

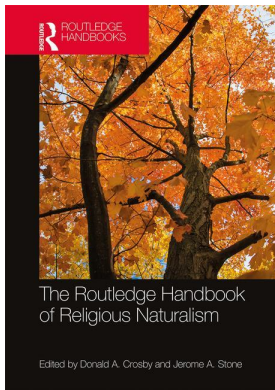
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The Religious Availability of Religious Naturalism

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THE RELIGIOUS AVAILABILITY
OF RELIGIOUS NATURALISM*David E. Conner*

What aspects of philosophical naturalism might be deemed valuable for reasons that are specifically religious? Or, what specifically *religious* values might be conferred by a naturalistic philosophy? How can we assess the question of philosophical naturalism's religious availability? For that matter, how is it even plausible to connect religious values with *naturalism*, which, many persons would say, entails by its very definition a repudiation of the supernatural, the transcendent, the spiritual—and, therefore, the *religious*?

Criteria for religious availability

Readers of this volume are aware that there are ways of addressing these questions that are not merely cogent, but scholarly. This essay undertakes to organize various expressions of religious naturalism into a schema of five types and then consider briefly the religious availability of each of those types. I explicate the notion of “religious availability” in terms of seven types of religious value: values that are *intellectual*, *axiological*, *ethical*, *esthetic*, *emotional*, *interpersonal*, and *institutional*.¹ These types are imprecise and there are areas of overlap, but the typology is nevertheless useful for purposes of analysis.

It is not possible here to present a detailed assessment of each of the five types of naturalism with regard to each of the seven types of value—that method would require 35 instances of analysis—but these seven types of religious value can at least be kept in mind as we broach the overall subject of religious naturalism. We begin by describing these seven criteria for religious availability.

- Related specifically to values that are *intellectual*, we ask whether the type of naturalism under consideration is reasonable. Are its arguments persuasive? Are its claims tenable? Is it compatible with other fields of study? Does it commend itself to thoughtful persons?
- Regarding *axiological* considerations, how does the type of naturalism understand the existence of value? Are values held to be merely epiphenomenal? If values do exist, are they arbitrary and subjective, or are there objective grounds for value? If certain values are commended, do they tend to be viewed as personal choices, or are they more likely to be shared by groups? Are the values that are sustained limited mainly to human interests, or do they transcend humanocentrism?

- Does the type of naturalism encourage *ethical* involvement? If so, what types of commitments and ethical aims are entailed? Is ethical conduct an ancillary consideration, or are ethics and morality such dominant emphases that the religious outlook tends to be subsumed under ethical obligations?
- Pertaining to *aesthetic* value, does the type of naturalism foster an appreciation of beauty? There is a well-developed history of collaboration between religion and the fine arts. Does the religious naturalism being considered easily lend itself to expression through music, poetry, visual arts, the use of inspiring language and symbolism, or other forms of esthetic creativity?
- Concerning *emotional* value, does the type of naturalism convey feelings of comfort, security, companionship, and trust? Or does it demand attitudes of self-sufficiency, determination, courage, or stoical resignation? Does the type of naturalism encourage a balance between feelings of serenity with feelings of stimulation and challenge? Perhaps most crucially, are there feelings of redemption, of acceptance and companionship? Is there a conviction of grace—the feeling of a Power that “does for us what we cannot do for ourselves?”
- Regarding *interpersonal* values, we ask whether the naturalistic perspective may comfortably be held simply as a private point of view—or does it invite interaction with others, perhaps even begging to be shared? May it be limited to inner reflection, or does it call for conversation, group activity, and social wholeness?
- The consideration of interpersonal values leads finally to the question of *institutional* value. Values that are institutional rely on the continuing existence of organizations for their creation, preservation, implementation, and development. Because naturalism is not a prevalent perspective in most religious institutions and because some may feel that there is a palpable antagonism between naturalism and institutional religion, it will be helpful here to go into a bit more detail concerning religious values that are specifically institutional.

Whether willingly or unwillingly, virtually all of us interact with institutions. Nowadays it is commonplace especially in Western cultures to encounter attitudes that are disinterested, dismissive, or openly antagonistic towards religious institutions. One imagines that such attitudes are particularly prevalent among the intellectually oriented persons who are most likely to embrace religious naturalism. Most of the reasons for the unpopularity of “organized religion” are well-known, and frequently those reasons are very defensible. Still, there are in fact certain kinds of positive religious value that are not simply interpersonal or social, but *institutional*. When we think of religious values associated with institutions, we may think first of values derived from church-related hospitals, colleges, orphanages, and homeless shelters and from churches that sponsor refugees, receive offerings to alleviate hunger, provide buildings and resources for disaster relief, and so on. These social-ethical benefits are laudable. However, there are less obvious but still momentous institutional values associated with the origination, development, preservation, and interpretation of religious symbols and practices. One thinks of scriptures and other sacred writings, of hymns, anthems, prayers, poems, and sermons; of sacraments both canonical and circumstantial; of the lingering memory of baptisms, weddings, and funerals; of the dissemination of the writings of a host of prophets, saints, reformers, and teachers; of countless study groups focused on moral progress or personal growth; of innumerable shared meals, supportive words, affectionate gestures, and other kind deeds, large and small, all of which are made possible by religious institutions.

Moreover, there is a unique type of *cumulative* value that accrues from sustained involvement in scheduled activities with persons who, over time, may become one’s closest friends—and the more so in the setting of a religious institution, where deliberate efforts are made to relate

the institution's activities to matters of ultimate concern and self-transcending commitment. It could be objected that this cumulative value is disputable, for many religious institutions have done more harm than good. Nevertheless, the good that has been realized is not simply demolished by the bad, and as we examine the religious availability of philosophical naturalism, the possibility of specifically *institutional* value must not be excluded.

The fact that certain ideas may tend to support certain values is, of course, no sufficient reason for believing that those ideas are *true*. It would not be a sound argument to advocate one type of religious naturalism over others merely because that type is deemed to be well-suited to religious purposes. Of course, "truth" is not a simple attribute; we must bear in mind that there is considerable leeway in establishing religious truth, for it is inherent to religious perspectives to manifest elements of subjectivity. William James ever reminds us that in some situations the will to believe may create the conditions in which the beliefs in question are warranted (James, 1897). In assessing the religious availability of certain perspectives—naturalistic or otherwise—we accept the *pragmatic* or *perspectival* dimension of the beliefs in question.

But subjective interpretation is acceptable only within limits. Though those limits are notoriously daunting to establish, they nevertheless may not be ignored, for religious feelings and motives display a long and lamentable history of leading beyond the realm of reasonable interpretation into the domain of wishful thinking and error. It is at the point of halting the vehicle of religious delusion that we encounter one of the chief advantages of religious naturalism, for among naturalism's most conspicuous goals is the avoidance of beliefs based on special revelation, miracles, and other examples of the opinion, apparently widely held, that the claims that are most illogical and non-evidential are precisely the claims that must be "accepted on faith." We remember the story of the little boy who, when asked what faith is, answered, "Faith is when you believe what you know ain't so."² The tension—which should be a constructive one—between objective and subjective elements in the formation of religious beliefs is relevant here because one of religious naturalism's most important roles may be the provision of parameters and new ideas in the reconstruction of traditional religious convictions.

The reconstruction of religious beliefs, however, is primarily intellectual in character. As soon as one moves beyond religious naturalism's intellectual value to the other types of value that we are considering, challenges confront naturalism's ability to function as a perspective that is explicitly religious. These challenges are not as clear-cut concerning axiological and ethical values, since naturalism, or at least certain types of it, has an established (if not entirely affirmative) history related to axiology and ethical responsibility. The most daunting challenges to naturalism seem to be related to esthetic, emotional, interpersonal, and institutional values.

Naturalism's apparent difficulties in attaining religious availability are not a recent development. The stubborn gulf between intellectual philosophy and popular religious conviction was commonly encountered even in antiquity and can be seen in the disparity between the religious thinking of Greek and Roman philosophers, on the one hand, and the popular polytheism of the cultures that surrounded them. Aristotle's idea of God as an abstract philosophical requirement provides an example, as Whitehead reminds us:

Aristotle found it necessary to complete his metaphysics by the introduction of a Prime Mover—God... The Greek gods who surrounded Aristotle were subordinate metaphysical entities, well within nature. Accordingly on the subject of his Prime mover, he would have no motive, except to follow his metaphysical train of thought whithersoever it led him. It did not lead him very far towards the production of a

God available for religious purposes. It may be doubted whether any properly general metaphysics can ever, without the illicit introduction of other considerations, get much further than Aristotle.

(Whitehead, 1925)

A similar assessment has been put forward regarding the theology of one of the foremost advocates of religious naturalism in our own time, Henry Nelson Wieman. Huston Smith writes that Wieman

uses empiricism to identify what within the world deserves to be regarded as God because it merits man's ultimate commitment. Where he has failed to carry the religious mind with him, we fear, is in his move from "X is the most worthy event in the natural world" to "X can, on a wide scale, evoke religious fervor." Wieman's position carries force for thinkers (a) who accept rational empiricism as the royal road to knowledge, and (b) who, having been nurtured in a religious tradition, feel their lives should be committed to *something*... . How few are the persons who meet the conditions stated in both (a) and (b) ... is evidenced by the smallness of the inroads of Wieman's theology into Christian churches. The moral is: even if something is the best there is, this is not necessarily enough to evoke religious fervor.

(Smith, 1969)

The central question being addressed in this essay is whether there are circumstances in which naturalism may go any further religiously than it did for Aristotle or Wieman. Can a religion that is focused primarily on qualities observed in nature achieve values that are not only intellectual and ethical, but emotional, psychological, and social? It seems clear that if religious naturalism is to move beyond the sphere of intellectual conviction to the arena of widely experienced religious feeling—"fervor" on a "wide scale," in Smith's terms—it can only be because religious naturalism has moved beyond the intellectual and the ethical to include values that are emotional, social, and even institutional.

Types of religious naturalism

We turn now to a consideration of the various types of religious naturalism itself. What, exactly, is *naturalism*? Perhaps most obviously, naturalism may be defined as a *denial of the existence of the supernatural*. There is, naturalism alleges, neither a supernatural realm nor in fact any type of existence other than what is contained within nature. Naturalism so understood is not a uniquely modern idea. Miracles and other outlandish religious claims were doubted even in ancient times by critical-minded people, but wary attitudes toward religion during antiquity have an ad hoc flavor, being based more nearly on objections to specific instances of religious sensationalism and superstition than on a categorical philosophical distinction between the natural and the non-natural. A more precise approach to the issues became possible due to the labors of Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274 CE), who had received the writings of Aristotle—which had been preserved through Middle Ages by Islamic scholars—and thereupon happily baptized them for Christian purposes. It was clear to Thomas that the comprehensive explanation of natural physical causation found in Aristotle's metaphysics made no allowance for the primary doctrines of Christian belief, such as the divinity of Christ, the Holy Trinity, our need for divine grace and the effectiveness of the sacraments as means of that grace, etc. In Thomism it therefore

became necessary to make a formal distinction between natural theology and revealed theology, and a concomitant distinction between the natural world and a superior realm beyond nature—the supernatural (*supernaturalis*). It is the existence of this realm and any influence it might be said to have that are denied by naturalism.

The concept of nature took on new preciseness because of the work of Isaac Newton (1642–1726), whose mathematical treatment of objects both terrestrial and astronomical led to the notion that the total causal matrix of the universe can be explained solely in terms of efficient causes. Nature then began to be understood as a vast network of mechanistic physical interactions, an idea that somewhat ironically differs considerably from the Aristotelian naturalism that had originally inspired Thomas. However, Newton's system was not immediately interpreted as requiring an abandonment of the supernatural; the deists of Newton's era held that God in fact made deliberate use of efficient causation to enact the purposes of Divine Providence, and, though his private views were unorthodox, Newton himself remained within Anglicanism.

By the time of the French mathematician Pierre-Simon Laplace (1749–1827), atheism and a complete renunciation of the supernatural were widely recognized as possible consequences of Newtonian mechanism. British geologist Charles Lyell (1797–1875) added impetus to the idea of nature's self-sufficiency with his doctrine of uniformitarianism, the proposition that the same natural laws and processes that we now observe in nature have always operated in the universe and are uniformly applicable everywhere. Charles Darwin (1809–1882) was influenced by Lyell's work, and it was Darwin's theory of evolution that at last led the public at large to recognize a fundamental conflict between scientific naturalism and orthodox Christianity. But even from the time of Newton, continuing during the era of Lyell and Darwin, and enduring through our own day, there have been religious intellectuals who were "liberal" or "scientific-minded" who have sought to reconcile scientific worldviews with religious ones. It is, one dares to say, because of the legacy of these religious intellectuals that we now can speak of "religious naturalism" and produce books such as the present volume.

I offer this capsule version of the history of naturalism as a reminder that, though we may now speak of "naturalism" as if it were a freestanding, self-defined worldview, its roots are inextricably intertwined with a protracted controversy with religion. Therefore the adjective "religious" ought not to be applied to "naturalism" as if the word "religious" were some sort of an optional add-on or intellectual interloper. Whether or not those who now utilize the term "naturalism" are aware of it, the question of "Religious? Or not?" ineluctably lurks at least tacitly in the root meaning of "naturalism" itself. It is instructive to keep this lingering connection with religion in mind as we examine the following typology of the ways in which *naturalism* may be associated with outlooks that are explicitly *religious*.

Naturalism has been expounded in many ways. For present purposes it is useful to analyze naturalism according to the following five-fold typology: (1) purely materialistic systems that tend to be reductionistic and to regard items such as purpose and free will as, at best, epiphenomenal; (2) philosophies that hold the cosmos was primordially material but that things such as purposiveness, consciousness, and free will have evolved spontaneously from matter and energy; (3) philosophies that view physical reality as having an innate tendency to transmit and utilize information—i.e., influence that is not restricted to purely physical content—in order to form novel and increasingly complex wholes, though without positing the action of a single coordinating agency or creator; (4) philosophies that generally resemble type 3 but in which it is argued that the formation of increasingly complex wholes requires the coordinating activity

of some transcendent agency that possesses a singleness or unity that is at least functional, if not ontological; and (5) panentheistic philosophies that claim God is not supernatural but is nevertheless somehow greater than the physical universe and that God possesses not merely functional unity but quasi-personal subjectivity. After briefly describing each of these types, I list thinkers whose works provide exemplification of the type being described. It is, of course, not possible here to go into any detail regarding the ideas of any one philosopher or theologian.

In the first type, the total causal matrix of the universe may itself be viewed as an object of religious devotion. This type tends to deny any kind of transcendence other than our *concept* of the totality; in other words, there is a dismissal of any causally effective holism or “downward” causality, at least on the level of the entire universe. The unity of the universe is simply like the unity of gas molecules in a tank; all the molecules contribute to the temperature and pressure of the tank as a whole, but this wholeness hardly seems to point to anything that could be called “transcendent” in a religious sense. Efficient causes are the true basis for the total causal matrix. As an example of this outlook in antiquity, we may look to the Roman philosopher Lucretius (99 BCE–ca. 55), a materialist and atomist, who, like any worthy anti-supernaturalist, denied the efficacy of prayer and the existence miracles and dismissed any hope in life after death (souls, he said, are made of atoms and simply disintegrate). This materialism notwithstanding, the poetry of Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* expresses eloquent religious devotion to Nature itself as the creative matrix and life-giver (Latham, 1967).

Modern examples of this first type may be found in the thinking of French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857) and contemporary American biologist Ursula Goodenough. Comte developed a philosophy of positivism in which truth claims are derived from the discovery of positive correlations between scientific observations and the laws of nature. Rejecting traditional Protestantism and Catholicism, Comte pushed for the formation of positivist societies that would support an altruistic “religion of humanity” to fulfill the organizing, social functions that had been associated with traditional religions. Goodenough embraces a philosophy of reductionistic materialism (Goodenough, 1998, pp. 28, 45, 109) but nevertheless writes beautifully about the religious inspiration conveyed by nature. Though she sees herself as a humanist rather than a theist (Goodenough, 1998, pp. 60, 139), Goodenough has joined a Christian church and has participated regularly (Goodenough, 1998, p. xi).

How religiously available is this materialistic, reductionistic type of naturalism? We must preface our answer to this question by acknowledging that there is an extent to which each personal expression of religious conviction may ultimately be assessed only by the person who has embraced it. For example, a friend who is a devout pantheist commented, “People say that pantheists can’t pray because ‘there’s nobody up there to pray to,’—but I still pray anyhow.” Persons are entitled, we imagine, to formulate religious beliefs and practices however they please, so long as the results are not demonstrably dysfunctional or harmful. A similarly subjective dimension pertains to many non-religious examples of personal choice and commitment, also.

Nevertheless there are objective criteria for religious availability. We have described seven types in this chapter. With reference to those types, then, we might say that the primary strengths of a purely materialist naturalism are *ethical* and *aesthetic*. Both Lucretius and Goodenough remind us of the astounding beauty and complexity of nature, and that this beauty and complexity are associated with the sources of life itself. Intuitively, there is a sacredness to the source of life, and this sacredness would entail ethical obligations related to the preservation of nature. But the ontological status of value (related to axiology) in materialistic schemes is dubious; emotional,

interpersonal, and institutional values are not accessible in obvious ways; and even intellectual values are open to dispute, since the adequacy of reductionistic materialism as a worldview has for some time been hotly debated by scholars.

The second type of naturalism maintains that the cosmos was primordially material but that life, intentionality, consciousness, free will, and other psychological, social, and moral realities have emerged as products of natural evolution and now make religion a legitimate aspect of any discussion of plausible worldviews. This second type of naturalism supports true holism—the doctrine that wholes truly are more than the sum of their parts—and that causation is not only “upward” (parts influence the nature of wholes) but “downward” (wholes may influence their parts by functioning not only as aggregates but as unitary agents). Though this type of naturalism attaches crucial importance to notions such as novelty, creativity, and emergence, there is an unwillingness to speak decisively about any identifiable ontological structure or single metaphysical functionality that is seen as the cause of these phenomena.

Examples of this type of naturalism may be found in the works of Samuel Alexander (1859–1938), Henry Nelson Wieman (1884–1975), Gordon Kaufman (1925–2011), and contemporary American philosopher Donald Crosby. I am not claiming that the ideas of these four scholars are identical but only that there are significant similarities as we seek to understand various types of religious naturalism. Alexander and Crosby agree that life, mentality, purposes, etc. have emerged spontaneously from matter, which displays an innate tendency to become organized in increasingly complex combinations. Crosby writes that “nature contains within itself the seeds of all of its adventures of becoming” (Crosby, 2016; Crosby, 2002). Alexander utilizes the term *nisus* to refer to the universe’s creative tendency towards increasing complexity, but the term *nisus* is simply an allusion to an observed phenomenon, not a metaphysical explanation (Alexander, 1920). Crosby deliberately eschews the word “God,” deeming it too laden with anthropomorphic and supernaturalistic connotations to be useful. Though Alexander speaks of “deity,” he uses the term simply to refer to the universe’s observed tendency to create emergent wholes or to refer to the highest levels of complexity that have emerged so far during natural history. Wieman and Kaufman, both theologians, do describe God at length, but their descriptions are phenomenological or observational rather than ontological or metaphysical. Wieman understands God as “creative good” or “the creative event,” which, Wieman argues, is “the Source of Human Good” and therefore worthy of our reverence (Wieman, 1946). Kaufman identifies God as “Serendipitous Creativity.” It is indisputable, Kaufman says, that the universe sustains types of creativity that bring the greatest good we know of into being, but Kaufman declines to enter into any philosophical speculation regarding the sources of that Creativity; it is best to describe it simply as “serendipitous” (Kaufman, 2004). Neither Wieman nor Kaufman emphasizes metaphysical materialism, but both may be classified as “materialists” if, with Crosby and Alexander, we enlarge our notion of “matter” to include radical dynamism and spontaneous creativity.

How available for religious purposes is the second type of naturalism? Clearly, along with the first type, the second type urges us to recognize the awe-inspiring complexity of nature. In this awesomeness there are inspiring esthetic elements and also robust incentives to preserve nature and protect the creatures that have evolved within it. In contrast to the first type, the second type recognizes the positive ontological status of values, feelings, thoughts, and goals as emergent realities. This is in closer harmony with traditional religions—though the second type might be critiqued for associating valuation and higher aspiration, as emergent realities, only with more complex life forms, thereby tending towards humanism or humanocentrism. Nevertheless, feelings of kinship or companionship with the universe itself are possible; Crosby stresses this idea, most prominently in *The Thou of Nature* (Crosby, 2013), but elsewhere as well. It seems doubtful,

however, that feelings of kinship with nature as a whole are currently accessible to a large proportion of religious seekers. As for interpersonal and institutional values, the burden of proof would remain with the second type to demonstrate that it can move beyond the province of intellectual endorsement to the realm of significant religious community.

The third type of religious naturalism resembles the second, but with the added conviction that it is not enough to attribute the holism present in nature to mystery or serendipity; rather, it is postulated that holism (creative emergence) is caused by a universal interplay between the *physical* and the *informational*. That is, the most primordial tidbits of reality traffic in data—data that inform the behavior of physical objects. This leads to the proposition that reality is *value-laden*, *purposive*, and/or *experiential*, since the notion of “being informed” clearly implies that there are subjects, however primitive, that somehow assess the relevance of abstract content as a goal for imminent actualization. I use the word *informational* here as roughly corresponding to Whitehead’s term eternal objects, Plato’s forms, or Carl Jung’s archetypes. I prefer the word “information” because it focuses on functionality and is less prone (I hope) to reification. One final characteristic of this third type is that, though pan-subjectivism and pan-evaluationism are affirmed, there is a reluctance to speak of any single coordinating principle or guiding source of graded relevance among the data being transmitted; in other words, God-talk is avoided. Examples of this third type of naturalism include William James (1842–1910), John Dewey (1859–1952), Bernard Loomer (1912–1985), and contemporary American philosopher Donald Sherburne.

William James, later in life, advanced what he called a philosophy of “radical empiricism,” by which he intended to refocus the attention of philosophy on “things definable in terms drawn from experience.” Though James resisted traditional metaphysical attempts to define reality, he clearly regarded *experience*—the reception, utilization, and transmission of what I am here calling “information”—as intrinsic to nature itself (James, 1996). John Dewey largely followed James on these points in his *Experience and Nature* (Dewey, 1925). James was not a traditional theist, and Dewey was a professed humanist. Loomer, a theologian, spoke and wrote extensively about God, but Loomer was a pantheist who identified God with “the totality of the world, with whatever unity the totality possesses” (Loomer, 1987, p. 20). Loomer’s God is thus not an *aspect* of reality that serves specifically to guide or interrelate natural processes. Sherburne’s work evidences a long-standing commitment to reinterpret the philosophy of A. N. Whitehead so that the idea of God is jettisoned (Sherburne, 1971).

Regarding religious values, the third type of naturalism, like the first two, is primarily intellectual in orientation in which religious feelings find expression most easily in forms of humanism. Humanism, as an expression of religious feeling, has a long history particularly among persons who are scholarly or skeptical-minded. However, it seems improbable that large numbers of non-intellectuals may enter into these gates with thanksgiving or into these courts with praise. Emotional, social, and institutional values are compromised.

The fourth type of naturalism differs from the third chiefly in its willingness to speak explicitly of an identifiable metaphysical or cosmological structure that is viewed as the coordinator of value in the world. Nature is seen as being composed of occasions of experience in which each occasion is a dipolar unity of physical and mental elements, though the term “mental” must be reconceived so that familiar examples of higher brain functioning (consciousness, thinking, step-by-step deliberation, etc.) are not treated as paradigms. *Mentality* is defined simply as the ability to process and act on information, observed in the way that particles in quantum systems spontaneously arrange themselves into patterns that do not depend on physical collision or the transmission of energy. In this fourth type of naturalism, the individual entities of

the world do not, on their own, organize themselves; there is an organizing reality or unitary function that fosters holism by interrelating the welter of aims that are possible. This organizing reality is referred to as “God,” though God is not viewed as a single being but as an aspect of the ontological structure of every transpiring event. God is seen in a way similar to the way we understand gravity, which is consistent in its effects though not existing as an individual self. Examples of this type of naturalism are found in the writings of German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1864–1947), and American theologian Harvey H. Potthoff (1911–2002).

Schleiermacher, who was influenced by Kant, German idealism, and German romanticism, held that we experience God directly through what Schleiermacher called “the feeling of absolute dependence” (Niebuhr, 1967). This feeling is not merely an experience of awe or weakness when confronted by the Infinite but, rather, the feeling of the groundedness or rootedness of our own feelings, our own preferences and choices, and our own sense of self within the matrix in which all choices and all selfhood arise. This may sound pantheistic, but Schleiermacher’s God is not the universe as a whole, and he expressly disavowed pantheism. Whitehead defined God variously, but his common theme is that God is the metaphysical ground or structure (not an individual being) that coordinates the “initial aims” that bring order and wholeness into nature. Potthoff defined God as “the Wholeness Reality” or “the character of reality in its wholeness” (Potthoff, 1969, pp. 185–192). Though he had studied with Whitehead, Potthoff declined to follow Whitehead into the intricacies of constructive metaphysics. Still, Potthoff’s phrase “Wholeness Reality” is not simply a descriptive reference to one of nature’s traits but an allusion to a specific tendency or integrative functionality that permeates nature. Potthoff elaborated on this concept by describing the functioning of the Wholeness Reality as “Ground, Grace, and Goal”—a deliberate parallel to the traditional Christian understanding of the functioning of the Holy Trinity (Potthoff, 1969, pp. 198–211).

Though they may seem subtle, the differences between the third and fourth types of naturalism are of major importance when assessing religious availability. Even though God is not thought of as the traditional supernatural personal Spirit, the ability within the fourth type to speak of God with definiteness and conviction as the Source of the Sacred is a critical factor. Though Schleiermacher and Potthoff were professors, it happens that both also served with conspicuous effectiveness as pastors who were celebrated not only for their preaching but for their pastoral care.³ Reference to these two persons does not constitute a statistical sample, but I nevertheless feel prompted to hazard the opinion that it is of inestimable value to be able to approach a religious calling in the context of a theocentric orientation, or devotion to some other transcendent sacred reality. It is hard to avoid the likelihood that some understanding of “God” as an Ultimate Real Other which/who functions as the Source of the Sacred is of decisive value concerning the matter of religious availability.

This brings us to the fifth type of naturalism, which can be identified by the single term *panentheism*. Panentheism may be defined as the belief that God is greater than the universe but includes and interpenetrates it. Whitehead is commonly but incorrectly named as panentheism’s foremost proponent; this distinction belongs more properly to philosopher Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000). This assertion cannot be defended here but is developed more fully elsewhere (Conner, 2009; Conner, 1993; Wheeler, 2018, forthcoming). Panentheism usually also includes the assumption that God is not just a functional aspect of nature but a living Being—that is, in Whitehead’s terminology, a “personally ordered society of occasions” (Hartshorne, 1948; Cobb,

1965). Distinguished exponents of panentheism include John B. Cobb, Jr., David Griffin, Marjorie Suchocki, Catherine Keller, and Philip Clayton, but there are numerous others. As Keller indicates, the vision originally spawned by the process theologians now comprises “a vast community of authors, teachers, clergy, and activists collectively rethinking the core values and symbols of the West” (Keller, 2008, p. 23; also 53).

Though panentheism has not achieved the status of being a prevalent orthodoxy in the world’s monotheistic religions, its relative success as a form of naturalism is extraordinary. A major reason for this success is that panentheism has all the right stuff: it promotes creative dialogue between religion and the natural and social sciences; vigorously supports liberation theology and social justice; is in step with the pluralist and postmodernist attitudes of the twenty-first century—all this while offering the religious availability of traditional personalistic theism: a God who is “the great companion—a fellow sufferer who understands” (Whitehead, 1978, p. 351).

But, perhaps surprisingly, the challenge for panentheism in our present inquiry is whether panentheism truly is a form of *naturalism*, as its proponents typically claim. The challenge to panentheism’s naturalism is that, though panentheism alleges that God is thoroughly immanent, God is also said to be “greater than” nature. Panentheists might reply that this is merely a question of stipulative definition; nature may be redefined so as to include spiritual realities, as in the second, third, and fourth types of naturalism. But the objection remains that panentheism’s ultimately-greater-than-nature God is by definition stretched beyond the one-order concept of nature that is espoused by naturalism; panentheism’s God finally transcends the interrelated system of nature’s total causal matrix. A second problem for panentheism is to explain how the God of panentheism—often described as possessing consciousness, a mind, and a will—can simultaneously and uninterruptedly be in touch with and influential upon the entire universe, a universe unimaginably vast and in which, relativity theory assures us, the traditional notion of cosmic temporal simultaneity is meaningless. These issues rapidly become abstruse and cannot be addressed here. I would like simply to acknowledge my own judgment that Philip Clayton is correct in suggesting that panentheism must finally appeal beyond nature in order to support its claims (Clayton, 2004, pp. 172–185). If this be the case, panentheism ironically falls short at the point of *intellectual value*, since attempts to reach beyond nature are, for philosophical naturalism, simply untenable.

Conclusions

In this essay I have not sought—nor would it have been appropriate—to argue for one type of religious naturalism based on its putative religious availability. My hope has been simply to clarify some issues pertaining to a topic that is admittedly complex and ambiguous and in which one’s own history and personal commitments play a legitimate role. Based on the foregoing discussion, however, I now offer a few tentative conclusions. It seems quite likely that the religious availability of any form of philosophical naturalism is greatly aided by the presence of the following features, listed in no particular order.

- (1) *The presence of a community of faith.* The religious availability of a set of ideas is almost always enhanced by being expressed in a community of belief. This is achieved more readily if the ideas can be adapted to an existing religious tradition. It is not that nature on its own cannot inspire devotion and reverence. It can, and it does; and, in my view, those who are able to embrace a religion based on nature are to be congratulated. But the values that a religion of nature conveys center upon the intellectual and, in a more derivative way, on the ethical,

and the esthetic. The availability of values that are emotional, psychological, interpersonal, and institutional is more tenuous where there is no faith community.

- (2) *The presence of durable sacred conventions* (Dean, 1994). Sacred conventions include rituals, symbols, stories, familiar ideas, songs, and other traditions. Sacred conventions accompany communities of faith but community and sacred convention are not identical. Sacred symbols and conventions cannot simply be invented. They seem to come into existence spontaneously and take on a life that often pays little heed to human manipulation.
- (3) *The accessibility of a personal dimension pertaining to the sacred*. Whitehead commented that satisfactory religion moves through three stages, “from God the void to God the enemy, and from God the enemy to God the companion” (Whitehead, 1960, p. 16). God need not be thought of as a literal person if there are sufficiently compelling sacred conventions that convey personal imagery.
- (4) *The conviction that the beliefs in question relate directly to what is salvific*. That is, the ideas being advanced are believed to pertain to realities that are essential to salvation, redemption, and/or spiritual wholeness.
- (5) *The experience involved is not one of merely comprehending the Sacred, but of being summoned, being transformed, and being sent forth by it*. There is an experience of grace—that the Sacred Reality in some way “does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.”

On this final point—if I may speak from the perspective of the religious tradition with which I am familiar—it is instructive that Abraham, Sarah, Moses, the prophets, Mary, Peter, Paul, and apostles encountered the Sacred not through acts of deliberate analysis but in experiences that were completely unanticipated and over which they had little or no control. Their experiences stand in contrast to religious naturalism, which, despite elements of intuition and emotion, is mainly a deliberate invention of human intelligence. But our investigation into the question of religious availability reminds us that religion is not primarily a cognitive activity. In Whitehead’s words:

Religion is the vision of something which stands beyond, behind, and within, the passing flux of immediate things; something which is real, and yet waiting to be realised; something which is a remote possibility, and yet the greatest of present facts; something that gives meaning to all that passes, and yet eludes apprehension; something whose possession is the final good, and yet is beyond all reach; something which is the ultimate ideal, and the hopeless quest... . Apart from it, human life is a flash of occasional enjoyments lighting up a mass of pain and misery, a bagatelle of transient experience.

(Whitehead, 1925, p. 275)

Religion centers not upon intellectual acumen, but upon conviction, devotion, and action. Intellectual coherence may be highly valued, but it is not paramount. Vital religion is not merely plausible, but compelling. It is not a matter of grasping certain ideas, but of being grasped.

Notes

- 1 Intellectual, axiological, emotional, and ethical types of value are utilized as means of assessing religious availability by Charles Milligan in his “Religious Values of Whitehead’s God Concept,” *The Iliff Review* IX, 3 (Fall 1952).

- 2 This statement is commonly attributed to a character in one of Mark Twain's stories, but I have not been able to locate the source.
- 3 The extensive level of public esteem for Schleiermacher is indicated by his funeral procession, which was attended by an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 persons in the streets of Berlin. Potthoff was highly regarded among United Methodists not only regionally but nationally.

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