

The Religious Naturalist Orientation

The first edition of this book was written from the perspective of a religious naturalist, an orientation with many historical roots but considered at the time to be a general concept. Since then, in books, articles, conferences, and conversations, a number of religious naturalists have contributed to developing a more specific framework. An overview of such a framework is presented here. Many resources can be found in the Endnotes and at <https://religious-naturalist-association.org>.

WHO IS A NATURALIST?

Scientific inquiry has provisioned us with mind-blowing new ways of understanding the natural world, generating a narrative that has been called the New Story, the Epic of Evolution, the Universe Story, Big History, Journey of the Universe, and Everybody's Story. Naturalists dwell within these understandings, recognizing that they will certainly deepen and that some may be revised with further scientific discoveries, and they adopt this account as a core narrative. A naturalist is at home in the natural world.

WHAT IS ENTAILED BY BEING RELIGIOUS?

People can “be religious” in many ways, some participating in traditional rituals and adopting traditional moral codes as a way of life without engaging in deep explorations of their dynamics. When the dynamics are probed, some common themes emerge.

A religious person self-orientes within a core narrative (a Mythos, a large story), historically accessed in sacred texts or oral accounts, that tells How Things Are, and develops responses to the narrative along three axes – the interpretive, the spiritual, and the moral.

1. The interpretive axis involves asking the Big Questions along philosophical/existential axes in the context of the narrative. Why is there anything at all rather than nothing? What does the narrative tell me about Death? Love? Evil? The Meaning of Life? God? In indigenous and traditional religions, answers to these questions are usually included in the narratives themselves and are then further interpreted by elders and clerics.
2. The spiritual axis involves exploring *inward* responses to the mythos, including awe, wonder, gratitude, assent, commitment, humility, reverence, joy, and the astonishment of being alive at all. In both traditional and indigenous religions, art, ritual, and meditative practice foster and deepen spiritual modalities in the context of the mythos.
3. The moral axis involves exploring *outward* responses to the mythos, including nurture, empathy, fairness, responsibility, and communion. In both indigenous and traditional religions, moral precepts are woven into the fabric of their

texts, traditions and ceremonies, and are then further interpreted by elders and clerics.

A religious person integrates these three axes into a coherent whole -- the oft-uttered concept of being “spiritual but not religious,” for example, leaves out the interpretive and moral aspects of being religious. Persons who adopt the core tenets of an indigenous or a traditional religion are said to hold Beliefs, and they are likely to participate in communities of fellow believers.

The adjective religious does not mean the same thing as the noun religion. Most religions establish and advocate a set of codified Beliefs and practices and support a formal clergy of some kind. A religious person may, or may not, elect to adopt such a religion. Importantly, the noun religion is inapplicable to the religious naturalist trajectory, where interpretations and practices are shared and celebrated but not codified. Since there is no such thing as, nor is there likely to be, a canonical religious natural *-ism*, but rather many versions thereof, we speak of a religious naturalist *orientation*, albeit the term religious naturalism often serves as useful shorthand.

WHO IS A RELIGIOUS NATURALIST?

A religious naturalist is a naturalist who, having adopted Everybody’s Story as a core narrative, goes on to explore its religious potential, developing interpretive, spiritual, and moral/ethical responses in the context of the natural world. The search for social justice, for example, is guided by an understandings of the evolutionary antecedents to our social sensibilities. Foundational to this orientation is Ecomorality -- seeking right relations between the Earth and its creatures, mindful of our interrelatedness and interdependence.

None of these religious responses is front-loaded into Everybody’s Story as they are in the traditional and indigenous religious texts and traditions. Nature Just Is. Therefore, the religious naturalist engages in an exploration, accompanied by fellow explorers, developing and sharing interpretive, spiritual, and moral understandings and feelings. These odysseys are informed and guided by mindful explorations of our human cultural traditions, including art, literature, philosophy, and the religions of the world, all of which are also part of Nature.

The reflections offered in this book are written primarily in what I would call a spiritual voice. Some readers, I have come to learn, are uncomfortable with the word spiritual, seeing it as connoting a supernatural framework. But the word comes from *spiritus*, Latin for breath, and connotes essence. For religious naturalists, our spiritual selves, our most deeply felt selves, are fully essential and fully natural.

Naturalistic understandings greatly expand and deepen the parameters of spiritual experience. I can look at a sunset and thrill to its outrageous beauty, then toggle to marveling at the nuclear fusions generating the helium and the heat and the light, then switch to gratitude for the sunlight-driven photosynthesis that generates the oxygen that

I am breathing, and then become infused with joy that we have such a spectacular star. Naturalistic understandings also expand and deepen the parameters of our moral sensibilities to include ecomorality, as explored in Chapter 13.

WHAT ABOUT GOD(S)?

The concept of god(s) who actively guide and alter the course of natural events and human lives is not a naturalist view, and persons for whom this concept is important will presumably prefer another religious orientation. Most religious naturalists, including myself, do not elect to use god language at all, but some adopt the word as metaphor (e.g. God is a Personification of sacred dimensions of reality), or to connote the unknown and perhaps unknowable substrate of order (e.g. God is the Ground of All Being), or to connote a large and revered human dynamic (e.g. God is Serendipitous Creativity), or to characterize a pantheistic framework (e.g. God is the sum of the natural and physical laws of the Universe).

I call myself a religious nontheist and not atheist because an atheist is considered to have a belief about God -- that there isn't one. I find that God language gets in the way of my religious sensibilities, but many, of course, consider it to be fundamental.

A RELIGIOUS NATURALIST TAKES NATURE TO HEART

A "vanilla" naturalist takes Nature to mind. A religious naturalist takes Nature to mind. A religious naturalist also takes Nature to heart.

Loyal Rue, who coined this phrase, illustrates what this would mean in an Islamic context:

If I were to say that I have taken the Koran to heart, you might infer that the teachings of the Koran now shape how I think, feel and act. I now take Allah's will as my own, and I have a newly clarified sense of who I am, where I came from, and where I am going. Taking the Koran to heart alters the fabric of my self-understanding, it shifts my teleological center of gravity, and I operate differently in my efforts to live in harmony with that reality.

Transposing to a religious naturalist context, we get this:

If I were to say that I have taken Nature to heart, you might infer that my understandings of the natural world now shape how I think, feel and act. I now take the natural world as my own, and I have a newly clarified sense of who I am, where I came from, and where I am going. Taking Nature to heart alters the fabric of my

self-understanding, it shifts my teleological center of gravity,
and I operate differently in my efforts to live in harmony with
that reality.

PERSPECTIVE

A religious naturalist is anchored in and dwells within her understandings of the natural world. He finds religious orientation within that meta-narrative and develops mindful religious responses to it – interpretive, spiritual, and moral. A religious naturalist takes Nature to mind and to heart.

Importantly, the religious responses developed in religious naturalist orientations often deeply overlap those espoused by existing traditions. The adoption of a meta-narrative does not alter the human impulse toward common spiritual and moral sensibilities; rather, it influences how we get there.

Listen! On the hillside
Trees are singing,
Chalice gold with praise.

The sun blurts a dazzling
Sermon. In maroon and caramel
Maples whisper amazements.

You see in the pond's perfect placidity
Where years of prayer
And stillness will take you.

It's so still here you can almost hear
The leaves hymning as they lilt down
Distributing communion to the Earth.

Feel their bliss as they bob,
On the periphery
Of eternity.

The trees meditate, plunging
Deeper, ever deeper into wisdom's
Watery dark.

Here and there circles silver: Softly,
Shyly the depths are offering themselves
To you.

As day bows to the setting sun,

And fills the sky with millions of votive candles,
Incense rises everywhere

And you, at last,
Become
The temple.

--- Duane Tucker, *The Temple of Autumn*