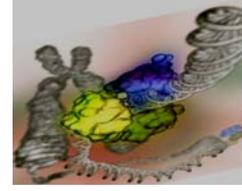


Convergence



A report on the ongoing dialogue between science and religion

Vol. 2 No. 6



(Photo: Roger Brown)

Science and the Sunday Sermon

“Water is life’s matter and matrix, mother and medium. There is no life without water.” – Albert Szent-Gyorgyi

When the children’s sermon became scientific, it sadly didn’t hold many of the amusing theological insights of the congregation’s youngest and boldest members. I don’t remember the words all that well, but I do remember the image of the ice cubes being dropped into the pot of water that after an uncomfortable stretch of minutes became steam.

If water can have three properties, so does God, right? I know now as an adult that probably is one of the most troubling ways to illustrate the Trinity.

Watching the steam rise and then disappear from view, a person can feel very small and even detached from that essence that was supposed to be “God.” We all have searched for this ‘essence’ whether it’s a spirit or hunch that there is something more that we can’t explain. While some rather dodge the issue of something that is unexplainable, I think there is a growing number of people seeking a better understanding of that dissipating steam and is even more comfortable in incorporating nature into their spiritual journey.

Religious naturalism is just where this is now happening. Theologian Jerome Stone this month tells us a little bit more about a field that is drawing attention from a growing number of those active in the study of religion and science.

While water itself can not show us the spiritual essence of the world it seems to be something we are drawn to on many levels. Recently at the annual conference of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science, yours truly was part of a group (see photo above) that used water as part of a ceremony depicting a ‘mingling’ of new places and new ideas.

Water is a symbol of so many things – rebirth, purity, and life. God too symbolizes so much of our shared history and emotions we don’t often see the value of taking the time to define our beliefs in a way that doesn’t conflict with our own sense of the world.

Susan Barreto

“Religious Naturalism” demystified

Jerome Stone discusses his research of a growing philosophical movement

By Susan Barreto

Jerome Stone is not one to shy away from touchy subjects. His focus when it comes to religion has been a concept that is not often publicly discussed and sounds like a simpler idea than it really is. Religious naturalism or RN for short is something that takes more than a paragraph or two to explain and is the source of a dialogue in religion and science circles.

Not afraid of a challenge Stone has written the book on the topic of religious naturalism. His historical account of religious naturalism can be found next month in the new paperback edition of his book, “Religious Naturalism Today: The Rebirth of a Forgotten Alternative”, published by SUNY Press.

Stone is professor emeritus of philosophy at William Rainey Harper College in Palatine, IL and adjunct faculty at Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago. He is also the coeditor of both volumes of *The Chicago School of Theology: Pioneers in Religious Inquiry*, and the author of *The Minimalist Vision of Transcendence: A Naturalist Philosophy of Religion*. A minister in the Unitarian Universalist Association, Stone is also a member of both the Highlands Institute on American Religious and Philosophical Thought and Institute on Religion in an Age of Science (IRAS).

At this year’s annual IRAS conference, a number of presentations and discussions referred to Stone’s groundbreaking work in offering a new view of religious experience.



Jerry, what is meant by the term religious naturalism or “RN”?

“RN” is a philosophy which seeks to live a religious life without a Supreme Being that is superior in power and value to the natural world. It is the attempt to think about life and live a religious orientation without a God, soul or heaven. There is a slightly different use of the term which overlaps with this first one. In this second view RN is the attempt to find in the natural world (including culture and history) the world as scientifically understood inspiration and resources for their religious life. It does not involve the explicit attempt to get along without a Supreme Being, soul or heaven.

Because I am trying to develop a viewpoint for those who can no longer believe in such a God, my research has been limited to RN in the first sense.

How did RN become part of the religion and science discussion?

In the 1940's theologians at the University of Chicago used the words "religious naturalism" to describe what they were doing (although there was some variation in what they meant). Since about 1990 some of the scientists and other folk in the Institute on Religion in Age of Science (IRAS) started using the term. The biologist Ursula Goodenough and Michael Cavanaugh ran with the term. They and Willem Drees and I wrote articles for *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* about religious naturalism. A symposium on the topic appeared in 2003 in *Zygon*.

Who are the influential thinkers behind religious naturalism?

Ursula Goodenough is probably the best known today. Her "The Sacred Depths of Nature" was on the bestseller list.

Karl Peters, theologian and author of "Dancing with the Sacred", is active in IRAS along with Ursula. Gordon Kaufman, professor of theology emeritus at Harvard, wrote "In the beginning...Creativity". (He prefers to call himself a "biohistorical naturalist.") Henry Nelson Wieman at the University of Chicago wrote the very influential "The Source of Human Good".

At University of Chicago, Bernard Loomer wrote the short, packed and rewarding book titled "The Size of God". Albert Einstein was probably a religious naturalist. Many American philosophers have been called naturalists, including George Santayana, who wrote "Reason in Religion", and John Dewey, who wrote "A Common Faith".

If I had to make a judgment call, I would say that Dewey, Wieman, Kaufman, Peters and Goodenough are the five most influential writers. However, we cannot forget the Dutch philosopher Spinoza who used the phrase "God or nature" in "Book I" of his "Ethics".

Is this idea embraced by specific religious groups or Christian denominations?

Connie Barlow and Michael Dowd have been traveling around the country giving talks, mostly in churches and synagogues of all varieties, on religious naturalism. They have been given enthusiastic receptions, according to what I hear.

Walter Bruggeman, a United Church of Christ Biblical scholar, has been showing the importance of land in Biblical writings and geologist George Fisher and Presbyterian minister Gretchen van Utt have been building on this with the concept of "emergence" in a way that could help bring some RN ideas into Christian churches. The founders of Reconstructionist Judaism Mordecai Kaplan, and also Rabbi Jack Cohen, Rabbi David Oler and philosopher Henry Levinson have been developing a Jewish version of religious naturalism.

Many Unitarian Universalists like the idea of religious naturalism. They have an informal organization called UURN. Besides the IRAS and UU RN e-lists, there is a discussion at ReligiousNaturalism@yahoo.com. But many people do not identify with any religion. I like to think that people who say that they are

“spiritual,” not religious, would find religious naturalism congenial. Much depends on how the word “God” is used.

What does RN say about God?

Given the definition of RN as being religious without a supreme being different from the world, it would seem as if there is no room for God in RN. But it is not that simple. There are many humanists—people who say there is no God or at least probably no God -- who gravitate towards RN. William Murry, former President of Meadville Lombard Theological School, writes in *Reason and Reverence* that many of the newer humanists are deepening their outlook by embracing RN.

But besides people in RN who don't affirm the reality of God, my research has shown there that are two other types of religious naturalists who do use the term God. One is a group of people like Spinoza, Einstein and Loomer for whom God and the universe are the same thing. Then there are others for whom God is the creative process within the world. Dewey, Wieman, Kaufman and Peters are included in this group. Of course you can still ask why use the term God, since it is so confusing and has such oppressive baggage. However, all of these writers address that term and insist that it is a powerful word that we cannot get along without, at least in Western culture. Thus there are both non-theists and people who could be called naturalistic theists within the big tent of RN, sometimes ignoring, sometimes gladly acknowledging each other. I believe that the future of RN within already established religious groups depends on this mutual recognition.

What can religious naturalism do for someone?

The religious aspect of a naturalistic outlook enables you to have a religious dimension to life without the traditional difficulties associated with theism. The religious dimension includes finding a meaning to life by seeing oneself as part of the on-going creative process of the universe, by aspiring to contribute to this process, by responding to it with awe and gratitude. Just as with traditional religion, religious naturalism can help one find celebration, courage, liberation from despair and a sense of being at home. It can provide ecstasy as well as a more



sustained mood. Religious naturalists have to learn to live without a personal God to cling to who will love and save us. This is true even for those naturalists who use the traditional language of “God.”

Religious naturalism will not supply an ethics, although naturalism encourages the development of what insights can be derived from a study of animal behavior, especially from primatology. Ethics is a human responsibility and religious naturalists probably are as moral and as immoral as anyone else. What religious naturalism can help provide is motivation to live morally and a way to deal with the moral failure that comes to the best of us. Hopefully a naturalistic outlook grounded in religion or spirituality will give a strong sense of urgency in protecting, nurturing and renewing the natural systems of our planet Earth and will help foster openness to the world, human, domesticated, and wild.

From my own experience I can testify that this naturalistic outlook has given me the intellectual framework to live a satisfying religious-spiritual life, even in the midst of the tragedy and discouragement which comes to all of us.

Where do you see RN headed as a movement?

Right now RN is expanding its outreach in the academic community. It has a well established interest group within IRAS. The Highlands Institute for American Religious and Philosophical Thought and its American Journal of Theology and Philosophy have RN as one of their four main areas of interest. Articles appear frequently in that journal, *Zygon*, *Religious Humanism* and *the Journal of Liberal Religion*. There are three major electronic discussion groups.

The academic community is a great place to refine and develop ideas, but they must obviously find a place within the larger society. There is growing interest within the Unitarian Universalists, led by myself, the group of scholars called Collegium, the UURN e-group and above all by the traveling team of Barlow and Dowd. Her “Green Space, Green Time” and his “Thank God for Evolution” are both important reflections on how to relate science and religion.

At first I was turned off by the enthusiastic revivalist tone of Michael’s book, but I kept going and I was greatly rewarded. For example, he is very helpful on how to use our growing knowledge of the triune brain in relating to our emotions and in helping teenagers navigate their own growth. RN is also receiving attention in other religious circles, Christian, Jewish and Quaker. The broad tent approach to living religiously within a naturalistic outlook is helpful here. Beyond these present trends I cannot see.

This is an experimental universe. Our job is to create religious materials and let future generations find in them what is helpful.

Galileo: Images of the Universe from Antiquity to the Telescope: *The International Exhibition at the Palazzo Strozzi, Firenze, Italy from March 13 to August 30, 2009*

By Karen K. Abrahamson

The international exhibition, “Galileo: Images of the Universe From Antiquity to the Telescope,” is, without doubt, in the opinion of this author, one of the finest visual presentations on the origins of modern science this author has experienced. Created in honor of Galileo’s achievements of perfecting and usage of the telescope as a scientific tool to bring the Earth nearer to the heavens, the exhibition reflects the United Nations’ declaration of the year 2009 as “The Year of Astronomy” and its accompanying slogan, “The Universe: yours to discover.” The exhibition, featured at the Palazzo Strozzi in Firenze, Italia, reaches far into the past to the astronomical traditions of the ancient Eastern and Near Eastern religions and cultures and extends through the Renaissance to Galileo and his contemporaries’ understanding of the heavens and their impact upon human existence.

The exhibition’s creators eloquently capture the flavor of Italian artistic and technological perspectives. Each room and presentation is alive with delicate balances of color, movement, and sound. An informative audio guide highlights the special features of each artifact. No physical space is neglected in this outpouring of national and local pride in the achievements of the Italian Renaissance and early Modern scientific enterprise. Even the ceiling becomes a backdrop showing the ancient dance of the constellations through the heavens.

Few peoples have been endowed with the ability to express simultaneously artistic beauty and technological acuity with the result that the impact still lingers today, shaping the worldview of the twenty-first century far beyond local boundaries and ethnic groups. Did Galileo sense how the worldview he proposed would become, to a large extent, a reflection of himself as a result of his observations of the moon and the planets? Reflecting on the impact of Galileo on today’s world, Cristina Acidini, who directed the international team that researched and created the exhibition, muses, “We find ourselves standing at the origins of modern science, with its burden of moral questions, ethical issues and contradictory beliefs that have lost none of their topicality, although today no one is forced by others to recite the formulas of abjuration.”



She further comments that “The vitality of the exhibition’s themes, emerging recurrently and in various forms during the stimulating debates of the International Scientific Committee which I have the honor of directing, makes of their initiative (with the many others contemporary to and correlated with it) a milestone in critical consciousness as well as a goldmine of knowledge for all those who visit or revisit it. Nothing could be better for Florence, I believe, with its younger generations to be initiated into the glory and weight of history and with its international public of visitors, than to celebrate Galileo and his invention.”

Indeed, it is important not only to remember the past, but to use it as a springboard for future

initiative. Galileo believed that the Earth could be brought nearer to the heavens. In doing so, he raised the Earth from the ancient traditions of centrality and self-centeredness to become a part of a vast and infinite horizon of possibility. He dared to dream and to hope and in so doing gave all who followed him a trajectory to follow.

For further information about “Galileo: Images of the Universe from Antiquity to the Telescope,” including a virtual exhibition, see http://brunelleschi.imss.fi.it/galileopalazzostrozzi/index_flash.html. A written description of the history behind the exhibition may also be purchased, which is entitled *Galileo: Images of the Universe from Antiquity to the Telescope*, edited by Paolo Galluzzi and published in 2009 by Giunti Editore S.p.A.

--Karen Abrahamson is a recent PhD graduate from Andrews University in Berrien, Michigan and has become a leader in the religion and science dialogue in organizing the Gloria Patri, a global conference focused on religion, science and the humanities. She is also the managing editor of the Andrews University Seminary Studies journal and adjunct faculty at Florida Hospital of Health Sciences.

Dialogue in Action

A roundup of recent religion and science news

IRAS holds 55th annual conference

The Institute on Religion in an Age of Science held its annual conference at The Athenaeum Hotel at the Chautauqua Institution in New York with the theme of “The Mythic Reality of the Autonomous Individual.”

The conclusion (which was never in doubt) was that humanity is not truly autonomous and individuals’ decisions and roles are determined by not only their own neurological make-up, psychological development, and strongly influenced by upbringing, faith, political and economic circumstances. Fraught with complexity, the human condition and how it is impacted for good or ill was deconstructed from a variety of viewpoints by 11 distinguished speakers.

Philosopher and theologian Philip Cary outlined the notion of the inner self starting out with Plato through to Augustinian Christianity. He illustrated the notion of the inner self as being shaped from “the outside in.” Alicia Juarrero, a philosophy professor who is active in supporting the study of complexity theory, spoke about the effect interactions of individual neurons and the evolution of complex systems that in constituting the human mind can give us a different view of free will.



Steven Winter, professor of constitutional law at Wayne State University, discussed the need to re-imagine democratic theory from the perspective of the social individual rather than the autonomous individual, while Amy Banks of the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute talked about the American myth of the self-made man from the aspect of neuroscience which can study the impact of relationship in creating the environment required for healthy, human development.

IRAS’ roots date back to the late 1940s when the American Academy of Arts and Sciences organized a Committee on Science and Values to address topics relating to contemporary scientific knowledge to fundamental human concerns about life’s morals and meanings. Early members included Ashley Montague, B.F. Skinner, Theodosius Dobzhansky and Ian Barbour.

Next year’s conference will be held on Star Island off the coast of New Hampshire and the theme will be “The Energy Transition: Religious and Ethical Perspectives.”

Environmental stewardship topic for 2009 ITEST conference

The Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology will hold its annual conference on October 23 through 25 at Our Lady of the Snows Conference Center in Belleville, Illinois.

The theme of environmental stewardship will be approached from Christian, Jewish and Catholic perspectives. Sessions will focus on the broad questions associated with the concept of stewardship in relation to the environment. Speakers include: Benjamin Abell, professor of meteorology in the department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences at St. Louis University; E. Calvin Beisner, national spokesman for the Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation; Sister Elizabeth Michael Boyle, professor emerita of English at Caldwell College and author of "Science as Sacred Metaphor"; Paul Driessen, senior fellow with the Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow and Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise; and Rabbi Michael Alper of Temple Israel and interim director of Education at Central Reform Congregation in St. Louis, Mo.



More information on ITEST and the conference can be found at www.faithscience.org.

Belief in both God and evolution ranked

A new survey compiled by the British Council found that while the majority of Americans have heard of Darwin, only 53% said it is possible to believe in God and evolution simultaneously.

Only 33% of those surveyed in the US said that the scientific evidence for evolution exists. The British Council surveyed more than ten thousand adults across ten countries. In the UK, roughly 51% said the scientific evidence for evolution is there, while 54% said that both belief in God and evolution can exist. Egypt and South Africa only 8% of the population believes there is scientific proof for evolution, while 95% of those surveyed in Mexico and in the UK said they had heard of Darwin.

The US fell in fourth place following Mexico, UK and Argentina (86%) with only 84% of the population having heard of Darwin.

Convergence is.....



New theological insight
New vistas in scientific discovery
A new way of seeing the world

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