

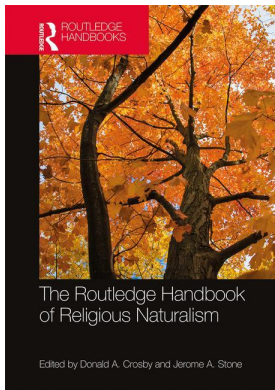
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## **The Routledge Handbook of Religious Naturalism**

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### **A Christian Religious Naturalism**

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# A CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS NATURALISM

*Karl E. Peters*

For more than two decades the contemporary movement of religious naturalism has been growing. Developed by such authors as Ursula Goodenough (2000), Charley Hardwick (1996), Jerome A. Stone (1992, 2008), Don Crosby (2002, 2008, 2015), Karl E. Peters (2002), Chet Raymo (2008), Loyal Rue (2012), Carol Wayne White (2016), and other members of the Religious Naturalist Association (2017), today's religious naturalism is on solid intellectual footing. One of the things that remain to be done is to explore how established world religions might be understood and practiced naturalistically. This Handbook offers work relating naturalism to Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Shawnee religion, and Judaism. However, many assume that Christianity is not very amenable to being expressed in a naturalistic framework. From my experience with liberal or progressive Christians, I have concluded that many would be open to a naturalistic understanding of a Christian life-way if only they had a coherent presentation of ideas that were both naturalistic and offered helpful understandings and guidance as what it means to follow Jesus. This essay is an attempt to provide that understanding.

There are a few theologians who might be considered Christian naturalists. Jerome Stone gives a fine account of major figures that include both the idea of theism and a focus on the significance of Jesus (Stone 2011). Three of these are Henry Nelson Wieman (1964), Charley Hardwick (1996), and Gordon Kaufman (2004, 2006). I am indebted to their thinking, and some of their ideas will be reflected in this essay.

However, rather than discussing the work of others, this essay will construct the beginnings of a possible systematic theology. In what follows I will try to show that Christian thought and practice can be developed with the following naturalistic assumptions: first, reality is the space-time world in which we live; second, knowing is through empirical methods—scientific, everyday sense experience, and historical critical research; and third, the contemporary findings of science are relevant to how we might think and live. With these assumptions we will examine how three foci of Christianity can be understood. First, God and the world can be conceived pragmatically as two ways of viewing the same reality, as creative interactions and as what is created. Second, humans and salvation can be understood in terms of dynamic systems that are mal-functioning becoming well-functioning. Third, Jesus can be portrayed as a non-violent revolutionary, an exemplar for social and individual transformation. Each focus will be introduced with a sketch of changing understandings in Western history about the world and God, human beings and salvation,

and Jesus. The recognition of historically changing understandings provides a context for exploring a Christian naturalism.

### Naturalistic theism—changing understandings of God and the world

Naturalistic theism is part of a major shift in Western thought—from thinking of everything as individual substances to thinking of everything as events or processes. This is a shift into dynamic relational thinking, namely, that everything is constituted by relationships and in turn becomes part of constituting others. While there are stable relational structures or systems that maintain their integrity for a long time, there also are relational or system dynamics that allow for the creation of new stable systems.

In *A God that Could Be Real* Nancy Abrams presents the historically changing relationship between cosmology and theology in the Western world (Abrams 2016: 7–17). The biblical cosmology of a flat earth, with waters under and above the earth and a dome of heaven beyond the waters above, fits well with the notion of a personal God—a patriarchal father-king who resides in the highest heaven, rules over the world, influences the course of events, sometimes with the aid of messengers (angels) and, finally, a divine-human son. Similarly, the Ptolemaic cosmology of the Middle Ages, with the earth as the center of the universe surrounded by spheres of planets and stars with possible movement up and down through them, allows for a personal divine ruler to direct the course of events. However, for Isaac Newton, the Enlightenment scientific genius of universal gravitational relationships in the sun-centered planetary system of Copernicus and Galileo, humans lived on an average planet circling the sun, which was an average star. No place is different from any other in the Newtonian cosmos; space goes on, perhaps forever; and there is no physical location for God.

It was not until the twentieth century—not even 100 years ago—that scientists were able to determine that the universe had to be thought of as “infinitely” more vast and wondrous than had ever been conceived in Western thought. Edwin Hubble used the Doppler Effect to reason that the entire universe was expanding, leading to the notion of an originating point of singularity metaphorically labeled the “Big Bang.” Calculating backwards from the present, scientists have been able to create a scientifically grounded story of the “epic of creation.” Around 13.8 billion years ago a point of singularity rapidly inflated; then it began to expand and cool, allowing the creation of hydrogen, helium, and a small amount of lithium. From the “Big Bang” the universe grew to at least 100 billion galaxies each with an average of at least 100 billion stars. Countless stars were born, and in nuclear fusion they created more helium, and carbon, neon, oxygen, silicon, and other elements up to iron. Then, depending on the mass of the star, when it uses up all its fuel, a star can collapse to a dwarf star, or explode as a nova or supernova. In these massive explosions all the remaining elements are created and ejected into space. In space, free floating hydrogen combines with oxygen to form water, and free-floating silicon combines with oxygen to form sand. Out of this “stardust” of elements and molecules more generations of stars were formed, until 4.6 billion years ago our solar system was born. Elements and simple molecules from space created our earth. On earth, organic life emerged from non-life, followed by sentient life, intelligent life, and about 200,000 years ago our own species, *Homo sapiens*. As our species evolved, so did tool making, agriculture, social structures, cultures, religions, and most recently the sciences, which are providing the ideas we now are considering—including this sketch of the creation of the cosmos based on twentieth-century science.

Then, beginning in the 1980s and '90s this science-based construction of the universe expanded in a way that makes the above picture almost unbelievable (Abrams and Primmack 2011: 39–66). First, the 100 billion galaxies, each with an average of 100 billion stars,

making up visible matter is only about 5 percent of the entire universe. The discovery of dark matter, evidenced by measuring gravitational attractions more prevalent than can be accounted for by the visible universe, is another 25 percent. The remaining 70 percent is thought to be dark energy, perhaps a property of space itself, which is accelerating the expansion of the universe ever more rapidly. In the distant future an observer from our own solar system would only see our own galaxy and its satellites along with the Andromeda galaxy. In fact, an observer from any galaxy would see only their own and nearby galaxies. According to astrophysicist Joel Primack, from any observational viewpoint the universe would only be as “large” as a few galaxies. The increasing rate of universe expansion would make it impossible for light and other forms of radiation to travel the ever-increasing distance from any particular galaxy to make its observation possible. Primack says that we live in a special time when we can scientifically understand the vast, amazing universe we inhabit (Primack, personal communication).

What does this twentieth and twenty-first century cosmology do for theology? Simply put, it creates a huge “housing problem for God.” A God beyond an ever more rapidly expanding universe is no longer conceivable. Neither is God within the universe—if God is conceived of as some kind of being, force, energy, or spiritual reality that exists alongside the physical world. The current scientific story of creation, and its physicalism makes it impossible to locate God as a distinct reality within or separate from the world as known by today’s science.

Yet, in a dynamic relational understanding of things, it may be possible to think of God and World as two ways of looking at the same thing. Wieman (1964) distinguishes between creative good or creativity and that which is created, created good. In line with this, we can say that creative good signifies interactions among subatomic particles, atoms, molecules, and organisms that over time give rise to the emergence of new molecules and life forms or created good. Creative good also signifies cultural interactions among people and existing social structures and patterns that lead to the emergence of new social institutions, ways of living, values, religious ideas and practices, and scientific understandings. These in turn are created goods.

However, creativity and its products are not separate. They are the same thing viewed in two different ways. As soon as stable forms (atomic, chemical, organic, social, and conceptual) are created, these interact with other created forms, and the interactions give rise to more new created forms. Created good becomes part of ongoing creative good. In a dynamic relational view of things, World in all its relatively stable manifestations becomes God the creative source of all things. And God is the World in its creative interacting.

If God and World are really the same reality, why bother making the distinction at all? The distinction makes a practical (pragmatic) difference in how we live. When we consider the World, created good, we have the tendency to want to preserve what has been created. When we consider God, creative good, we are open to and even welcome the possibilities of as yet unknown, new, emerging good. For example, we live in a frightening era of climate change, largely caused by human activity. If we focus on what has already been created and hope to conserve the rich and diverse world in which we live, we will be seriously troubled by the destruction of habitats, the increasing rate of species extinction, and the increasing social turmoil as people migrate away from rising sea levels and from draught spreading across land masses around the world. We will try to preserve cities as they are inundated by flooding, develop more irrigation systems for crops in drought stricken areas, and generally try to maintain our lives the way they have been. Losing created good is indeed significant—a global tragedy. On the other hand, if we focus on creative good, we are reminded of how

previous planetary changes with mass extinctions led to the proliferation and flourishing of new species. Sixty-six million years ago, when the dinosaurs went extinct as the result of an asteroid colliding with the earth, a small, rat-like mammal, the tree shrew, began to flourish and evolve, eventually leading to our own species. Of course, creativity does not “promise” the same good as before. Human living may be completely transformed. Something else may become dominant on the planet. But new good will emerge. Creative interactions will continue to work, bringing about things we cannot foresee. It may even be a new form of ecological civilization in which humans and other species live in a more loving, just, and peaceful world. We really cannot know. Our hope lies not in maintaining the status quo but being open to new, yet unforeseen, good.

If God and World are two ways of looking at the same reality, then we can say that as the world evolves, so does God. As created good becomes part of further creativity, that creativity exhibits features related to the world at a particular time. An implication of this is that, before *Homo sapiens* evolved, the creativity of the world—God—was non-personal. Further, in the continuing physical-chemical-biological aspects of the current world—on planet earth—it remains non-personal (Kaufman 2006: 52; Peters 2013: 584). Only in humans does the full range and power of personality formerly associated with a personal God emerge. This means that before human persons, God is not intentional and does not know consequences of actions. Thus, God is not responsible for evil—evil itself being something constructed by and relevant only to humans. This eliminates the problem of theodicy.

However, once creativity has produced humans as created good that can intentionally and knowingly participate in creativity, then it is possible to assign value to what creativity has done in the history of the universe and what it is doing now. Concepts of good and evil make sense when creativity evolves to its human form. So do concepts of salvation and of what humans must be saved from.

### Changing conceptions of humans and the world

If one asks how earlier thinkers in Western thought have approached the idea of what a human being is, two things are apparent. First is the idea of substance. All things including humans are substances, which means they are not composed of internal relations but are one kind of thing that is externally related to others. The second is that the model of a human being is the adult human, especially the adult male. There seems to have been little sense of developmental change from child to adult. In Western art before the Enlightenment, children were usually depicted as miniature adults, if they were depicted at all. There was no concept of childhood (Aries 1962; Clarke 2004). Furthermore, in the two creation stories of Genesis, humans are created as adults.

There are, however, some significant examples of thinking about human individuals as systems in ancient philosophy and Christian thought: Plato’s threefold division of the person into reason, will, and appetites (Plato 2016); Aristotle’s idea of virtues and vices in relation to a golden mean between the extremes (Aristotle 2012); Paul’s self-understanding of being at war with himself, not doing the good he seeks but instead doing the evil he does not want to do (Romans 7:14–15, *HarperCollins Study Bible* 2003); Augustine’s internal struggle between two wills inside himself that were in conflict, “one carnal, one spiritual” (Augustine 1998, Book 8); and Paul’s image of the body of Christ with many parts each supporting the whole or at odds with each other in a Christian community (1 Corinthians 12:12–31). Of course, these are adult human systems.

Beginning in the nineteenth century the understanding of humans became much more complex. First, the rise of evolutionary thinking led to the idea that every living thing, including

a human being, is an evolved, dynamic system. Second, twentieth-century psychology has come to see humans as internally complex—from the thinking of Freud and Jung to a contemporary view that humans consist of interacting feelings, emotions, behaviors, and thoughts, analogous to how members of a family interact. An individual human is an internal family with subsystems or sub-personalities. All have a positive role, especially when led by a calm, creative, compassionate core center of experience that Richard Schwartz calls “Self” (Schwartz 2001). Further, family systems theory, developed by Murray Bowen, suggests that individuals cannot be understood in isolation from one another. Families are systems of interconnected and interdependent individuals, none of whom can be understood in isolation from the system (Bowen 1978). Third, late twentieth-century technological developments in understanding the human genome, body chemistry, and the human brain have led to the idea that a human individual is an evolved complex, dynamic system of cells, organs, chemicals, and nerve fibers that carry information about interacting with the wider social and natural environment. Each human is a complex system that develops from fetus, to infant, to teenager, to young adult, to middle-aged adult, and through old age.

In the context of cosmic evolution we can say that each of us is a complex created good, constituted of energy from the big bang, atoms and molecules created in exploding stars, self-replicating molecules found in all of life on earth, DNA lineages derived from our living ancestors, brains that have evolved from reptiles and mammals, and beliefs and practices that are legacies from the cultures in which we live. Also in an evolutionary context, each of us is a participant within the wider evolved creativity of the universe that is taking place on our planet. In Darwinian terms there are new variations occurring in all parts of the human system, from chromosomes and genes, cells throughout the body, patterns of activity in our complex brains (Calvin 1990, 2014). As we grow through our life cycles from fetus to old age, interactions with others (and within ourselves) shape and reshape our behavior and the kind of person we are.

Melvin Konner has developed a multi-causal framework for understanding the complexity of human behavior. He suggests that there are nine kinds of causes arranged in three types. First, there are remote or evolutionary causes: (1) the phylogenetic constraints because the organism is of a particular type; (2) ecological/demographic causes resulting from an organism being adapted to a particular environment; and (3) resulting from the first two causes, the individual’s genome that falls within a certain spectrum of variation for its species. Second, there are intermediate or developmental causes: (4) embryonic/maturation processes guided by the genome throughout life; (5) environmental effects in critical or sensitive periods of development; (6) and ongoing environmental effects, such as stress, trauma, and various kinds of social reinforcement that operate throughout life. Finally, there are more immediate causes: (7) longer-term physiological causes, such as hormones, that are outcomes of gene expression in response to environmental contingencies and that operate for minutes or days; (8) short-term physiological effects such as neural circuits and transmitters that operate from milliseconds to minutes and are the immediate internal causes of behavior; and (9) the immediate external causes that are elicitors or releasers that precipitate the behavior (Konner 2010: 28–9; see also Peters 2008: 681, 686–97, where, following Konner 2002: 175, 234, I apply these to murderous rage).

Space does not permit the detailed unpacking of Konner’s multi-causal process. However, two things illustrate its significance. They are effects taking place during sensitive periods of human maturation. First, because the evolved pelvic structure of the human female results in a narrow birth canal, a human being just born does not have a fully developed brain. This contributes to a period of child dependency on parents and other adults. Studies show that if a parent

or family, including the infant, is undergoing considerable, chronic stress, and if there is a lack of adult nurturing during the first three years of life, a child's brain does not develop properly.

Science tells us that young children who experience significantly limited caregiver responsiveness may sustain a range of adverse physical and mental consequences that actually produce more widespread developmental impairments than overt physical abuse. These can include cognitive delays, stunting of physical growth, impairments in executive function and self-regulation skills, and disruptions of the body's stress response.

(Center for the Developing Child, 2017)

This leads to further health and behavioral problems as the child grows older. Second, there is a critical time of development during the "teen-age" years, from 13 through mid-twenties. The last part of the brain to mature is the frontal cortex, which is the brain's executive subsystem that enables teens and young adults to foresee consequences of their actions and rationally control them. The not yet complete development of the frontal cortex shows up in erratic and risky behavior that is sometimes harmful to the person and to others. Excess party drinking, experimenting with drugs, risky relationships, and reckless driving—all partly result from the brain immaturity of the teen-young adult brain as it interacts with others in social systems (Jensen and Nutt 2015).

### Naturalistic salvation

In this context we can ask, what does Christianity do? An answer is that it offers "salvation." What can this mean from a naturalistic perspective? Salvation cannot be from hell to heaven or even from some state of suffering in this world to peace and love in "the next." Christian naturalism affirms that salvation must be here and now in this world.

One root of the idea of salvation is the Latin word *salvus*. According to the *Latin Dictionary* (2017), *salvus* means well, unharmed, safe, alive, and sound. It means to heal or make whole. In this sense, salvation is "well-being." However, the idea of well-being is too static. In a dynamic relational naturalistic understanding, we can think of salvation as well-functioning. Ideally, human beings would be systems that are functioning well, within other well-functioning systems—families, organizations, societies, ecosystems, and planet earth. This is an extension of an Aristotelean understanding of "happiness." Happiness is not mere pleasure. Rather, "happiness seems rather to be a satisfaction that arises from functioning well, fulfilling our capacities." If we ask what the well-functioning of human beings is, we can say:

we are *bodies* in need of good nourishment; we are centers of *sensation*, of appetites and passions, in need of good experience; and we are *minds* in need of good thinking. When all of these dimensions are functioning well, then we are functioning well as humans.

(Ferré 2001: 31)

Christianity complements this understanding with its wisdom about ideal ends and life-guiding principles and values. Ideal ends can be symbolized by metaphors such as the peaceable kingdom where "the wolf lives with the lamb" (Isaiah 11:6) and a "new heaven and earth" (Revelation 21:1) where God is present among humans. Guiding principles and values are expressed in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1–17), Micah's "what does the Lord require of you but

to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8), and “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31).

These ideals and values do not always square with the ways humans live. How can it happen that we often are not functioning well? What leads to not functioning well? Generally, it is when some part of a system takes over other parts creating what Walter Wink calls a “domination system” (Wink 2003). For an individual person, what takes over may be a part of the body that is diseased. This could be the result of invasion of other organisms evoking the complex immune system, a “mis-take” in the DNA replication of body cells that is not corrected and leads to runaway growth of particular types of cells in cancer, or a disease such as sickle cell anemia that is part of the human’s evolutionary legacy and that may be adaptive in some circumstances but not others (Nesse and Williams 2012). For a family, environmental circumstances of stressful poverty and isolation from outside support may contribute to child neglect and abuse, especially in single-parent homes. For business systems, a financial crisis may lead the Board of Directors to hire what appears to be a strong leader. This leader promises to take care of everything but turns out to be a psychopath—with no empathy but getting joy out of manipulating others, and seeking his or her own aggrandizement at the expense of the business and its employees (Babiak and Hare 2009). For social-political systems the leadership may become authoritarian and dominate the system at the expense of many of its people. Imperial Rome at the time of Jesus, we shall see, was such a domination system, which under Caesar tightly controlled the far-flung areas of the Roman Empire, including Judea (Aslan 2014).

When systems are not functioning, whether a human body, a family, a local organization, a city, a country, or a world civilization, we can say it is divided, conflicted, and malfunctioning. In Plato’s *Republic* the system is no longer “just.” We can say the same thing in our contemporary world: racial, sexist, and ageist are all terms that point to systems not functioning well. Because of discrimination, some do not have a voice and consequently cannot contribute their unique talents and share the benefits of the system. In Christian terms we might say the system is “fallen,” “missing the mark,” or in a state of “sin.” Systems that are extremely out of balance and not functioning well are the antithesis of what William James describes as “conversion”:

To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities. This at least is what conversion signifies in general terms, whether or not we believe that a direct divine operation is needed to bring such a moral change about.  
(James 1997: 160)

Salvation from a naturalistic perspective is the transformation of a system of any kind and complexity to function well again in a new form of living. The conditions that lead to malfunctioning may still be present, but through creative transformation a system may come into a new kind of wholeness. For example, a person suffering a terminal illness such as cancer might undergo a transformation so that he or she can still function well. Even though physically impaired, he or she may engage in new meaningful social relationships in a caring community. As my first wife was dying of cancer, new ways of sharing and growing in love between ourselves and with others emerged (Peters 2002: 113–118).

To become relatively well-functioning, however, one must be open to the future. In Hardwick’s terms it is living by grace rather than in a state of sin. In Wieman’s terms it is not trying to preserve created good that can no longer be preserved but living in creativity that



opens up new possibilities for good even when a system can no longer be maintained as it was. From a Christian perspective it is engaging not the man Jesus—who like all humans was a created good—but rather being open to the “Christ event”—the creativity working in the new interrelationships that Jesus catalyzed as he interacted with his followers.

### **Jesus as a way of salvation in naturalistic Christianity**

Through the centuries of Western thought there have been many ways of symbolizing the meaning of Jesus. Historian Jaroslav Pelikan presents many metaphors of Jesus that show his significance for the Christian community in the changing, wider cultural context (1985). Some of these metaphors are biblically based: “Rabbi” in relation to Judaism at the time of Jesus; “Light to the Gentiles” as Christianity spreads beyond the boundaries of Palestine; “King of Kings” in the context of the Roman Empire; the “Son of Man” who revealed both the promise of human life and the power of evil in fifth century Christian psychology and anthropology; “Christ Crucified” of the Middle Ages when the suffering of Jesus on the cross became the primary image of salvation in Christianity (see also Parker and Brock 2008: 223ff.); and the “Prince of Peace” in the resurgence of pacifism among sixteenth-century Anabaptists. Other metaphors reflect philosophical developments in the culture and the response of Christian theologians: the Assisi to transform the way of Christian living and the institutional Church. Still others are rooted in the culture itself: the “Universal Man” of the Renaissance, the “Mirror of Eternal Truth” in the Protestant Reformation, the “Teacher of Common Sense Morals” during the Enlightenment, the “Poet of the Spirit” in the nineteenth-century Romantic Movement, and the “Liberator” in the social gospel and human rights movements of the last two centuries. One might add Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s “the Man for Others” in the context of Nazi Germany (Bonhoeffer 1972: 382; see also Beck 2010). Note how these metaphors have become more naturalistic in the last four centuries since the science-based Enlightenment.

Another way of seeing a changing understanding of Jesus is suggested by Gordon Kaufman, who developed the idea of historical trajectories. There are countless historical trajectories emerging as a result of creative interactions—cosmic, biological, and human-cultural. Out of particular trajectories, new trajectories emerge. Examples are the emergence of our solar system from an earlier generation supernova and the creation of new species through Darwinian variation and selection. Likewise, human history contains many cultural trajectories. Each can give rise to further trajectories, such as Christianity emerging from Judaism in the context of the Greco-Roman world. Within Christianity, Kaufman writes of two different historical trajectories stemming from Jesus. One trajectory leads to a supernatural understanding of Jesus. “Jesus trajectory<sub>1</sub>” begins with his baptism by John the Baptist, his teachings of the coming Kingdom of God, and his crucifixion. Next there is among his followers the emergence of the belief that God has raised him from the dead and that he is the Son of God who is bringing God’s Kingdom. The third conceptual step in this trajectory is emergence of the conviction that Jesus ascended to heaven and that in his life on earth he was the incarnation of God. Finally, Jesus trajectory<sub>1</sub> culminates in the Church’s development of the doctrine of the Trinity, in which the Son (Jesus Christ) has equal divine status with God Father and the Holy Spirit (Kaufman 2006: 11). This trajectory assumes a dualism of the natural and supernatural, so that the person Jesus becomes divinized and understood to be fully God and fully human. As fully divine and fully human, “the God-Man,” he is the mediator between human beings and God.

In the context of this dualistic concept of mediator, Jesus’ death was understood as the sacrifice for the sins of the world, the substitutionary theory of atonement. Beginning with the Jewish notion of animal and plant sacrifice as a way of sharing and maintaining a relationship

with God, the crucifixion of Jesus became understood as a way of restoring the relationship between sinful human beings and the Creator. In the eleventh century this view was developed by Anselm of Canterbury into a formal argument for the “substitutionary theory of atonement.” God was the Divine King to whom humans owed *complete* obedience. Humans inevitably disobeyed God. Because they owed everything to God in the first place, they could never compensate for their falling away into a state of sin. Only a “God-Man” could satisfy God’s demand for justice and restore the relationship: as a human being Jesus was the one to make the sacrifice; as God, he was capable offering a level of obedience that compensated for all the sins of the world (Platcher 1990: 142–144). Even though few today know about Anselm’s argument for “Why God Became Man,” the idea of substitutionary atonement, Jesus “dying for my sins,” is the most common understanding of salvation for Christians today. It also is the most common understanding for those who reject the supernaturalism of Christianity.

The second Christian trajectory, “Jesus trajectory<sub>2</sub>” leads to a naturalistic-humanistic understanding of Jesus, represented by Kaufman himself. This trajectory becomes clearer after the rise of historical, biblical scholarship in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. This scholarship enables a reconstruction of Jesus and his significance for today that is in keeping with the idea of God viewed as the interactions in the world that are creative of new forms of cosmic, biological, and social existence. In Jesus this non-personal creativity takes shape in the form of a personal, normative moral standard. Kaufman writes:

The reconstruction of Jesus’ ministry, leading up to his death as a dangerous rabble-rouser in Roman Palestine, is plausible historically and presents us with a Jesus in many respects still quite attractive: his forthright challenge to the conventional religion of his time; his forceful preaching punctuated with striking parables; his beautiful vision of the coming kingdom of God in which the sick are healed and the poor are cared for, and the outcast and despised are welcomed to the dinner table; his radical emphasis on love as the overarching posture within which humans should live their lives – love of God, love of neighbor, indeed love of enemies; his unwavering conviction that he must not respond violently against those who were forcing upon him the bitter death of crucifixion; his profound hope that God was bringing in a New Age.

(Kaufman 2006: 21)

Kaufman’s depiction of trajectory<sub>2</sub> illustrates a second theory of atonement that is part of the history of Christian thought—Peter Abelard’s twelfth century “moral exemplar” theory (Platcher 1990: 144–145). In this theory Jesus’ life and death is an expression of God’s love—an inspiring example of how a Christian should live in everyday life. Consistent with this theory is a view of Jesus as a non-violent revolutionary. Those who are non-violent revolutionaries (as was Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King) neither passively accept unjust systems or engage in violence to overthrow them. Instead they lead a non-violent protest as Jesus did against the Roman Empire. According to New Testament scholar Marcus Borg, Jesus was a “nonviolent revolutionary,” challenging the “domination system” of his day: the Roman Empire that had been accommodated by some Jewish leaders (Borg 2006). This idea is illustrated by Jesus proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was occurring among the people he was with, eating with and healing social outcasts, and telling stories that encouraged people to look at themselves and society in new ways—for example, the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. It also is illustrated by his developing what New Testament scholar Walter Wink calls “Jesus’ third

way”—a path between passively submitting or violently responding to evil (Wink 2003). This is the path of nonviolent resistance in the face of unjust systems of domination.

Jesus was an exemplar of this third way during his final week in Jerusalem. The Palm Sunday procession, the ejection of the money changers out of the Temple, the debates with Jewish leaders—all are actions of a nonviolent revolutionary protesting the domination system of his day on behalf of the poor and oppressed. The opening act of this week is the Palm Sunday procession. This was not the only procession at that time. To guard against things getting out of hand among the Jews, the Roman governor Pilate

rode into the city from ... the west, at the head of ... imperial cavalry and foot soldiers arriving to reinforce the garrison on the Temple Mount. They did so each year at Passover, coming to Jerusalem from Maritima, the city on the Mediterranean coast from which the Roman governor administered Judea and Samaria.

Jesus came into Jerusalem in another procession from the east. The biblical texts tell us that this was not accidental. It was a procession that Jesus planned. According to Borg,

his decision to enter the city as he did was what we could call a planned political demonstration, a counter demonstration. The juxtaposition of these two processions embodies the central conflict of Jesus's last week: the kingdom of God or the kingdom of imperial domination ... two visions of life on earth.

(Borg 2006: 232)

This type of living offers a way of overcoming oppression in all areas of life, in all kinds of dynamic systems: family, churches, communities, and nations, so that the well-functioning of all can be restored. It is even a way of dealing with conflicted parts or subsystems within an individual. Instead of simply acquiescing to out-of-control inner desires or angrily rejecting them, one can calmly, compassionately, and courageously connect with them and enable them to be creatively transformed so that the entire person functions well again. With the “moral exemplar” theory of atonement, one is inspired by Jesus’ example (and by that of others like him) to live a “Christ-like” life.

This process involves a transformation into a new way of living. Central to Christianity is the transformation known as the resurrection of Jesus. How can the resurrection be understood naturalistically? Wieman distinguishes between the man Jesus and the creative interactions Jesus had with his followers. It was not the man Jesus who was divine; the man Jesus was human, a created good. However, in the relationships Jesus catalyzed with and among his followers, an open, indiscriminating, creative love was present. When Jesus was crucified by the Roman imperial domination system that was crucifying all kinds of people it saw as a political threat, this creative love was liberated. What rose from the dead was not the man Jesus but the creativity of the “Christ event” in the midst of his followers as a new community of love began to be formed. Creative interaction became present in history in a new way. Jesus’s interchange with his disciples so transformed them that they became capable of having such interchange with one another (Wieman 1964: 39–40.)

Christian naturalism shows a way in which we can reshape our thinking about God and the world, and about human beings and salvation in a this-worldly context of science. Christian naturalism also shows us a way to live—following Jesus as an exemplar and living creatively in the “Christ event” of unconditional love and justice in all our social, economic, and environmental relationships.

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