

# **Religious Naturalism in a Unitarian Universalist Context**

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There are a number of twenty and twenty-first century religious thinkers who may be grouped together under the name Religious Naturalism.

Who are the religious naturalists? Historical roots go back at least to Spinoza and include Henry David Thoreau, and some poets including Whitman and Robinson Jeffers. Former religious naturalists included Samuel Alexander, Santayana, Dewey, Mordecai Kaplan, Ralph Burhoe, founder of *Zygon*, and such Chicago theologians as Wieman, Meland, and the later Bernard Loomer. Recent religious naturalists include William Dean, Willem Drees, Ursula Goodenough, Charley Hardwick, Henry Levinson, Karl Peters, myself, and perhaps Gordon Kaufman.

Religious naturalism as a movement overlaps Unitarian Universalism. The purpose of this paper is to situate religious naturalism in relation to the UU's. I shall start with a definition of religious naturalism. Then I shall attempt to relate religious naturalism to the humanists of the 1920's and 1930's and to what William Murry calls the New Humanists. Then I shall treat what may be called theistic naturalists, including Frederick May Eliot, Henry Nelson Wieman, Bernard Loomer, Ralph Burhoe, and Karl Peters. Finally I shall discuss two non-theist religious naturalists, Ursula Goodenough and myself.

All of the writers treated at length in this paper either were or are Unitarians or UU's at some point in their life or else are read and discussed in UU circles. There are major omissions in this study, such as the work of Connie Barlow and Michael Dowd and Donald Crosby. Readers are referred to Barlow's *Green Space, Green Time* and Crosby's *A Religion of Nature*. These are large holes in this presentation and I hope to rectify this in future work.

**1. What is Religious Naturalism?** As I am using the term, religious naturalism is a type of naturalism. Hence we start with naturalism. Naturalism is a set of beliefs and attitudes that focuses on this world. On the negative side it involves the assertion that there seems to be no ontologically distinct and superior realm (such as God, soul or heaven) to ground, explain, or give meaning to this world. On the positive side it affirms that attention should be focused on the events and processes of this world to provide what degree of explanation and meaning are possible to this life. While this world is not self-sufficient in the sense of providing by itself all of the meaning that we would like, it is sufficient in the sense of providing enough meaning for us to cope.

Religious naturalism is a set of beliefs and attitudes that there are religious aspects of this world which can be appreciated within a naturalistic framework. There are some happenings or processes in our experience which elicit responses which can appropriately be called religious. These experiences and responses are similar enough to those nurtured by the paradigm cases of religion that they may be called religious without stretching the word beyond recognition.<sup>1</sup>

I need to point out that the denial of God, soul or heaven as distinct and superior is made with varying degrees of confidence by religious naturalists, from a tentative

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agnosticism to a full-blown assurance. However, as I am using the term, religious naturalists would agree in developing theory and practice without reference to distinct and superior transcendent realms or entities. To complicate things further, some religious naturalists, such as Wieman in his middle period, use the term “God” to refer either to all of the world or else to an aspect of the world. This viewpoint, which could be called “naturalistic theism,” stays within the parameters of religious naturalism as this term is being used.

**2. Religious Naturalism and Classical Religious Humanism.** In many ways religious naturalism is close to religious humanism. I am referring here to the viewpoints of classical humanists such as John Dietrich and Curtis Reese during the time of the Humanist Controversy (1920’s) or the signers of the *Humanist Manifesto* of 1933. Clearly these humanists are naturalists in that they focus on this world and deny the reality of God, soul or heaven. I believe that they could also appropriately be called religious naturalists because their devotion to science and human betterment is analogous to the devotion of those whom we normally call religious.

William Murry has distinguished older humanists of the 1920’s and 1930’s from contemporary humanists. Among the characteristics of this newer humanism, as he describes it, is an openness “*to wonder and mystery and transcendence in a naturalistic framework*” (Murry 2000, 84). The older humanists might be considered as religious humanists, if their passion for truth and justice are read as analogues of a religious orientation. However, the attitude of the newer humanists, as described by Murry are definitely cut from the same cloth as religious naturalism.

**3. Religious Naturalism and Process Theology.** Another issue concerns process theology. As I understand it the God of process theology, while deeply immersed within this world, is so ontologically distinct and superior as to fall outside of naturalism as I understand it. An entity which is surpassable by none except itself is not naturalist. Immanentist yes, naturalist no.

**4. Theistic Naturalism and Religious Naturalism: A Typology.**

On the topic of God I find that religious naturalists tend to fall into three groups:

1) those who conceive of God as the creative process within the universe, 2) those who think of God as the totality of the universe considered religiously, and 3) those who do not speak of God yet still can be called religious. In the first group belong, among others, Shailer Mathews, Henry Nelson Wieman, Ralph Wendell Burhoe, Karl Peters, and also, I would claim, William Dean and Gordon Kaufman. In the second belong Spinoza, Samuel Alexander, George Burman Foster, Frederick May Eliot, and Bernard Loomer. The third includes Ursula Goodenough, Donald Crosby, Willem Drees, and myself. *What is important to note is that religious naturalism need not involve a rejection of the concept of God, but if that idea is used, it involves a radical naturalization of the idea.* (This section is taken from my article "Is God Emeritus?" in the *Journal of Liberal Religion*. Stone 2005).

To make a presentation of reasonable length, I will address the concept of God or the religious orientation of Eliot, Wieman, Burhoe, Peters from the first group; Loomer from the second; and Goodenough and myself from the third, all, except Goodenough, either life-long Unitarians or persons who became Unitarians.

**a. God as Creative Process within the World**

**Henry Nelson Wieman** Professor of Philosophy of Religion at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago from 1927 to 1947 and later a member of the Department of Philosophy at Southern Illinois University, Wieman was one of the most influential of the religious naturalists. Although considered rather radical during the period of American interest in neo-orthodoxy, Wieman was brought to the Divinity School to counteract the popularity of humanism, especially as developed by Eustace Haydon, who was not technically a member of the Divinity School but who was significant in the life of that school from approximately 1919 through 1945.

The impact of Wieman in a period of growing humanism may be gathered from two comments. Charles Clayton Morrison, editor of The Christian Century, said, “I have no need of Barth. Wieman is my Barth.” Morris Eames of Southern Illinois University said that Wieman’s writings had allowed him and others to retain religion in the face of the scientific world view.

Wieman was passionately concerned to find the truth and avoid error in religion. Error in religion results in personal and social havoc. He wanted religion to be anchored in reality. Now in his understanding, common sense empirical inquiry and its sharpening in scientific method are the best way to find truth in any area. Thus, there is but one method of separating truth from fantasy, the empirical method, and religious inquiry is a species of it, differentiated from other inquiry by its object, not its methods or principles. (See Stone 1992, 149-153 for my exposition and critique of Wieman’s empirical method in religious inquiry.)

Specifying the object of inquiry is a key phase of any empirical investigation. Thus much of Wieman’s work was spent in refining the definition the object of religious

inquiry. Briefly, for Wieman, the definition of what we are looking for in religious inquiry is:

What transforms man as he cannot transform himself to save him from evil and lead him to the best that human life can ever attain, provided that he give himself over to it in religious faith and meet other required conditions (Wieman, 1975, 273).

In traditional religious language what can save us as we cannot save ourselves, provided we devote ourselves to it, is God. The soteriological emphasis of this is clear. I like to call this a theology of grace (See Shaw, 1999).

In fact, it is a naturalistic theology of grace, because Wieman had a naturalistic world view in which the only things which exist or can accomplish anything are events, relations, and qualities (Wieman 1946, 6). While he owed much specifically to Stephen C. Pepper's contextualism, this is a process-relational view in a very broad sense that could include Dewey's general orientation in *Experience and Nature*, as well as Whitehead, and much process theology (Pepper 1942).

Now within this naturalistic world view, that which can transform us as we cannot transform ourselves is the process of integration in the world, or what Wieman eventually called, famously, "creative interchange." This idea, which has been called a "truncated idealism," is rooted ultimately in Hegel, but its immediate source of inspiration for Wieman was in Ralph Barton Perry and William Ernest Hocking. (See Wieman 1985 and Minor 1977, chaps 2 and 3.).

In passing I wish to point out that there is a strong and fruitful principle of cultural and personal critique in this outlook. This principle is rooted in the distinction between the creative good (the process of integration) and created goods. All created goods can be become demonic when treated with idolatry (Wieman 1946, 23-26).

Wieman's thought went through several stages of development. After beginning with a heavy dependence on Whitehead, Wieman worked out a viewpoint in *Normative Psychology of Religion* (1935) and *The Growth of Religion* (1938) in which the process of integration extended beyond human interactions and included the history of the cosmos and biological evolution. By the time of *The Source of Human Good* (1946), his focus was almost entirely on creative interaction in human individuals, groups, and history. In his last period, exemplified by *Man's Ultimate Commitment* (1958), reference to God had virtually dropped from his writing and he referred to creative interchange on the human level as that which is worthy of our dedication. He is perhaps best known for his penultimate period of *The Source of Human Good*. In this period God is the creative process within the world.

**Ralph Wendell Burhoe.** Ralph Wendell Burhoe is our next naturalistic theologian. Trained in the natural sciences, he used his position as the first Executive Officer of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences to develop, in 1954, the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science which meets annually on Star Island. In 1964 he went to Meadville Theological School in Chicago to develop possibly the first theological teaching position using modern sciences as a prime resource. There he established the Center for Advanced Study in Religion and Science, now the Zygon Center for Religion and Science, and became the founding editor of *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*. He believed that the wisdom of the ancient religious traditions about humans and their place in the world can be reinterpreted and placed on a firm footing by the findings of modern science. His central notion is that the evolutionary process is in fact what the ancient religions referred to as God, the judgment of God being the selective process of

evolution. His discussion of God may be found especially in “The Concepts of God and Soul in a Scientific View of Human Purpose,” chapter 5 of his book *Toward a Scientific Theology*.

For Burhoe the two major elements of traditional religion are the concepts of God and soul, concepts whose loss represents the breakdown of once flourishing cultural systems and whose re-interpretation might help reverse the present cultural breakdown. These two symbols provide the motivation of long-term purpose, motivation which recent humanistic social philosophies lack.

The first of these two elements of religious belief “is that there is a system of reality or power sovereign over men individually” and collectively to which men must learn to adapt (Burhoe 1981, 116). This is the sovereign system which Burhoe claims that the sciences understand more fully as the process of evolutionary selection. In other words, *god* denotes “the total sovereign system, which in scientific language may be said to be the total cosmic ecosystem including the details of local ecosystems on earth” (Burhoe 1981,124). He uses the typographical devices of using quotation marks and italics to refer to these traditional concepts “to indicate that these terms are to be symbols that relate in some ways closely to some of their traditional meanings as well as to concepts of the contemporary sciences” (Burhoe 1981, 117).

**Karl Peters**. *Dancing with the Sacred*, by Karl Peters, co-editor of *Zygon*, is the fruit of a lifelong wrestling with the issue of being religious in a scientific and pluralistic age (Peters 2002). Chapters 4-8 deal with what Peters calls the sacred source of existence and development. He articulates a revisionary evolutionary naturalistic worldview in which the creative cosmic mystery is nonpersonal. Specifically, what he calls

serendipitous creativity is a two part process: the occurrence of variations in cosmic, biological, human, and personal history and the selection of some of these variations to continue.

Running like a thread throughout his thought is his concept of cosmic, biological, historical and personal creativity as a two-fold process of variation and selection which is, of course, an extrapolation of Darwin's idea of natural selection. Besides this dominant thread, there are clusters of ideas throughout Peters which are anchored in scientific discourse.

He uses Ilya Prigogine's work in nonequilibrium thermodynamics which shows how random disturbances of existing systems lead to the formation of new structures. Astrophysicist Eric Chaisson suggests how this dual pattern of chance fluctuation and natural law can be applied to the origin of galaxies. Peters uses this discussion to illustrate his contention that the creative process in the universe can be seen as the two-fold pattern of variation and selection and specifically that we do not need the concept of a transcendent creator in order to have creativity. At this point Peters illustrates his metaphor that the scientific and religious views are like two maps of the same area (like a street map and a subway map) that coincide in certain features (such as subway stations) by showing that the traditional Biblical terms for this two-fold pattern are Spirit (fluctuation) and Word or Logos (the law that selects some variations for survival) (Peters 2002, 53-58).

What Peters calls serendipitous creativity is a two part process: the recurrence of variations in cosmic, biological and human history and the selection of some of these variations to continue. Following Burhoe, and using the metaphor of the two maps,

Peters asserts that God is this twofold process of innovation in cosmic, biological, cultural and personal evolution. Peters is very clear about his indebtedness to Burhoe and also Wieman at this point.

**b. God as the Totality of the World Considered Religiously**

**Frederick May Eliot.** F. M. Eliot is known, of course, as the President of the American Unitarian Association from 1937 to 1958. Before that he was minister of Unity Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he published a sermon series, *Toward Belief in God*, in 1928. Since I gave a presentation his theology as a form of religious naturalism to Collegium three years ago, I will summarize his view briefly. In short, for Eliot the three experiences underlying, indeed constituting, his belief in God are the moral imperative, the rational order of the universe, and a sense of purpose in the universe. My claim is that these experiences, especially the last two, the intuition of a rational order in the universe and a sense of purpose in the universe, place him in the camp of religious naturalism in that the object of the religious attitude is the universe as a whole grasped religiously.

**Bernard Loomer.** Bernard Loomer was Professor of Philosophy of Religion at the University of Chicago's Divinity School (1942-1965) and Dean (1945-1954). Throughout his career he was an advocate of using Whitehead's philosophy to articulate Christian theology and, along with Charles Hartshorne and Bernard Meland, helped give rise to process theology in America, particularly through their students Schubert Ogden and John Cobb. At the end of his career Loomer taught at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley (1965-1977), where he developed a naturalistic theology expressed in a brief but seminal writing, "The Size of God" (Loomer, 1987).

Loomer notes a “basic shift in perspective from the two worlds of traditional thought to the one evolved and relativized world of contemporary thought. This movement entails a revolution in our conception of the life of God and of our participation in it.” This will be a transition “from a theology that maintains that resources for salvation ultimately derive from a transcendent God to an outlook that suggests that the graces for the living of a creative life emerge within the depths and immediacies of concrete experience. It is a transition from the wisdom of the sojourner...to the wisdom of the evolved earth-creature” (Loomer 1987, 21). The main thesis of this essay is that: “If the one world, the experienceable world with its possibilities, is all the reality accessible to us,...then it follows that the being of God must be identified in some sense with the being of the world and its creatures” (Loomer 1987, 22-23).

Loomer then sets up a dichotomy: “As an actuality or group of actualities God is then to be identified with a part or with the totality of the concrete, actual world, including its possibilities” (Loomer 1987, 23). *The Size of God* is an exploration of one of these options, “the alternative that God is to be identified with the totality of the world.” He notes that this exploration requires courage, especially since this is “unfamiliar and traditionally forbidden territory” and the conclusions “appear to be at odds with what has been accepted as true and adequate for so long.” Such “courage and tentativity, along with humility, are inherent qualities of faith” (Loomer 1987, 23).

Loomer’s naturalistic outlook is expressed in “basic empirical, methodological principles.” These principles “do not have independent justification; they are of a piece with the accompanying ontological stance. They are in fact the methodological

expression of this ontology” (Loomer 1987, 23). The general empirical principle is that “knowledge is derived from and confirmed by physical experience” (Loomer 1987, 24). In elaborating this principle, Loomer, drawing on Whitehead, distinguishes between physical feeling and sense perception. By this distinction he separates himself from the older British empiricism which is based on sense experience. “The heights and depths of life, the unmanageable and efficacious undertows of existence, and the transformative energies of creative interchange are known first through our bodily feelings. Sense perception, by contrast, is an abstract version of physical experience....It is a more specialized type of prehension that enables us to have relatively clear and distinct impressions of the more manageable features of our experience” (Loomer 1987, 24). It is significant that Loomer is able to articulate a theory of religious intuition on the basis of this empiricism. “An intuition in the perceptual sense is a physical experience with a modicum of conceptual interplay. The far-ranging insights of religious intuitions are derived from the fusion of physical and conceptual sensitivity to life-directive and life-transformative qualities and relationships” (Loomer 1987, 25).

The naturalistic outlook, according to Loomer, may be expressed in a positive and a negative assertion. “The disavowal of transcendental causes, principles, and explanations is the negative side of the assertion of the self-sufficiency of the world and of our descriptive analysis of it....This naturalistic orientation can be restated in terms of a principle that is both methodological and ontological in scope: the reasons why things are the way they are and behave as they do are to be found within the things themselves and their relationships (including the factor of chance) to each other” (Loomer 1987, 25).

Loomer elaborates this naturalistic outlook in terms of two topics: the web of life, the unity of the web, the concept of ambiguity, and the creative advance.

a) In explicating the concept of the web of life, Loomer stresses the importance of relationships at all levels. “Actualities are largely constituted by their relations.” Indeed, “We create each other” (Loomer 1987, 31). This is not necessarily love. “Love does not create our essential interrelatedness. Love is an acknowledgment of it. We love because we are bound to each other, because we live and are fulfilled in, with, and through each other.” By the same token, the interrelatedness of things is “exemplified as much in the mutual destructiveness of evil” as in “the mutual enrichment of a loving relationship” (Loomer, 1987, 33).

The “all-inclusive human web is the primordial covenant...to which all are called and all are chosen, and in whose service all covenants of lesser generality, both religious and secular, receive their justification.” However, we are “coming to understand that the human community belongs to a larger web that includes all forms of terrestrial life” (Loomer 1987, 34). This idea of an extended web is a generalization of field theory and an expansion of our sense of community. It is “an imaginative extension of the sentence: ‘inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these, you have done it unto me’ ” (Loomer 1987, 35).

b) The nature of the extended web of interconnected events seems to lie between two extremes. On the one extreme, there is the personal unity of an experiencing subject, which the world as a whole, approached empirically, appears to lack. The other extreme is that of an aggregation, but the world seems to be more unified than that. The tentative conclusion is that the universal web has the kind of unity which the term “web” suggests,

that of a generalized enduring society. This idea of the world as a whole as an interconnected web does involve an imaginative leap of the imagination. While it goes beyond the limits of scientific evidence, yet it does have some support in scientific theory. It has “rootage in poetic insight, parapsychological phenomena, and in deep intuitions emanating from several religious traditions” (Loomer 1987, 36).

Here Loomer introduces the notion of religious intuition into his empirical outlook. “Evidence is a function of perception (and accessible data), and perception is a matter of sensitive discernment. Discernment is a variable, reflecting the inequality of sensitivity among observers. In order to obtain a discerning and penetrating ‘seeing,’ physical perception must be informed and prepared by appropriate and suggestive theory that guides our seeing, prefigures possible connections, and enlarges our receptivity concerning what may be presented to us” (Loomer 1987, 36).

At this point Loomer introduces the term “God.” “In terms of this analysis, God as a wholeness is to be identified with the concrete, interconnected totality of this struggling, imperfect, unfinished, and evolving societal web” (Loomer 1987, 41). Why call this inter-connected web of existence “God”? Why not simply refer to the world? Since “God is not an enduring concrete individual with a sustained subjective life, what is gained by this perhaps confusing, semantic identification?” (Loomer 1987, 42).

“In our traditions the term ‘God’ is the symbol of ultimate values and meanings in all of their dimensions. It connotes an absolute claim on our loyalty. It points the direction of a greatness of fulfillment. It signifies a richness of resources for the living of life at its depths.

It suggests the enshrinement of our common and ecological life.

It proclaims an adequate object of worship. It symbolizes a transcendent and inexhaustible meaning that forever eludes our grasp.

The world is God because it is the source and preserver of meaning; because the creative advance of the world in its adventure is the supreme cause to be served; because even in our desecration of our space and time within it, the world is holy ground; and because it contains and yet enshrouds the ultimate mystery inherent within existence itself” (Loomer 1987, 42).

Loomer goes on to assert that anything unambiguous is an abstraction. Hence an ambiguous God is of greater stature than an unambiguous deity. “The aim in the first instance is not to seek and cherish ambiguity for its own sake....The quest is for a living, dynamic, and active God—in short, a concrete God....The concretely actual is ambiguous; only the highly abstract can be unambiguous” (Loomer 1987, 43).

Given Loomer’s distinction between perfection as a bloodless abstraction and complexity as fullsome concreteness, the creative advance of the world is not a movement toward perfection, but toward greater stature, a movement which “involves the transformation of incompatibilities and contradictions into compatible contrasts within the unity of the web and within the lives of its members” (Loomer 1987, 51). Finally, Loomer ends his essay by the hint that the interconnected web of existence is growing towards a unity of experience. “The conception of the stature of God that is presupposed in this essay may be indicated by the speculative suggestion that the world is an interconnected web endeavoring to become a vast socialized unity of experience with its own processive subjectivity” (Loomer1987, 51).

### **c. A Religious Orientation without God**

**Ursula Goodenough**. *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, by Ursula Goodenough, is a clear statement of a non-theistic religious naturalism. Professor of Biology at Washington University, Ursula Goodenough is the author of a best-selling textbook on genetics, Past-President of the American Society of Cell Biology, and also of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science. She is not a theist yet relates to the world with a religious feeling response. This feeling-response is informed by scientific methods and conclusions. It appears in moments of ecstasy, even terror, and also in long-range affective orientation. This feeling response is very articulate, thoroughly melded with reason and logic, far from arbitrary or merely subjective. On the other hand, this is not humanism in the style of John Dietrich, humanist preacher (at his height in the “Humanist Controversy” of the 1920’s and 1930’s), or Paul Kurtz at his most combative, but rather what she (and others) call “religious naturalism,” what William Murry, Past-President of Meadville/Lombard Theological School calls an “open humanism.” This response, which could appropriately be called a “religious,” is awed in the face of the complex wonders of the world opened up by a scientifically disciplined study and which is more, not less, amazed the further empirical inquiry is pursued.

According to Goodenough we have learned from the historians of religion that religious cosmologies generally are the product of the interaction of cultural traditions, as is the scientific cosmology itself. “By the same token, the crafting of religious responses to the scientific world view can—indeed must—be a collective and dynamic project.” In fact, the collective nature of the project can alleviate our uneasiness about engaging in it. “No one person is setting himself or herself up as the guru; we’re all responding from our own perspectives, offering rather than professing.” (Goodenough, 2000, 563).

The scientific account of the vast history of nature “works as a religious cosmology only if it resonates, only if it makes the listener feel religious....The scientific account of how things are, and how they came to be, is much more likely, at first encounter, to elicit alienation, anomie, and nihilism, responses that offer little promise for motivating our allegiance or moral orientation.” This scientific account can elicit gratitude and reverence and help us acknowledge an “imperative that life continue” (Goodenough, 1998, xv-xvii).

In her conclusion to *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, “Emergent Religious Principles,” she affirms that the opportunity to develop personal beliefs in response to ultimate questions, such as “why is there anything at all,” are important to the human experience. Even though her own beliefs are naturalistic, it is important that she does not dismiss these questions as meaningless nor treat them as simply scientific questions. Her own response is “to articulate a covenant with Mystery.” She speaks of responses of gratitude that our planet is “perfect for human habitation” and “astonishingly beautiful” and of reverence in the face of the vast lengths of time, the enormous improbability and the splendid diversity (Goodenough 1998, 167-168). Her naturalism is explicit in her profession that this “complexity, awareness and intent and beauty” plus her ability to apprehend it serve as the ultimate meaning and value, requiring no further justification, no Creator (p. 171). These attitudes she sees as giving rise to action to further the continuance of life, including human life. Her final coda is a skeptical appreciation for “our religions of origin.” She finds deep wisdom embedded in traditional religions with their arts, texts and rituals which she views as patterns on the warp of the Epic of Evolution. These patterns are to be “absorbed, appreciated, and then put aside,” put aside

because we no longer find their claims about Nature and Agency plausible, but appreciated because we need other stories than the Epic of Creation (Goodenough 1998, 173).

Goodenough differs from the religious naturalist Henry Nelson Wieman in having a biological starting point, in not having his drive toward finding a oneness to all workings of the creative event, and in not focusing on progressive integration or creative interchange. She is also more alive to and theorizes about the appreciative response, placing her closer to Bernard Meland. Wieman is zealous for the radically transformative character of the creative event, whereas Goodenough is grateful for the evolving of life which has long stretches of comparative temporal stability.

Like Ralph Burhoe, she starts her religious meditations focusing on evolutionary history. The difference is that he seizes a major theistic notion, God as creating and judging, and equates these two roles with the positive and negative aspects of the mechanism of evolution. Goodenough starts with several events in evolutionary history and relates to them with a variety of feeling and theoretical responses.

**Jerome A. Stone.** I have developed what I call a theology of “religious naturalism.” I hold that many events have what could be called a sacred aspect. I am not talking about a being, a separate mind or spirit. I am saying that some things, like justice and human dignity, and the creativity of the natural world, are sacred. This vision is very pluralistic. What degree of unity there is to this plurality I am reverently reluctant to say.

I have elaborated a technical definition in my book, *The Minimalist Vision of Transcendence*. The transcendent, in my terminology, refers to norms and creative powers which are relatively or situationally transcendent. A common element in the

paradigm cases of religion seems to be what I term an orientation to transcendence. There is also a polarity of norms and of creative power(s). Within the limits of my naturalistic outlook the transcendent dimension of norms and powers is understood as a collection of continually compelling norms and situation transcending creative powers. They are “relatively transcendent” to norms and situations within the world yet are within the world as relevant possibilities and realities beyond a situation as perceived. To illustrate this, the search for the norms of truth or justice means to reach for possibilities relatively transcendent to present attainments and yet relevant to our efforts. Truth and justice remain continually compelling norms no matter how far we come. Likewise openness to the healing or restorative powers of medicine or pedagogy means a readiness to receive creative and recreative powers relatively transcendent to our present situation and yet within the world beyond our limited present. This is a philosophy urging openness to norms and resources which are beyond our narrowly perceived present situations and yet are not resident in a different realm (Stone, 1992, 9-20).

Recently I have articulated a simplified version of this minimalism in a theory of the sacred: 1) as a quality of events or processes of overriding importance, 2) not within our control, and 3) to be treated with respect (Stone 2001, 2002, 2003). As a counterpoint to this, I insist, as a resistance to fanaticism, that the sacred is not to be isolated from questioning, criticism, or rational and empirical inquiry.

This situates me between Wieman of *The Source of Human Good* and John Dewey, not quite able to accept the unity of Wieman’s creative process. If I were forced to choose on a questionnaire between humanism and theism, I would be a humanist, but I call myself a “religious naturalist” to situate myself with current writers like Ursula

Goodenough. I differ from the classical humanists like Dietrich and Reese by having a more sober sense of human potentiality, by using what I call in *The Minimalist Vision of Transcendence* a “generous empiricism,” and by urging an open stance to the gifts of life as a yin to complement their yang of moral striving. This also means that I am developing a vocabulary of reverence, like David Bumbaugh and William Sinkford, and places me with what William Murry calls “The New Humanists” (Murry 2000 55-90).

Normally I prefer to use “sacred” or occasionally “divine” as an adjective or adverb. However I find that other people (and I myself in the past) have used the term “God.” So I have developed what I call a minimal definition of God for purposes of conversation and common worship, a translation device for communication between various religious voices. “God is the sum total of the ecosystem, community and person empowering and demanding interactions in the universe.” Another way I have of speaking of God, when I have to, is to say, that God is the world perceived in its value-enhancing and value-attracting aspects, placing me close to Frederick May Eliot. The term “God” has power, while phrases like “situationally transcendent resources and continually challenging obligations” replace the power of the language of devotion with the clarity of the language of theory. (The languages of devotion and inquiry are different, but not separated by a fixed gulf. See Stone 1992, 157-167). The term God can put an end to thinking, either in the fanaticism of belief or of unbelief. My point is that the theoretical term “the transcendent” and the devotional term “God” (minimally understood) share the same reference to situationally or relatively transcendent resources and challenges. (See Stone 1992, 18-21).

Like Wieman, James Luther Adams, and Sharon Welch, I stress the importance

of motivation for social criticism. I do this through talking of “relatively transcendent norms” (like justice) which continually challenge our present attainments.

### **Conclusion**

Although there were many religious naturalists in the first half of the twentieth century, religious naturalism as a movement in religious thought has been coming to self-consciousness since about 1990. My purpose has been to give a general picture of this movement and then to show that many currents in 20<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian Universalist thought can be thought of as within this movement. In short, religious naturalism and UU theology are intersecting circles. It is my hope that advocates of this view can find conceptual resources for their own use by studying other thinkers in this movement. Of particular note is that I have included many thinkers within the boundaries of religious naturalism, thinkers such as Wieman, who use the term “God” for the creative process within the world and others, such as the later Loomer, who use the term “God” for the entire world. Some people have found this to be a helpful move. Finally by showing that there is a rich strain of religious naturalism within recent and contemporary UU thought, I have tried to indicate that Ursula Goodenough’s writings deserve careful attention from today’s Unitarian Universalists. Finally, last but certainly not least, our own David Tarbell has been developing some valuable reflections on radical empiricism which I think belong within the camp of religious naturalism (Tarbell 2005).

NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Portions of this article appear in “What is Religious Naturalism?,” *Journal of Liberal Religion*, Vol. 2 www.Meadville.edu/journal reprinted, with addendum, in *Religious Humanism*, XXXV (Winter/Spring 2001), in “Religious Naturalism and the Religion-Science Dialogue: A Minimalist View” *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science* Vol. 37 (2002), 381-394; in “Varieties of Religious Naturalism,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* Vol. 38 (2003), 89-94; and in “Is God Emeritus?” *Journal of Liberal Religion* Vol. 5 No. 2 (Spring 2005), meadville.edu/ Lifelong Learning/Journal.

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