

Preface

Can there be a spiritually evocative yet thoroughly naturalist interpretation of human life? Can an account of the human condition shed ancient superstitions while remaining religiously potent? Yes. Indeed, the central argument of this book supports a naturalistic interpretation of the human being as *homo religiosus*. That is, religious behaviors, beliefs, and experiences—understood sufficiently broadly—constitute human nature not only historically, culturally, or circumstantially, but also ontologically, essentially, and inescapably. A thoroughgoing and consistent naturalism is inevitably also profoundly spiritual and religious. This remains so even though religious communities with traditional theological outlooks hesitate to embrace religious naturalism, and despite the fact that many naturalists and humanists are leery of all things religious.

This claim that human beings are *homo religiosus* has been articulated before, with various meanings, some rather different than the meaning it has here. The breadth of meaning accorded “religious behaviors, beliefs, and experiences” in this treatment offers a way to grasp the significance of the central claim. Religion here includes not only the characteristic behaviors, beliefs, and experiences of organized institutional religious groups but also existentially potent behaviors, beliefs, and experiences in every domain of life, from wonder at nature to awe in the face of human frailty. Religion in this sense applies even to the fervent prophets of secular humanism who devote themselves to the liberation of human beings from what those prophets take to be the delusions of supernatural religious mythologies and the bondage imposed by groups that promote such delusions. Religion in this generous sense is a matter of people’s ultimate existential, spiritual, and social concerns. It pertains to the way we bind ourselves (*religio*) to that which has surpassing meaning for us, and bear this reflexive or elective bondage in every aspect and circumstance of life. Religion *in this sense* suffuses every aspect of human life, and appears to spring from the valuational depth structures and dynamics of nature and culture that are the fecund sources of meaning and life possibilities.

One reason this generous interpretation of religious behaviors, beliefs, and experiences is relatively uncommon is that, while descriptively accurate at its own level, it is semantically strained relative to more common usages. I acknowledge this without hesitation but wish to argue that this usage of religion in “religious anthropology” and “religious naturalism” is appropriate and beneficial.

The diverse meanings of “religion” usually take shape in two ways. On the one hand, “religion” refers to organized social groups of those who supposedly share specific religious beliefs and practices. On the other hand, “religion” refers to the putative objects of religious belief and practice as most commonly understood—namely: supernatural beings from Gods to ghosts, from angels to demons, and from

bodhisattvas to ancestors; and supernatural narratives about how to escape the problems of the human condition, whether they refer to heaven and hell, *saṃsāra* and nirvana, guilt and freedom, or blissful immortality and mindless extinction. Certainly the anthropology of religion, the sociology of religion, the psychology of religion, and the cognitive neuroscience of religion are typically guided by such assumptions about religion. Even theology and philosophy of religion are dominated by theories of ultimate reality that embrace the supernaturalist metaphysics so common within the belief systems of many religious traditions. The considerable virtues of this approach to religious phenomena derive from the statistically appealing fact that this is how *most people* understand religion in practice.

In an essentially philosophical work of synthetic interpretation, however, an approach to inquiry corresponding to this narrower understanding of religion would be flawed by the fact that it registers what is dominant at the cost of not being responsive to exceptions. These exceptions include great thinkers who gave birth to fertile ideas that structure many forms of religious self-understanding, such as Plato and Aristotle, Śāṅkara and Nāgārjuna, Confucius and Laozi. They include many of the great mystics whose reflective experience takes them away from the anthropomorphic limitations of supernaturalism. They include the skeptics of every culture and era who have always intuited that the religious beliefs and practices of their environment were what they were later discovered to be in part: social constructions for regulating human behavior in an uncertain world perpetually on the edge of chaos. They include the anti-religious but profoundly spiritual seekers of the modern world for whom the spell of religion has been broken and the lure of supernaturalism lost, and yet the mystery of human life in an awesome natural environment persists, ever strengthened by increasingly detailed knowledge of its wondrous workings.

Focusing on religion's statistically and historically dominant forms only yields the conclusion that human beings are not *homo religiosus* ontologically, essentially, and inescapably; rather, religiosity is an optional and dispensable aspect of the human condition, and one that we might be better off without. At this level of analysis—that is, using the historically and statistically dominant forms of human religiosity to delimit inquiry—I consider this conclusion deeply compelling because I judge supernaturalist metaphysics to be mistaken and I recognize that some elements of religion have often exercised social control ignorantly and unjustly. Yet I also consider this conclusion profoundly unrealistic with regard to the prospects of human beings managing without religion, historically one-sided through neglecting the wonderful cultural and moral achievements of religion, and shockingly neglectful of the symbolic richness of religion that facilitates authentic human engagement with the material and value-laden world in and through sometimes fanciful mythical worldviews and bizarre practices.

At some fundamental level, I believe that lovers of the truth, whether calling themselves religious or not, would cautiously but definitely choose enlightened awareness over the delusions of fanciful worldviews if they were convinced that the fancies were false and the worldviews wrongheaded. They would so choose

even knowing that their choice would mean risking a frightfully complicated social reengineering project with uncertain benefits. That is, they would take Jesus' side over the Grand Inquisitor's side in Dostoyevsky's famous fantasy. This passionate, ascetic truth-bondage, surely, has as much claim on our attention as the statistically and historically dominant supernatural myth-bondage when our task is to understand human religiosity.

Along this and similar paths, then, I am led to conclude that we do not reach to the depths of human religiosity by focusing solely on its statistically dominant forms. Our value commitments, our efforts at meaning construction, and our socially borne explorations of life possibilities reach far beyond the historically most prominent forms of religiosity, and into every nook and cranny of our lives. It is at this axiological level, beneath the most overt beliefs and practices of both religious and non-religious people, that we find *homo religiosus*. From there we can trace the impact of human religiosity *in a properly general sense* on existential awareness, on moral choices, on the social construction of reality, and on vast civilizational projects—and we can do this in such a way as to account for the fabulous variation in religious and spiritual expressions across culture and eras, traditions and individuals.

I am convinced that the theoretical machinery required for such a synthetic analysis of the human being as *homo religiosus* crucially depends on the metaphysical hypothesis of religious naturalism. This is because a properly generous interpretation of human religiosity inclusive of the full variety of spiritual and axiological sensitivities of the human condition—a view of religiosity rich enough to discern that human beings are *homo religiosus* not merely historically, culturally, or circumstantially, but also ontologically, essentially, and inescapably—requires a metaphysically minimalist framework that registers species-wide features of the human condition. For example, if the metaphysical framework guiding theological interpretation were to include a supernatural ultimate religious object of any kind, the proper meaning of religion inevitably contracts. And if metaphysical neutrality is attempted, which is the posture (if not the actual achievement) of many social-science approaches to religion, the philosophical interest in evaluative questions of meaning and purpose is sacrificed and there is no possibility of producing a properly *religious* or *theological* interpretation of the human condition. I have had to adopt a particular strategic approach to the religious-naturalism hypothesis in this book, accordingly. Specifically, it has the status of a *presupposition* for the inquiry, in the sense that it is not evaluated overtly here. But I certainly intend to evaluate religious naturalism indirectly by means of its theoretical fruits, and for that purpose the entire book is the argument. The companion volume to this book, *Science and Ultimate Reality*, takes up the task of justifying religious naturalism in relation to its most serious theological competitors.

One of the preliminary chapters discusses the meaning of religious naturalism. In this prefatory context it suffices to say that religious naturalism rules out both supernaturalism and all views of ultimate reality as an active, focally aware entity, but that it affirms an ultimate reality in the axiological (that is, valuational) depth

structures and dynamics of nature. This view of nature and ultimate reality is reflexively appealing to a wide range of modern people—religious, non-religious, and anti-religious—but it also has impressive credentials and ancient standing in all of the world’s religious and philosophical traditions. Some of the ways religious naturalism can be elaborated metaphysically and theologically are discussed in the chapter on ‘Habitat’. One way of expressing its relationship with the statistically and historically dominant supernatural-determinate-entity portrayals of ultimate reality in the world’s religions is to say that it persists on the underside of these traditions. From there it offers an intellectually and morally compelling refuge for those who have always needed to retreat from what they come to see as the garish offense of anthropomorphically excessive forms of religion, and it also profits from the social viability of the obverse, supernatural face of religion. In short, religious naturalism in a variety of forms enjoys a symbiotic relationship with religious supernaturalism. It has always done so, and it will continue to do so at least for some time into the future.

The great social-engineering question concerning religion, when reexpressed in these terms, is whether this symbiosis needs to be permanent, or whether at some point religious naturalism can separate and live on its own, apart from supernaturalism, and possibly fully opposed to the anthropomorphic and credulous excesses of supernatural religion. However this question is finally answered, I think we can affirm with some confidence that the ending of this symbiotic entanglement would *neither* be an exhibition of the human species evolving to some higher plane, *nor* an intrinsically stable cultural arrangement. On the contrary, it would be a matter of creatively constructing a new reality, one that would disintegrate were the human species to lose the stable civilizational conditions for such high-energy ventures in social engineering. Like gender equality, economic justice, scientific inquiry, high-quality health care, and the rejection of ingroup–outgroup discrimination, cultural practices built around religious naturalism and its vision of the divine in the axiological depths of nature would be hard-won social achievements requiring consistent education of human beings against a number of cognitive impulses that tend toward belief in supernaturalism and divine beings. A collapse of civilizational stability would interfere with the necessary conditioning processes and thus inevitably provoke a reversion to default cognitive and emotional modes of world-interpretation.

So much for the central claim of the book—human beings as *homo religiosus*—and its primary presupposition—religious naturalism. Methodologically speaking, this book is an extended argument on behalf of the thesis that the natural and social sciences meaningfully constrain without finally determining religious interpretations of the human condition. Equally, it is an attempt to demonstrate that theological reflection can be conducted not on behalf of any particular religious tradition, but rather with the secular academy as its institutional home and multiple religious and philosophical traditions as its discussion partners. These characterizations can be compressed into one by saying that this is an exhibition of religious philosophy in the sense of multidisciplinary comparative inquiry,

with the subject matter for the inquiry being human beings as *homo religiosus*. The methodological considerations most pertinent to assessing the possibility and prospects of this type of intellectual work are laid out in another volume, *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry: Envisioning a Future for the Philosophy of Religion* (Wildman 2009). Apart from some necessary preliminary comments in the first two chapters of this book, I do not revisit those issues here.

A lot of science is surveyed in the chapters of this book, chiefly in evolutionary biology, evolutionary psychology, the cognitive neurosciences, and the human sciences from psychology to sociology. Crystallizing the formidably complex unfolding processes of scientific inquiry in any given discipline is a difficult task—one made easier but also more perilous by not being a specialist. While I have attempted to be thorough and accurate, and also to stay close to consensus territory, the complexity and diversity of scientific opinion will make many of my judgment calls questionable. At the same time, while I am more deeply acquainted with the scientific study of religion and the literary and philosophical study of religions, thanks to my primary training, I can easily see a number of ways in which my presentation and coverage decisions even in these areas could plausibly be challenged. I venture to say, however, that these kinds of weaknesses are inevitable in multidisciplinary comparative inquiry. This is particularly so in these early decades of attempts to generate communities capable of supporting such forms of inquiry against and above the barriers inevitably erected by the social reality of conventional university disciplines. I believe these weaknesses should be risked because of the intrinsic value of multidisciplinary comparative inquiries. In the final analysis, of course, whether the risk is worth taking in the case of the present inquiry depends on the quality of the product. And that is for others to decide.

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