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Religious naturalism

Citation for published version:

Leidenhag, M 2018, 'Religious naturalism: The current debate', *Philosophy Compass*, vol. 13, no. 8, e12510. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12510>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1111/phc3.12510](https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12510)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Philosophy Compass

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Religious Naturalism: The Current Debate

A religious naturalist seeks to combine two beliefs. The first belief is that nature is all there is. There is no “ontologically distinct and superior realm (such as God, soul, or heaven) to ground, explain, or give meaning to this world” (Stone, 2008, 1). Moreover, the natural sciences are the only or at least most reliable source of knowledge about the world. The first belief is usually referred to as *naturalism*. The second belief is that nature, or at least some part of nature, can provide religious meaning, purpose, and value analogous to that of traditional religion (Crosby, 2007). Some religious naturalists maintain that nature, and its internal processes, is *sacred*, thereby worthy of reverence, awe and wonder (Peters, 2002; Crosby, 2015; Kauffman, 2008; Kaufman, 2004; Goodenough, 1998).

The main task for several religious naturalists is to articulate a position between secular/scientific naturalism, which rejects any meaning in nature, and supernaturalism which posits meaning outside the natural order (see discussion in Cavanaugh, 2000). Religious naturalism, it should be noted, is not a unified view, but covers a variety of beliefs and perspectives. This paper will explore the arguments for religious naturalism, different versions of religious naturalism, and three demarcation issues that religious naturalism currently faces.

1. Arguments in favour of Religious Naturalism

A religious naturalist considers traditional modes of religion to be scientifically suspicious, ecologically dangerous, and spiritually inadequate. Generally in these discussions, arguments *against* supernaturalism are taken as a vindication of naturalism.¹ Science, it is argued, takes us beyond theism/supernaturalism and towards a naturalistic worldview. For Willem Drees, naturalism is simply “a response to the success of the sciences”, and it “stays close to the insights offered and concepts developed in the sciences...” (Drees, 1996, 11). To assume a

scientific view of the world means, according to Karl Peters, that “we see the causes of things in nonpersonal terms, in terms of laws and forces”, in order to understand such causes naturalistically (Peters, 2002, 9). There is no division in reality between a natural and supernatural domain because “whatever is natural is real whatever real is natural... Naturalism rejects the notion that anything at all transcends nature, except nature itself” (Rue, 2011, 97). Dualistic thinking is seen as incompatible with the methodology and deliverances of current science. Drees argues that contemporary science challenges the dualistic notion that something can have both mental and physical properties. The neuroscientific accounts of consciousness carry important implications for how to understand the nature and causes of religious experiences. The correlation between the mental and physical, according to Drees, and even the potential reduction of mental states, implies that it is no longer tenable to interpret religious experiences theistically; as experiences of God (Drees, 1996, 188-195).

Gordon D. Kaufman poses a different scientific objection to traditional religion. He argues that the notion of a creator God does not match an evolutionary view of reality. The notion of a creator God implies a view of a conscious being that brought the world into existence. On this view we have mind before matter. Evolution, however, suggests that mind is a secondary product which came into existence after billions of years of evolution (Kaufman, 2007, 917; Kaufman, 2004, 53-55). Thus, biological evolution clashes with the idea of a creator God existing prior to the evolutionary process.

With the rise of science came the prioritization of mechanistic explanations. Charley Hardwick argues that theism, with its emphasis on personal explanations, has been made redundant. Naturalism and science in general can account for all that exists without invoking intentional explanations. Hardwick writes, “All existence, all order, and all action can be accounted for without recourse to the operation of intelligent purpose” (Hardwick, 1996, 16). Theism is therefore seen as explanatorily obsolete.

Theists typically claim that God interacts with humanity and nature. God is personally involved in the final outcome of the cosmos. Such imagery, however, is seen as religiously problematic by religious naturalists discussed herein. Kaufman argues that the “traditional idea of God’s purposive activity in the world – a powerful movement working in and through all cosmic and historical processes – is almost impossible to reconcile with modern and postmodern thinking about evolution and history” (Kaufman, 2004, 42). From a naturalistic point of view, “there is no need for some kind of disembodied spirit or God to have brought the present creative universe into being...” (Crosby, 2015, 91). Furthermore, the idea of God acting in nature leads to theological incoherency, as God has to go against God’s own laws (Drees, 2008, 110).

The conclusion reached by these naturalists, given the problems of supernaturalism and explanatory success of the physical sciences, is that we live in a natural world where “all natural facts can be construed, in some minimal sense at least, in terms of the organization of matter” (Rue, 2005, 14). However, one “can affirm naturalism without affirming *religious* naturalism...” (Cavanaugh, 2000, 243). What are some of the reasons, then, for specifically a religious construal of naturalism, and a religious/spiritual appreciation of nature? Several religious naturalists appeal to our current ecological situation. Kaufman, for example, maintains that Christian theology has been too human-centred, structured around a rather anthropomorphic conception of God. The traditional Christian view of God and the accompanying idea “that humans are created in the image of this God, tends to obscure and dilute... ecological ways of thinking about our place in the world” (Kaufman, 2004, 41). Similarly, Loyal Rue, drawing on Lynn White Jr.’s infamous 1967 article in *Science*, argues that the Judeo-Christian tradition has unfortunately promoted “the view that nature’s purpose was to serve humans” (Rue, 2005, 353). The dualistic mind-set of traditional religion, according to Peters, has led many to identify the natural world as evil and a source of

temptation (Peters, 2002, 102). In this way, nature becomes a rival to a devotional relationship with God. Nature has not been properly valued in the received religious traditions of the world, hence religious naturalists seek to develop new images of God which can help to articulate our dependency on the integrity of nature.²

Reductive and non-reductive religious naturalism

Religious naturalism holds within itself different types of naturalism and different ways of thinking about the religious potentiality of naturalism. One could say that “religious naturalism” functions as an umbrella term. I will first address the issue of naturalism(s), and in the next section I will draw up different ways of articulating religious stances within a naturalistic framework.

While all religious naturalists seem to subscribe to a general form of monism – meaning that there is *one* reality – they express their naturalistic sympathies differently. Religious naturalists such as Willem Drees and Charley Hardwick have opted for more restrictive or reductionist versions of naturalism. Drees argues for constitutive reductionism, meaning that our “natural world is a unity in the sense that all entities are made up of the same constituents” (Drees, 1996, 14). Physics, on this view, holds a prominent place in our collective epistemological endeavour to understand reality. Physics “offers us the best available description of these constituents and thus our natural world at its finest level of analysis” (Ibid). In a similar physicalist spirit, Hardwick states that there is “No difference without a physical difference” and that “All truth is determined by physical truth” (Hardwick, 1996, 43). For Hardwick, theology is significantly “*constrained* by physicalism” (Hardwick, 2003, 111). Although Drees and Hardwick pursue reductive paths when it comes to naturalism, they both acknowledge that not everything can be articulated through scientific categories. They both employ what might be called semantic or explanatory irreducibility;

that “the description and explanation of phenomena may require concepts which do not belong to the vocabulary of fundamental physics” and that the various domains and discourses above physics possess “explanatory autonomy” (Drees, 1996, 16; Hardwick, 1996, 36).³ Yet, on an ontological level these proposals remain reductionist.⁴

However, the majority of religious naturalists herein opt for non-reductive versions of naturalism, commonly construed through *emergence theory*. We can see emergentist ideas employed by Goodenough, Peters, Kaufman, Kauffman, Crosby, and Rue.⁵ An emergentist ontology claims something like the following: the material world “consist of levels of organization” (Rue, 2011, 51); “reality is divided into a number of distinct levels of order” (Kauffman and Clayton, 2006, 503); “new properties of matter come into being” through complex organization (Crosby, 2015, 30); “something else can, in turn, participate in generating a new something else at a different level of organization” (Goodenough and Deacon, 2006, 854). Moreover, emergent properties are irreducible with respect to physics, and underlying physical base structure give rise to emergent phenomena that are “not predictable from, or reducible to, our knowledge of the properties and dynamics of lower-level systems” (Rue, 2011, 52; see also Kauffman, 2008, 31-43). As Kaufman says, “We do not (and may never be able to?) understand the mystery of how greater and more complex things can come out of simpler and lesser things” (Kaufman, 2004, 92). With these anti-reductionist remarks we also get ideas of *downward causation*, that higher-level phenomena can causally affect their constituent parts or physical base structure (Rue, 2011, 52; Kauffman and Clayton, 2006, 516; Crosby, 2015, 61-63). Indeed, some religious naturalists claim that self-organizational laws are themselves emergent and so defy physical reduction (Kauffman, 1995). Indeed, while physical explanations might provide some insight they cannot “give us any real knowledge of the future toward which this whole creative process may be moving” (Kaufman, 2004, 93). Emergentism fends off the threat of scientism⁶ and, according to these

religious naturalists, provides a pluralist ontology, meaning that the universe is best described as a “*pluriverse*” (Crosby, 2015, 34). This goes against the more monistic commitments of Drees and Hardwick. As will be seen, this issue of monism versus pluralism lends itself to quite different construals of the *religious* dimension of religious naturalism.

Religious Stances within Religious Naturalism

It is possible to identify at least four ways of affirming religious aspects of reality from the perspective of naturalism:

- (1) Religious aspects of reality refer to events, norms, or values which transcend purely physical categories (while at the same time being *natural*).
- (2) The possibility of a religious conception lies in the limits and explanatory gaps of science.
- (3) What is religious about nature refers to a specific aspect of it.
- (4) What is religious about reality refers to nature as a whole.

The reductive naturalist Hardwick admits the religious implications of physicalism: “‘God’ cannot be found in the ontological inventory of what exists” and there is “nothing referentially significant in a religious sense about nature as a whole or in its parts” (Hardwick, 2003, 113). Hardwick, writing from within the Christian tradition, suggests a non-metaphysical reading of the claims of Christianity through Rudolf Bultmann’s existentialist framework. The Christian faith is construed as a “seeing- (and experiencing-) as”, as a way of “taking the world” (Hardwick, 1996, 158). The proposition “God exists”, therefore, does not refer to anything existing or an objective part of reality. Theological statements should be considered “valuational”, in the sense that they are meta-expressions “for a form of life that is expressed as a theistic seeing-as” (Ibid., 114). Through this particular way of conceiving the world we

can, Hardwick suggests, encounter “events of grace” (Ibid., 156, 185). Hardwick expresses religious stance (1) in his physicalist and existentialist reading of Christianity.

Drees’s monistic naturalism relies heavily on the methodology and explanatory power of the sciences. Yet, on numerous occasions he stresses the epistemic limitations of science and so seems to express (2). Science cannot, not even in principle, properly answer “limit-questions” regarding the “most fundamental constituents of, or structure in reality” (Drees, 1996, 267). Science, therefore, “does not address the cosmological dimension of religion...” (Drees, 2017, 255). The intrinsic limitations of science create space for a religious interpretation of reality, hence it is possible to posit “God” as an answer to such limit-questions.⁷ We are both *wandering* and *wondering* humans – meaning that we are immersed within our particular environments and face the unavoidable limitations of our epistemic reach (Drees, 1996, 274-283).

Option (3) is to place the religious focus on specific aspects of nature. This orientation is shared by several religious naturalists. Religious naturalists such as Kaufman, Peters, and Kauffman have proposed that we think of God as the “creativity of the universe”, and that we should articulate the symbol of “God” in terms of evolutionary development. On this view, we should change our conception of God as The Creator to what is called “serendipitous creativity”, or the “creativity manifest throughout the cosmos” (Kaufman, 2004, 48). God is the ongoing creativity of this world and the “evolutionary processes that today are believed to have brought into being, in the course of some billions of years, countless different sorts of creatures, including humans” (Kaufman, 2007, 918).⁸ In a similar way to Kaufman, Peters employs the notion of serendipitous creativity to capture the “nonpersonal way of describing the ever-present working of the sacred” (Peters, 2002, 36). This creativity, for Peters, is a two-part process: “one part gives rise to new variations in the cosmos, in life, and in human society; the other part selects and continues some of these new variations, which in turn

contribute to further creation” (Ibid., 37; cf. Peters 2007, 53). Thus, “God” symbolises the different material interactions within the world that give “rise to new possibilities of existence and then selects some of these to continue” (Peters, 2008, 23).⁹ Kauffman puts this theological proposal in relation to our current global challenges, manifested most strongly in our current ecological crisis. By retrieving an immanent conception of God, according to Kauffman, “we can, at last, take responsibility for what we call sacred, and thus treat as sacred” (Kauffman, 2008, 287).¹⁰ We need to reinvent the Sacred by finding new ways of articulating the nature of God in an evolutionary world. Kauffman is clear about the fact that how we construe God is a pragmatic decision: “It has always been us, down the millennia, talking to ourselves. Then let us talk to ourselves consciously, let us choose our own sacred...” (Kauffman, 2008, 286).¹¹

Lastly, there are religious naturalists who maintain that nature as a whole should be construed as religiously significant (4). Donald Crosby, who prefers to speak of “a religion of nature” (as opposed to religious naturalism),¹² states that we should “grant to nature the kind of reverence, awe, love, and devotion we in the West have formerly reserved for God” (Crosby, 2002, xi).¹³ Nature is religiously ultimate, according to Crosby, because nature is the source of life, provider of beauty and order, and “the ultimate source of the good of human life itself, and all of the specific goods of human history, civilization, and experience” (Ibid., 159). Crosby is aware of the fact that nature is *ambiguous*, that it contains both goods and evils, enjoyment and suffering. This, however, does not count against the validity of construing nature religiously. Ambiguity is a necessary part of our world, according to Crosby, so if we negate the evils we also have to negate the goods.¹⁴ Nature’s creativity would be absent in a perfect world, as nature’s “creations are bought at the price of its destructions” (Crosby, 2008, 27). Loyal Rue follows a similar path to Crosby by taking nature as whole to be construable as a religious object. One of Rue’s main assumptions is that religions are mythic traditions; they offer narrative accounts of cosmology and morality, and

the joining of these two is achieved through a *root metaphor*. Such root metaphors are “God”, “Nature”, and the “Dharma”. Rue argues that traditional myths have lost power due to the “creeping non-realism” produced by a) modern science, and b) religious diversity (Rue, 2005, 316).

Naturalism can provide a story which, centred on the evolutionary origin of all life, has the potential of uniting the dispersed cultures of humanity. Moreover, given the ecological challenges we need a *biocentric* myth, according to Rue. This myth would affirm the integrity of nature, and that nature is the ultimate source of life. Thus, Rue’s solution to the increasing non-realist erosion of religious myths is to understand nature as humanity’s sacred object, which he believes is compatible with both naturalism and realism.¹⁵ Nature as “root metaphor renders the real sacred and the sacred real” (Rue, 2005, 127).

Demarcation Issues for Religious Naturalism

A main ambition for religious naturalists, as we have seen, is to steer a path between the Scylla of pessimistic secularism and the Charybdis of supernaturalism. However, this attempt at carving out a golden path leads to a series of demarcation issues for religious naturalism. That is, how do we separate religious naturalism from neighbouring perspectives? The perspectives I have in mind, and which share many of the key beliefs of religious naturalism (monistic and pluralistic), are *non-religious naturalism*, *religious fictionalism* and *religious agnosticism*.

DEMARCATON ISSUE 1: How should we understand the difference between someone who interprets naturalism religiously and one who does not? Rue seems to think that the difference between religious naturalism and the non-religious take on naturalism is quite obvious. A religious naturalist is a *sunny* (optimistic) naturalist¹⁶, compared to the “aggressive cranks and party-poopers such as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris” (Rue, 2011, 123). It is true that new

atheist discourse is characterized by a polemical and frequently aggressive tone concerning the existence and effects of religion. It is also true, however, that both Dawkins and Harris affirm the awe-inspiring story mediated by science,¹⁷ and the possibility of a secular spirituality on par with that of traditional religion.¹⁸ Religious naturalists often try to distance themselves from non-religious naturalism and argue that their religiously conceptualized naturalism can be distinguished from New Atheism, but the line between them, given importance of awe and wonder for many new atheists, is blurred.¹⁹ Religious naturalists claim to have developed a via media between New Atheism/non-religious naturalism and traditional religion. Nevertheless, in order to uphold this via media religious naturalists need to offer better reasons for thinking that their position differs significantly from the awe-affirming New Atheism of Harris, Dawkins, and others. Otherwise this remains a problematic demarcation issue for religious naturalism.

Indeed, if we consider the monistic naturalism of Drees and Hardwick it gets even harder to differentiate religious naturalism from its non-religious counterpart. Hardwick states, as we saw, that there is “nothing referentially significant in a religious sense about nature as a whole or in its parts” (Hardwick, 2003, 113). Drees rejects divine presence in the world (Drees, 1996, 92-106), affirms identitism regarding the mind-brain relationship (Ibid., 183-189), and denies human subjectivity and the objectivity of moral values and norms (Ibid., 216-221). The religious beliefs of monistic naturalism, it seems, “are so minimal as to be virtually nonexistent” (Griffin, 1997, 595).²⁰ Monistic naturalism, thus, makes it even more difficult to locate the dividing line between religious naturalism and non-religious naturalism. Religious naturalists of the monistic type need to positively construe and bring out the religious relevance of naturalism, otherwise this framing of naturalism runs the risk of collapsing into a meaning-negating, non-religious naturalism.

It seems, then, that a religious naturalism that affirms a pluralistic/emergentist ontology would do better. That is, an ontology that affirms the emergent reality of value and meaning and a creative process throughout the physical might be able to more successfully articulate the religious dimension of naturalism. It certainly has more of a religious vibe to it, compared to monistic naturalism. However, it is not obvious why a non-religious naturalist who affirms the reality of emergent phenomena has to think of such phenomena in religious terms. This is because, “it does not seem to be possible to deduce these philosophical and theological interpretations [that we find in religious naturalism] from emergence theories as presently conceived. One who studies emergence theory and who comes to recognize the positive ontological status of emergent properties, that there seem to be emergent properties that are ontologically irreducible... is not deductively, or empirically, forced to adopt a religious conceptualization of the same properties” (Leidenhag, 2013, 976). Stuart Kauffman concedes this point, saying that one is not “logically forced” to sacralise emergent properties (Kauffman, 2007, 903), that we “do not have to use the *God* word [for describing the emergent character of the universe], but it may be wise to do so to help orient our lives” (Kauffman, 2008, 285).²¹ Similarly Gordon Kaufman, with his emphasis on “theology as imaginative construction”, seems to say that theological interpretations of emergence theory boil down to a matter pragmatic choice (Kaufman, 1993, 32-44). Given this strong pragmatic dimension, it becomes difficult to justify a religious conceptualization of naturalism over a non-religious one. Pluralistic naturalism faces, in similar vein to monistic naturalism, the task of bringing out the religious relevance of natural phenomena – in this case emergent features, structures, and properties. If this issue is left unaddressed, then religious naturalism will come across as an oxymoron.²²

DEMARCATIION ISSUE 2: Given the strong pragmatic dimension to different expressions of religious naturalism, one might wonder if religious naturalism is actually a version of

religious fictionalism. The literature on religious fictionalism is vast, but a person who affirms such a view typically holds that a) there are deep problems with realist interpretations of supernatural/non-natural realities, b) we should not discard supernatural/non-natural discourses, because c) supernatural/non-natural discourses serve some useful purpose.²³ The clearest expression of such view can be found in one of the earlier writings of Loyal Rue. Rue believes that the survival of humanity depends on a shared myth and a biocentric myth in particular; an ecologically informed myth that focuses on the “conditions for a rich diversity of life forms” (Rue, 1994, 304). A biocentric myth enables human flourishing, and the achievement of personal wholeness and social coherence.²⁴ Rue is clear on the fact that it is a lie, but it is a *noble* lie as it helps people to more fully enjoy life, despite the harsh truth of naturalism. Rue writes, “Biocentrism is your story and mine. It is everybody’s story. It presumes to tell us how things are and which things matter. It is, nevertheless, a lie” (Ibid., 306).²⁵ Such candid remarks bring religious naturalism significantly closer to a fictionalist understanding of religious discourse. Yet, Rue affirms simultaneously realism regarding religion, suggesting that anti-realism threatens the spiritual effectiveness of religious traditions (Rue, 2005, 130-131). Hence, in this case we have a tension between, on the one hand, a realist affirmation of religious discourses and, on the other hand, a fictionalist and akin to anti-realist understanding of the nature and function of religion. This raises an important issue – but which goes beyond the scope of this paper – can you believe in something (e.g. partake in religious practices and communities) that you simultaneously believe is factually untrue?²⁶

DEMARCATIION ISSUE 3: Another demarcation issue concerns the difference between religious naturalism and religious agnosticism.²⁷ Willem Drees has addressed the fluidity between his own religiously tinted naturalism and an agnostic approach to religious discourses. The notion of mystery has a central place within Drees’ naturalism (Drees, 2002,

14-19). While science is an impressive human endeavour, “explanatory successes do not exclude further questions. Again and again, questions emerge at the limits of scientific understanding” (Drees, 2002, 18). As described above, limit-questions form an integral part of Drees’ religious vision, the kind of questions that arise at the end of scientific investigations concerning the nature of nature or the origin of the physical. For Drees, limit-questions can provide the starting point for a naturalistic spirituality, in that they may “induce a sense of wonder and gratitude about the reality to which we belong” (Drees, 1996, 281). Yet, he has expressed some issues with the fact that many want to, perhaps too quickly, place him within the broader camp of religious naturalism: “Am I a religious naturalist? Others have used the label for me. I am not sure that I like the label, as it seems to constrain, whereas I want to explore” (Drees, 2006, 121). Indeed, in some respects Drees’ offered naturalism seems to align itself with a version of religious agnosticism, and perhaps even the apophatic strands of Christian theology. A “serious agnostic”, according to Drees, is not a lazy agnostic – someone who refuses to understand or explore as much as possible – but someone who adopts “epistemic modesty” in light of the richness of reality (Drees, 2010, 111). “Honest agnosticism” is firmly rooted in philosophical and theological thought. Apophatic thinkers, such as Nicolas of Cusa, stress the need for negative theology, which recognizes “the categorical distinction between God and creation, and thus the inadequacy of any analogy we construct” (Drees, 2010, 111). As human creatures, knowledge of both world and God will always be limited. This is because, we “never see the universe ‘from outside’, from the perspective of eternity, but always from within. This is also a problem when we speak of God; we are within the universe while we attempt to speak about something more encompassing” (Drees, 2002, 19). Given the limited nature of human speech and knowing, God will always transcend the humanly conceivable: God is radically transcendent (Drees, 1996, 259-266).²⁸

The spirit of agnosticism is also evident in the earlier writings of Gordon Kaufman. Theological investigations will never be able to successfully capture God. If we claimed to have done so, to have gained control over God, we have merely created an idol. As Kaufman says, “What we will have gained control of will be at most something of our own manufacture; to simply identify this directly with the mystery of God would be idolatry” (Kaufman, 1993, 16). Kaufman, influenced deeply by a Kantian epistemology, argues that theology can no longer be conceived of as a straight-forward metaphysical enterprise. The concept of “world” is always a construct of the mind, as the world is never an object of direct perception (Kaufman 1981, 242). Likewise, “the concept of God...can be properly understood only as a construct of the mind” (Kaufman 1981, 243). Central metaphysical concepts, such as “world”, “I”, and “God”, are created by human minds to serve particular intramental functions and purposes. His view of God is articulated in terms of an agnostic stance. This is not “a cynical agnosticism...that is destructive of everything that humans believe in and need; but that agnosticism which indirectly opens us to what is beyond our world...” (Kaufman, 1993, 58).²⁹

Thus, similarly to Drees’ emphasis on human knowledge as limited and provisional, Kaufman’s agnosticism constitutes a starting point for a religious orientation towards ultimate reality; an ultimate reality which is best characterized as “mystery”. If we look at Drees’ and Kaufman’s proposals, they might best be understood as versions of religious agnosticism. How much agnosticism, then, can religious naturalism tolerate while still being considered naturalistic in any meaningful sense? If science encounters unsolvable limit-questions, as Drees suggests, and if human beings are cognitively limited, which Kaufman claims on his Kantian-inspired epistemology, then this form of naturalism cannot coherently rule out theism. However, this seems to undermine the underlying naturalistic ontology of Drees’ and Kaufman’s religious proposals? Can we separate religious naturalism from religious

agnosticism, and does not an agnostic spirit undermine naturalism? This is certainly another demarcation issue facing contemporary religious naturalism.

Concluding remarks

This article has provided an overview of central issues and positions within religious naturalism. Religious naturalism, it was shown, is construed reductively and non-reductively through monistic and pluralistic ontologies. Moreover, it is possible to identify (at least) four distinct ways of affirming religious aspects of reality within religious naturalism. Lastly, this article presented three different demarcation issues for religious naturalism.³⁰

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¹ Jerome Stone concedes that it is impossible to provide proof for religious naturalism; rather "it will be a wager, a reasoned, weighted wager, and one side will appear more likely to be true" Stone (2017, 2). He further divides the argument for religious naturalism in terms of *negative* and *positive* arguments. A negative argument for religious naturalism, or a naturalistic ontology in general, is based on the failure of arguments for the existence of God. A positive argument for religious naturalism means "that you can have many of the positive values of a religious or spiritual life" without having to address some of the deepest problems of traditional religion: problem of evil, how to reconcile science and religion, and so on. Stone (2017, 2-3).

² Michael Hogue puts particular emphasis on the ecological dimension in his treatment of religious naturalism. He focuses particularly on Loyal Rue, Jerome A. Stone, Ursula Goodenough, and Donald Crosby. See Hogue (2010).

³ Hardwick describes the task of combining ontological reductionism with semantic irreducibility in this way: "a physicalist must, at the same time, (1) claim that underlying all domains there is a unity in which all truth is determined by truths at the level of physics, yet (2) not assert that these other domains are either identical to or nothing more than the domain of physical entities and the discourse in physics about them" (Hardwick, 1996, 36). See also, Hardwick (2003).

⁴ Drees employs a form of conceptual emergentism. He argues that "emergence and ontological reduction are not opposed" (Drees, 2007, 72). This is because while reality is reducible to the basic level of physics we might need "new concepts" to capture complex phenomena.

⁵ It should be noted, however, that Rue's earlier work is more materialist than emergentist. See Rue's discussion regarding scientific materialism in (2005, 14-16).

⁶ See Crosby (2011) for an extensive critique of scientism and the attempt to reduce "knowledge" to scientific knowledge.

⁷ Drees, however, argues that the phenomenon of limit-questions should not be interpreted as evidence for a theistic reality, "however they could serve as proposals for answers to those limit-questions" (Drees, 1996, 281). Yet, Drees also argues that "God" should not be interpreted realistically given the problems of

theological realism. He says, "I draw upon this non-temporal understanding of God's transcendence and upon theologies which build upon an evolutionary understanding of religion, relating their concept of God to 'the way things really are'... However, such ideas are *not so much affirmed as realist claims, but rather accepted as speculations and regulative ideals.*" Drees (1996, 237. My italics).

⁸ Kaufman employs three different modes of creativity for talking about the richness and complexity of the natural world. *Creativity*₁ refers to the initial coming into being of the universe. The term *Creativity*₂ designates those complex physical processes that progressively give rise to complex creatures (human beings and animals). Lastly, *Creativity*₃ refers to the creativity manifested in us; that is, human symbolic creativity. See Kaufman (2004, 76).

⁹ Peters has discussed the implications of this model for Christian understandings of human salvation. See Peters (2012, 843-869).

¹⁰ Kauffman's earlier work is characterized by a strong commitment to emergence theory. Lately, however, Kauffman has explored the fruitfulness of *panpsychism* for articulating a natural conception of the sacred, as well as a participatory view of the universe. See Kauffman (2016a) and Kauffman (2016b, 36-47).

¹¹ He also writes, "It is our choice whether we use the God word. I believe it is wise to do so. God can be our shared name for the true creativity in the natural universe. Such a view invites a sense of the sacred, as those aspects of the creativity in the universe that we deem worthy of holding sacred. We are not logically forced to this view" Kauffman (2007, 903).

¹² Crosby who prefers to label his approach "religion of nature" still acknowledges his view to be "one of at least four general categories of religious naturalism" (2002, 172n. 14).

¹³ For Crosby, an objective and realist view regarding the religious significance of nature can be defended via six "role-functional categories": uniqueness, primacy, pervasiveness, rightness, permanence, and hiddenness. Such role-functional categories are commonly associated with a religious object and they can, according to Crosby, be applied to nature as a whole. See discussion in Crosby (2002, 117-118).

¹⁴ See also Jerome Stone's discussion regarding moral and religious ambiguity in recent religious naturalism: (2004, 225-246).

¹⁵ It is worth noting that Loyal Rue's strong defence of religious/mythic realism puts him, to some extent, in opposition to the more pragmatic considerations expressed by Gordon Kaufman, Stuart Kauffman, and Karl Peters.

¹⁶ John F. Haught makes the distinction between *sober* and *sunny* naturalists. A sober naturalist is someone who maintains that "nature is all there is, but for them nature is *not* resourceful enough to satisfy the voracious human hunger for meaning and happiness." A sunny naturalist, on the other hand, holds "that nature's overwhelming beauty, the excitement of human creativity, the struggle to achieve ethical goodness, the prospect of loving and being loved, the exhilaration of scientific discovery – these are enough to fill a person's life." Haught (2006, 10).

¹⁷ In (1998, xi) Dawkins writes, "The feeling of awed wonder that science can give us is one of the highest experiences of which the human psyche is capable. It is a deep aesthetic passion to rank with the finest that music and poetry can deliver. It is truly one of the things that make life worth living."

¹⁸ See Harris (2004, 204-222) and Harris (2014).

¹⁹ Victor Stenger, a proponent of new atheism, affirms something similar, "Beauty and inspiration can arise from secular sources. Certainly much great art and literature is secular in nature", "God is not necessary for someone to find fulfilment in contemplation or social activity" Stenger (2007, 254, 252). He also writes, "Many people think of science as cold and impersonal. Scientists have tried to counter that by pointing to the beauty and majesty of nature and the great pleasure and inspiration that science brings to its practitioners" (2007, 255).

²⁰ See David Ray Griffin's overview and critique of Willem Drees' religious naturalism: Griffin (1997, 593-614).

²¹ Kauffman also writes, "Can I *logically force* you to this sense of the sacred? No. But the vastness of nature, the wealth of invention in the bio-sphere and human historicity can *invite* you" (Kauffman, 2008, 284).

²² See John F. Haught (2003, 769-782).

²³ See the following for stances on and articulations of religious fictionalism: Eshleman (2005, 183-199), Le Poidevin (2003, 271-284), Le Poidevin (2016, 178-192), Harrison (2010, 43-58), Cordry (2010, 77-89), and Lipton (2007, 31-46).

²⁴ For more on the importance of personal wholeness and social coherence within Rue's naturalism: see Rue, (2005, 9-10, 75-77, 160-164, 251, 255); Rue (2011, 65-67, 74-76, 143-144, 149).

²⁵ Interestingly, despite Rue's fictionalist stance he also defends realism as necessary presupposition for the spiritual effectiveness of mythic traditions. See Rue (2005, 130-131, 200, 317).

²⁶ For a critique of religious fictionalism, see Cordry (2010, 77-89).

²⁷ This issue has also been explored by Mikael Stenmark (2013, 546-547).

²⁸ As Niels Henrik Gregersen points out, Drees' theism seems to entail Atemporal Theism, which suggests that although "God is the creator of a temporal world, God is unimaginatively beyond time and change" Gregersen (2008, 291).

²⁹ How deep should this agnostic orientation go? Will an all-encompassing agnosticism simply undermine all attempts at constructive theology? Regarding this issue, Kaufman answers: "Therefore, any thoroughgoing agnostic response to all metaphysical questions – a refusal to take any position at all on the place of humanity within the cosmic scheme of things – is clearly a rejection from the outset of all moves toward constructing an understanding of reality in which God has a significant place. It must be granted, however, that a metaphysical agnosticism of this sort does not necessarily close the door on every significantly 'Christian' orientation on human life and the world" (Kaufman, 1993: 242).

³⁰ I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for his/her constructive comments which helped me to improve and clarify this paper.