

Down the Rabbit Hole: Exploring Religious Naturalism

Karen Stevenson, March 13, 2011

Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, and what is the use of a book, thought Alice, without pictures or conversations?

So, she was considering, in her own mind (as well as she could, for the hot day made her feel very sleepy and stupid), whether the pleasure of making a daisy-chain would be worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daisies, when suddenly a White Rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her.

There was nothing so very remarkable in that; nor did Alice think it so very much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself "Oh dear! Oh Dear! I shall be too late!" (when she thought it over afterwards, it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural) but, when the Rabbit actually took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket, and looked at it, and then hurried on, Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it, and, burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it, and fortunately was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge.

In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again. (Opening paragraphs of Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland)

Thus begins the story of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. My own exploration into environmental issues also felt very much like Alice's fall. I began chasing after the idea of religious naturalism which became my own white rabbit! As Alice tumbled down that rabbit hole she passed by shelves and shelves of books, maps and pictures. Me too – philosophy, science, religion, ethics. She had time to imagine where she might land and mused philosophically about the eating habits of cats and bats, and worrying about her cat Dinah. My philosophical pondering took the shape of looking at environmental ethics, ecospirituality, simple living, biodiversity, climate change, our own UU 7th Principle, sustainability – on and on.

Landing at the bottom of that long tunnel, Alice longed to enter into the garden behind the small door. She had choices – should she eat the cookie? Or, should she drink the strange liquid in the bottle? She ended up trying both; neither by themselves was successful. She ended up either too small or too large. Success, and entrance through the door, was achieved with the help of both.

As I began my chase, trying to understand how our societies could lessen our impact on the environment, my questions and readings lead me to religious naturalism. Today I would like to share what I have learned about this evolving, and growing approach to addressing environmental and global stresses.

Just as there are nuanced and varied expressions of traditional belief systems, so also religious naturalism. It is difficult to examine them all today, but a starting definition of religious naturalism is a reliance on a scientific understanding of the natural world one that honours events and processes that provide mystery, awe and

sacredness. All that exists, all that 'is', remains rooted in knowledge and experiences of natural phenomena. It is basically 'a set of beliefs or attitudes that focuses on this world to ground, explain, and give meaning. Most (but not all) self-described religious naturalists believe there is no distinct or superior realm of existence – no need for appeal to anything supernatural - no transcendent God, no everlasting soul, no heaven. Nature has always existed in some shape or form and always will exist, sustained by its own powers.

We humans are integral parts of nature. We share biological history, ecological interrelations and interdependencies with all natural beings. Nature, and nature in this context meaning the vastness of the cosmos, is a dynamic, ever unfolding, self-transcending process of creation, destruction, and ceaseless change. The religious naturalist honours the natural creative events, the mechanisms that allow life and all that sustains life to emerge.

Those that call themselves religious naturalists also vary in how they describe their religious experience. Biologist Ursula Goodenough writes in her excellent book *The Sacred Depths of Nature* the following:

Our human story tells us of the sacredness of life, of the astonishing complexity of cells and organisms, of the vast lengths of time it took to generate their splendid diversity, of the enormous improbability that any of it happened at all. Reverence is the religious emotion elicited when we perceive the sacred. We are called to revere the whole enterprise of planetary existence, the whole and all of its myriad parts as they catalyze and secrete and replicate and mutate and evolve.

Goodenough shares that she honours and has reverence for the Mystery of existence but it is very much rooted in a naturalistic perspective.

Philosopher and theologian, Donald Crosby, calls his particular flavour or religious naturalism – *A Religion of Nature*. A religion that offers no assurances of good or protection from evil or promises salvation – but does provide for our basic needs, enables us the intellect to make choices and reveals features of awe and power that fascinate, inspire and make us humble.

At its core religious naturalism requires a strong integration and reliance on science and religion. However, Ecotheologian, Thomas Berry calls both religion and science to task for the environmental and social problems we face today. I realize that both religion and science are very broad terms, so I am generalizing here. But Berry feels human interactions with nature and our misplaced religious sense of 'sacred' and 'reverence' have now made us vulnerable to ecological collapse, and by extension, compromised our own human survival. He identifies six ways humans have negatively placed themselves above or transcendent to the systems of the Earth.

The first three he attributes to Religion. First, he contends that our belief in a "transcendent, personal, monotheistic creative deity" has removed the sacred dimension from nature and all of creation. Secondly, our belief in the "spiritual nature of the human" isolates and detaches us from the natural world. The natural world is objectified and only important as a means to celebrate our perceived greater spiritual dimension. Thirdly, a belief in "redemption" from the natural world places us in a position where care for the Earth does not matter. We do not belong in this natural world and are only in transition to our permanent transcendent world.

Of Science he believes scientific enquiry valued separating the physical world into mind or matter and the emphasis on living organisms as machines removed the primary organizing, animating principle of a living organic being. Finally, the last two transcendences are our reliance on “technology” without concern for the destruction of living forms, and our belief in humanity’s historical destiny. Our western and global culture continues to believe that we have a right and obligation to pursue technological advancements. According to Berry, this misplaced reliance on technological achievements blinds us to the magnitude of the destruction happening around us. Religious Naturalism could provide a readjustment that might refocus our attention.

If at its core, religious naturalism requires a strong integration and reliance on science and religion but Berry names them both as attributing to our ecological crisis, what can we do?

Traditionally, the two have not had a happy history. Ian Barbour in his book *When Science Meets Religion* describes the tension between science and religion as a false dilemma and offers four views of the relationship between science and religion. At one end is what he calls the Conflict position. Advocates of the conflict position tend to come from fundamental extremes and attack what they see as the core of each discipline. But, these positions are really stereotypes and simplifications of each discipline. The Conflict position then moves toward Independence, an uneasy acceptance of each other. Each side acknowledges that they are separate and independent of each other. Religion deals with WHY questions and Science deals with HOW questions. The third view Barbour calls Dialogue, where both science and religion share methods of enquiry and metaphors. Barbour’s fourth view he names Integration is more than just the dialogue between science and religion. Barbour positions himself here, specifically advocating for a theology of nature that starts from the life of a religious community and asks what needs to be reformulated in the context of modern science. This is where religious naturalism fits. It can provide the context for this reformulation.

This might sound familiar. As Unitarian Universalists we have our 7th Principle that asks us to respect and value the interdependent web of all existence. Our statement of Sources acknowledges the immense importance of science and world faith traditions for guidance. As UU’s, we honour and value both a scientific, naturalist approach and a religious or spiritual approach to life in our statement of principles and sources.

The problem with a broader acceptance of a religion of nature, or religious naturalism though, is that it has no narrative centre it has no Great Story. This is important and should not be dismissed.

Loyal Rue in his book *Religion is not about God* states that:

...humans are narrative beings. Our lives unfold as series of connected events that acquire meaning as we integrate information about objects, events, properties and relations in the outside world with information about how things are going inside our bodies. ...Cultures too, are narrative entities. At the core of every cultural tradition there is a story, a myth, a narrative integration of ideas about reality and value.

Rue points out that a lack of a central mythic story or a narrative metaphor, which we find in the major world religions, is a potential obstacle to identifying religious naturalism as religious. Each religious tradition has a particular narrative metaphor that

guides the development of personal wholeness and the maintenance of social cohesion. Christianity has its story of a loving personal God and eternal salvation, Buddhism has its Wheel of Life. For Rue, the problem with religious naturalism is the difficulty to find a compelling metaphor or story to describe it.

Perhaps if we look again to Thomas Berry, we find a glimpse of a story that might make religious naturalism meaningful and dynamic. Berry says:

The New Story of the universe is a biospiritual story...and an Earth story. The universe as we now know it is integral with itself throughout its vast extent in space and throughout the long series of its transformation in time...every part of the universe activates a particular dimension or aspect of the universe in a unique and unrepeatable manner. Thus everything is needed. Without the perfection of each part, something is lacking from the whole. Each particular being in the universe is needed by the entire universe...any creative deed at the human level is a continuation of the creativity of the universe.

According to Rue the cultural narrative that religious traditions support must include ideas about morality, about which things ultimately matter. The New Creation Story, described by Berry, enlivens and deepens religious narratives that speak only of human-to-human morality. It broadens those narratives to include our relationships and interactions with the natural world. It requires us to think of natural systems as having meaning and importance for our personal wholeness and social cohesion.

This then, is my religious naturalist narrative. I am intimately linked through creative processes to all existence, past, present and future. The depth of this connection is profound and a mystery I am unable to explain. Yet, I have an ultimate responsibility to explore how my actions, thoughts and being can support this web of existence.

Like Alice, trusting explicitly and somewhat naively in the gift of the cookie, I have trusted in the sureness of science. Like Alice, trusting in the promise the small bottle held, my thoughts have been somewhat clouded by religiosity. However, I still am chasing that white rabbit. Like Alice I will need the balance of both a naturalistic, scientific cook with a swig of spiritual and religious cider to find my way out of this rabbit hole I find myself in.