

Newsletter Article on Religious Naturalism by Jason Cook

Is there meaning in a universe without God, heaven, or an afterlife?

That would be a provocative question to ask in many church newsletters, but not so much in one written for Unitarian Universalists. In fact, while many of our church members embrace some notions of the divine and the afterlife, many others find little personal value in those theological concepts. But simply rejecting one set of theologies doesn't necessarily leave us feeling whole. It can be easy to figure out what we don't believe, but if we're a person inclined toward a more scientific, rational understanding of the world, it can be difficult to articulate how we find meaning in life from a religious standpoint. For instance, if we don't believe in God, where exactly do we find hope?

Answering that question is one of the many reasons why I'm intrigued by the theology of Religious Naturalism, as explored in Jerome A. Stone's book *Religious Naturalism Today*. Stone presents Religious Naturalism as a forgotten alternative to more traditional theologies. Its roots run deep in Unitarian Universalist history; Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman are considered early Religious Naturalist pioneers.

So if Religious Naturalism isn't interested in notions of a discrete divine realm, then what is it concerned with? The answer is in the name itself: "naturalism" gestures both away from the supernatural and toward nature. But what does nature mean in this context?

Stone offers some intriguing ways of narrowing down this potentially overwhelming concept. For a Religious Naturalist, the important moments in life range from the richness of small everyday events to the blatant significance of life altering events. These moments

register as meaningful solely because of the depth the experience itself offers, as opposed to other religious impulses that look for the mystical meaning beyond and outside of the natural world. The Religious Naturalist's gaze is focused on this world as we understand it from a rational perspective; this gaze can yield insights that are "pockets of meaning that sometimes we can enlarge."¹ Stone assures us that this enlargement doesn't have to be nebulous or magical: "insight should be informed by the best sciences available."² In Stone's estimation, the events that foment these insights are sacred, but because the sacred operates within the framework of everyday life itself, the boundaries are quite blurry around what is and isn't sacred.

A word like "sacred" might evoke notions of otherworldly religious rapture, but Religious Naturalism offers us less lofty ways to think about what's sacred. If we define the sacred as simply what we hold as most important, we start to see sacred opportunities all around us, whether in a blooming flower or a friend's smile. Religious Naturalists practice awareness of the sacredness of everyday things and then act accordingly in response; this comprises their journey into a deeper sense of spirituality--one still firmly located in this world. That active response to sacredness begins a natural progression toward a goal we Unitarian Universalists share: making the world a better place.

Yet, whether we are Religious Naturalists behaving accordingly in response to the sacred or people simply motivated by the desire to do the right thing, working toward a better, more just world remains difficult and challenging. When I'm out in the community

¹ Jerome A. Stone, *Religious Naturalism Today: The Rebirth of a Forgotten Alternative*, (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press 2008), 229.

² *Ibid.*, 226.

doing this hard work, people often ask me the same question: if Unitarian Universalists don't believe in an afterlife and salvation through God, where do they find hope?

I patiently answer that some Unitarian Universalists do believe in just such a thing, but many do not. Since there is no one explanation for where Unitarian Universalists find hope, I usually share where I personally find it. Years ago, my neighbor, a concentration camp survivor, told me how it was the occasional glimpse of a few wild daisies outside the barbed wire of the camp fence that sustained her during her horrific ordeal. Since then, I've made a practice in my daily life of actively recognizing moments of beauty or clarity as beacons of hope. I've also considered them to be pinpoints of something larger—a greater sense of love or the divine. But a Religious Naturalist would say no; these moments have significance because of their inherent nature, nothing more. If I were a Religious Naturalist, I would do better to meditate on the meaning of that sacred thing in and of itself, and leave my greater religious questioning to pondering how “my joy, my pain, my dilemma, fit into the grand scheme of things.”³ It's an intriguing proposition, one that perhaps requires more discipline to stay in the here and now than I can muster, but I might attempt to experiment with it as a spiritual practice. And if this kind of thinking comes easily to you, you might be a Religious Naturalist.

I began by suggesting that Religious Naturalism was a theology without God, and I'm going to end by suggesting paradoxically that it can be one inclusive of God. For that matter, it can even be pantheistic, as evidenced by Thoreau with his conception of a “living earth”⁴

³ Stone, *Religious Naturalism*, 226.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 188.

and Whitman, who found the divine not just in pastoral settings but the bustle of cities.⁵ The inclusion or exclusion of God is not how a Religious Naturalist is measured; rather, it is the nature of divinity itself that matters. The divine must be “naturalistically conceived,” not a conscious agent capable of offering comfort or immortality.⁶ God as understood by a Religious Naturalist would never be separate from or above everything else. Consequently, nature, whether defined as divine or not, can never provide the kind of certainty that an omnipotent, active God can, but that doesn’t leave a Religious Naturalist without hope. Hope is to be found in those moments of sacred insight that nature offers, and hope is to be found in the good that people do when they act responsively to that sacredness. This hope offers the attainable, practical promise of a better world.

⁵ Stone, *Religious Naturalism*, 187.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 227.

SOURCES CITED

Stone, Jerome A. *Religious Naturalism Today: The Rebirth of a Forgotten Alternative*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2008.