalism are generally scientifically-oriented in most aspects, with their primary difference from other naturalists being their belief that the abandonment of superstition does not necessarily entail the abandonment of spirituality. To adherents, the intellectual and emotional experience of something greater than oneself is seen as a phenomenon of enduring value; spirituality may be seen as "an emotional response to Reality".

## Examples in religions

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### Judaism

Spiritual Naturalist ideas are most prevalent in Reconstructionist Judaism: a modern Jewish movement based on the ideas of Mordecai Kaplan. Reconstructionist Jews assert that Judaism, as a culture and as a religion, is constantly evolving and adapting to modernity.<sup>[17]</sup> God is not perceived as a supernatural being, but as being "manifest in the practice of kindness, justice and righteousness on the earth".<sup>[18]</sup> The reconstructionist conception of God is compatible with the spiritual naturalist's assertion that there is no supernatural; spirituality is manifest in the physical world. Kaplan also states that "the reality of God henceforth will have to be experienced through the functioning of conscience in the conduct of men and nations".<sup>[18]</sup> To Kaplan and Reconstructionist Jews, God is the collective consciousness of the Jewish community, not a supernatural other. One strives to know God, and to know God is to know how to live morally

### Christianity

Naturalism in Christianity is a rarer phenomenon than in some other religions because of the intensity of belief in the personhood of God, especially through the figure of Jesus Christ. Some scholars<sup>[19]</sup> also posit that the anthropomorphizing tendencies of such religion will not be overcome in the near future, partly because the categories of the supernatural are too well suited to our current attitude toward nature: Westernized societies tend to view nature as something to be used, not something to feel religious awe towards.

With the development of scientific thought and the discoveries in evolution, physics, etc. have come challenges to the Christian worldview. Over time, various ideas on how to reconcile these scientific truths with theological truths of the doctrines of Christianity. There is the once-popular clockwork universe theory, which states that God made the universe to run its course mechanically predetermined; however, this has lost popularity after more discoveries about the probabilistic nature of the universe. There is also the idea that God interferes supernaturally in ways that mask the presence of the supernatural—perhaps at the quantum level where scientists cannot precisely determine anything. This tends toward making a joke of everything scientists strive for<sup>[20]</sup>

Another interpretation, one where both truths may be simultaneous and coterminous comes from the New Testament quote "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made."<sup>[21]</sup> This can be interpreted as saying that the Word of God is not God, but the perfect expression of God that is God and is not God but brings forth creation. In the words of Rudolf Brun "The Christian revelation about

creation does not proclaim that creation is an extension or a function embedded in God. Rather, the Word of God that is and remains God is given away to creation. It is a gift that empowers creation to become itself." This allows God to be all things (pantheism) and in all things (panentheism) without either of those cases being true. It allows Christian belief in God to be worked into a worldview where there is no predetermined path for the cosmos, because God so loved the world that the Word was given freely to become nature in all its creativity and freedom.<sup>[20]</sup>

## Taoism

"The term Tao means "way", "path", or "principle", and can also be found in Chinese philosophies and religions other than Taoism. In Taoism, however, Tao denotes something that is both the source of, and the force behind, everything that exists. Taoist propriety and ethics may vary depending on the particular school, but in general they tend to emphasize Wu-wei (action through non-action), "naturalness", simplicity, spontaneity, and the Three Treasures: compassion, moderation, and humility."<sup>[22]</sup> "Though Tao is ultimately transcendent, it is also immanent. In this secondary sense it is the way of the universe, the norm, the rhythm, the driving power in all nature, the ordering principle behind all life."<sup>[23]</sup>

"Tao can be talked about, but not the Eternal Tao.

Names can be named, but not the Eternal NameAs the origin of heaven-and-earth, it is nameless:

As the "Mother" of all Things it is nameable.<sup>[24]</sup>

## Buddhism

"In a way, Spiritual Naturalism could be looked at as a form of philosophical Buddhism. There are many schools and ways of conceiving of Buddhism and practicing it. Many of Buddhism's concepts can be interpreted in naturalistic terms. Buddhism has certainly inspired the Spiritual Naturalist practices of meditation, mindfulness, compassion, and more. Therefore, there is much overlap and many people are both Buddhists and Spiritual Naturalists".<sup>[22]</sup> The Noble Eightfold Path and the Five Precepts of Buddhism are rooted in right relationship between the devotee, moralityand practices that align with naturalism.

## See also

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- Cosmic consciousness
- List of new religious movements
- Naturalistic pantheism
- Nature worship
- Process philosophy
- Religious humanism
- Religious naturalism
- Secular spirituality
- Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion

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## Further reading

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## External links

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- [The Spiritual Naturalist Society](#)
  - [Toward a Naturalistic Spirituality](#)
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# 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

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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

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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. •

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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)