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Ursula W. Goodenough

Washington University in St Louis, goodenough@wustl.edu

Michael Cavanaugh

Todd Macalister

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BRINGING RELIGIOUS NATURALISTS TOGETHER ONLINE

Ursula Goodenough, Michael Cavanaugh, and Todd Macalister

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Gimme that on-line religion
Gimme that on-line religion
Gimme that on-line religion
It's good enough for me.

Abstract

Religious Naturalism is a concept that has developed largely in the academy, in trade books, and on several on-line sites that avoid using the term religious. This chapter describes our two-year experience launching the Religious Naturalist Association (RNA), an on-line community that has attracted > 400 members from 47 states in the US and 28 countries. We lift up the challenges and the advantages of exploring the religious naturalist orientation in a virtual context.

The Religious Naturalist Association

What do the following have in common?

Farmer, architect, chef, speech pathologist, homemaker, scientist,
magician, mental-health counselor, writer, puppeteer, banker, minister,

filmmaker, student, veterinarian, social worker, scholar, ski instructor, composer, warehouse worker, accountant, teacher, sculptor, bus driver, painter, lawyer, publisher, truck driver, salesman, physician, carpenter, librarian, software engineer, midwife, administrator, housecleaner, editor, and performance musician.

The answer: This is a partial list of the > 400 persons who have become members of the online Religious Naturalist Association (RNA)¹, a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) entity brought together by Michael Cavanaugh in 2014. Its stated goals are 1) to create a worldwide “home” for those of us who self-identify as religious naturalists and 2) to encourage the development and spread the awareness of a religious naturalist orientation.

The authors of this chapter were elected by the RNA Board to serve as its first president (UG), secretary (MC), and communications director (TM). Membership is free. We maintain a website that provides information and resources, including essays and descriptions of creative projects, with links, that examine aspects of a religious naturalist orientation. We also host a members-only Facebook site², an online open discussion forum via Google Groups, and a discussion group of past and present clergy who are based in traditional denominations.

We have been thrilled by this list, as it represents our first indication that an RN orientation can extend well beyond the academy, beloved as the academy is to us all. Even better, these religious naturalists hail from 47 (49) states (and territories) in the US and from 24 countries.

This chapter serves as a report from the field in 2017. In a decade or two, it will be clear whether the online approach takes off or stalls out, and whether we have found viable and meaningful ways to supplement our on-line experience with face-to-face experiences with one another. Meanwhile, we are having a wonderful time engaging in the experiment.

Matters of Terminology: The R-Word

RNA is not the first on-line 501(c)(3) association to promote a like-minded orientation. In 1996, Paul Harrison launched what is variously called Scientific Pantheism or the World Pantheism Movement (WPM)³, where its history is recorded here⁴ and its two very active Facebook sites⁵ are open to all. More recently, Daniel Strain launched the Spiritual Naturalist Society⁶ with a Facebook site⁶. A compendium of other similar online offerings is found at the RNA website⁷.

The most notable distinction between RNA and these other groups is that RNA uses the adjective *religious*. WPM explicitly emphasizes that it is “spiritual but not religious,” a trope that has earned its own wikipedia entry⁸. Taking this to its perhaps inevitable endpoint, the commercial website Patheos⁹, which self-describes as “hosting the conversation on faith,” includes a “Nonreligious channel”⁹ devoted to “the largest-growing segment of the population — those who are neither spiritual nor religious,” which the Pew foundation estimates to comprise 21% of the US population.¹⁰

Hence, adopting the adjective *religious* would appear to be a decision to swim upstream, and those of us promoting an RN orientation encounter the “I would never use the R-word” response on a regular basis. When probed, many of these responses prove to arise from a conflation of “religious” and “religion” and an antipathy towards a particular traditional religion, one that has expanded to include all religions.

We see two ways to think about this. One, which RNA has adopted¹¹, is to suggest that “religious” be considered the large “catch-all” term. In this view, being religious entails the adoption of a core narrative (in this case, a naturalistic worldview based on findings from modern science) and its elicitation of three kinds of responses: 1) the interpretive (the philosophical/existential meanings of the worldview); 2) the spiritual (e.g. awe, gratitude, humility, and reverence elicited by the worldview); and 3) the

moral/ethical (e.g. responsibility, fairness, cooperation, and community suggested by the worldview), where a key RN focus is Ecomorality and Social Justice. Under this rubric, being spiritual becomes a facet of, rather than a substitution for, being religious.

The other response is to say that it does not matter, that persons who take the natural world seriously in launching their meaning systems are all members of the same community, regardless of what they call themselves. To the extent that “religious” has positive connotations for some, the community is to that extent expanded.

We are fully on-board with such a plurality of descriptors. Naming issues have diced and sabotaged all too many communal and religious trajectories. What is important is that members of these communities take Nature to Heart (Rue, 2011, p. 109).

Matters of Terminology: -ism vs. -ist

We intentionally elected to call our organization the Religious Naturalist rather than the Religious Naturalism Association in recognition of the present-day antipathy, which we share, to the creedal/doctrinaire connotations of -isms. The term *Naturalism* is particularly vulnerable on this axis since it has been adopted in the past to describe various philosophical and literary mindsets or “schools”¹² that put forward various truth claims.

A religious naturalist, we suggest, seeks to synthesize his/her interpretive, spiritual, and moral responses to the natural world into a coherent whole, a synthesis that functions as his/her version of religious naturalism, where the vocabulary, metaphors, and meanings that emerge from that search are not expected to conform to some external received credo. Rue (2006, p.364) lifts up this feature of RN as well:

It may be enough that particular versions of religious naturalism are prepared to install their own conceptual integrations of reality and value. Perhaps the only critical point for religious naturalism is that evolutionary cosmology becomes integrated with eco-centric morality by means of some conceptual device. Whatever metaphors do the trick are fine, so long as they don't compromise the principles of naturalism. . . . Religious naturalists must remain open to a range of options.

Such an approach is not unlike that of the Unitarian-Universalists (UU)¹³, with an important distinction: religious naturalists elect to adopt the story of Nature as their core narrative, whereas the UU tradition is centered on—indeed takes pride in—its absence of a core narrative.

The Option of Becoming a Subgroup of a Pre-Existing Institution

There are three general options for creating a community of religious naturalists: 1) Become a traditional religion with clergy-equivalents, brick-and-mortar churches, seminaries, and so on. This could conceivably come to pass in the distant future, but it is obviously not an option given our current numbers and resources. 2) Become a subgroup—a sect equivalent—operating within an existing traditional institution. 3) Form on-line associations.

There have been several experiments with Option 2. A group of religious naturalists who regularly attended the Star Island Conferences of the Institution on Religion in an Age of Science (IRAS)¹⁴ during the 1990's successfully petitioned the IRAS leadership to create a Religious Naturalism Interest Group (IRASRN) with an attendant email tie-in. RN subgroups have at various times also been formed within UU congregations. Such initiatives have the important merit of bringing actual people together. However, there prove to be many challenges inherent in sustaining a subgroup within a larger entity pursuing its own agenda, and none of the RN-subgroup initiatives that we know of have had a long half-life. Moreover, as expanded below, such groupings do not include those

religious naturalists without proximity to and/or interest in becoming a member of the larger institution.

Why RN Online?

An obvious disadvantage of an online organization is that it does not bring actual people into the same building or around the same campfire, a feature nurtured by religious institutions for many millennia. That said, there are of course countless opportunities available in one's community to join like-minded groups—in sports, in environmental and social activism, in book clubs, in music-making, in the work sphere, and yes, in traditional churches—so that to ground one's religious life in a virtual community in no way cuts someone off from experiencing actual people. The advantages of an online RN organization are presented below.

The Diversity and Global Reach Parameter

We have already lifted up the wide range of professions, avocations, and geographies that RNA has attracted. A similar spectrum doubtless characterizes our sister organizations.

Here are two testimonials that speak to this parameter: “As someone who is disabled, on-line e-mail communication is all I am capable of these days. Group discussion would be more fulfilling, but as I live in a remote rural part of Wales, communal gathering is also scarcely practicable for me.” “For me sitting out here at the end of the world (South Africa), this group is a lifeline.” The writers of these testimonials are isolated by geography and mobility, but it is worth noting that many persons have become comfortable self-describing as introverts: the merriment of a church social event can energize some and drain others. Online community can be a lifeline for introverts as well.

The Time and Expense Parameter

Church membership has traditionally entailed a significant commitment of time (attending services, participation in governance) and expense (annual giving, offerings). Surveys of those who have “left the church” usually include responses to the effect that the person did not have enough time for it, or did not choose to spend money that way.

At such time that RN picks up enough steam to attempt to influence global affairs, time commitments and financial resources may enter the mix, but until then, a religious naturalist is free to explore her/his orientation, for free, in numerous contexts, including walking in the woods, reading a book, going to an art or science museum, engaging in meditative practice, attending a concert or a workshop, playing with children or friends, or participating in online conversation.

The Online Discussion Parameter

A subset of RNA members has signed up for RNAnet, our Google Groups discussion forum. Of these, the majority “lurk” and a minority post—a ratio that obtains in other such forums familiar to us. We find these conversations to be deeply stimulating and productive. As posters, we treasure the clarity of mind that comes from putting vague intimations into coherent sentences, and we treasure the insights obtained as we read how others put things together, even if we are content to be lurkers. Happily, too, none of us is “trapped” into listening to a viewpoint that fails to interest or resonate; we can simply click to the next posting, an option not available when one is literally trapped in a dull sermon or in an adult-ed gathering in a church basement.

It is also important to lift up the affinity that one can develop with online “strangers.” True, each of us is presenting only selected facets of who we are when we are on-line, but that is usually the case in face-to-face interactions with others as well, exceptions being close family and long-time friends. Indeed, one often feels most comfortable posting expressions of doubt and confusion in a quasi-anonymous but trusted setting.

And personality abounds! On the equivalent IRASnet that has been in place for several decades, most of us previously knew one another in-person from Star Island conferences, but a European woman joined us online for several years before attending a conference, and meeting her in the flesh, while wonderful, was in many ways an affirmation of who we already knew her to be.

The Website Resources Parameter

We pay a great deal of attention to our website, developed and overseen by our excellent webmaster Terry Findlay, considering it both an introduction to the RN orientation for first-timers and a resource for both members and non-members. The founders and leaders of IRAS, our parent organization, were primarily academic scholars or clergy, and this tradition is reflected in our Board of Advisors¹⁵ and in our efforts to provide informational resources. Our book pages, for example, list numerous offerings categorized as Nature, Human Nature Mind and Culture, Philosophy and Religion, Ecomorality, and Varieties of Religious Naturalism.

All naturalist orientations face the same headwinds: Our central story—our Core Mythos in Rue’s framing—is poorly taught in most schools, and is often either misunderstood or actively undermined or “disbelieved.” For example, Citizens for Objective Public Education recently sued the Kansas State Board of Education for its adoption of the Next Generation Science Standards (COPE et al. 2016). According to the plaintiffs, the Standards “establish[ed] and endorse[d] a non-theistic religious worldview in violation of the Constitution. . . . Do theistic parents and children have standing to complain if the goal of the state is to cause their children to embrace a ‘nontheistic religious worldview that is materialistic/atheistic’?”

Countering this perennial pressure is a growing movement to teach what has come to be called *Big History*¹⁶: human history in the context of biological and cosmological evolution. Websites promoting this trajectory include the Deep Time Journey Network¹⁷, Journey of the Universe¹⁸, The Great Story¹⁹, and the Big History Project²⁰. Support for

such initiatives is of course vital to RN, it being impossible to generate religious responses to a story that one does not know.

Joining Online Organizations

An unexpected difficulty that we have encountered is a reluctance to join online groups. It turns out that some persons have provided their names and e-addresses to sites that have gone on to publicize their membership, or send unwelcomed emails, or provide their lists to other groups. Once someone has had or heard about such experiences, hesitation can often trump affinity. Compounding these specific “cybersecurity issues” is a chronic reluctance to affiliate in general, documented in Robert Putnam’s book *Bowling Alone* (2000), where concerns include discovering that other members are, for whatever reasons, “different from what I expected.”

We know of no way to counter these issues, but console ourselves with the hope that an encounter with our website, even if it does not result in signing up for membership, serves as an introduction to an RN orientation that may bear fruit down the road.

RN Evangelism

The other ongoing challenge we face is the matter of publicity. After an initial flood of pre-committed religious naturalists, we continue to add members incrementally, largely by word-of-mouth or via search engines that direct persons with the correct key words to our site. What else, if anything, should we be doing? A friend quipped that all it would take would be for some super-celebrity to announce having joined RNA on a Facebook page or in a tweet, and we’d be swamped.

In religious contexts, “evangelism” is often used instead of “publicity.” Evangelism is usually associated with the spreading of the Christian gospel, but it can be more generally defined as “zealous advocacy of a cause.” In our times, evangelism is widely

and effectively practiced via online communication. Indeed, traditional religions supplement their own complements of clergy and houses of worship with extensive online activity²¹.

Returning to the goals of RNA, the second goal reads: “to encourage the development and spread the awareness of a religious naturalist orientation.” An evangelical statement indeed!

Loyal Rue offers a framework for RN evangelism at the close of his important book, *Religion Is Not About God* (2006, pp. 341-368). He first evokes various plausible (and dire) Doomsday scenarios resultant from “humans having failed to acknowledge and embrace their true status as natural beings.” He then suggests that those emerging from the chaos of said holocaust will seek a religious naturalist orientation that provides an integrated vision of cosmology and eco-centric morality. “Religious naturalism treats the integrity of natural systems as an absolute value, implied by the principle that any vision of the good life presupposes life, and that life presupposes the integrity of natural systems.” He goes on: “Religious naturalism is already in the air, but it is not yet a robust mythic tradition ... and it is unlikely to become a dominant influence until the events of history render alternate mythic visions irrelevant and unpalatable.”

While it may prove to be the case that the global adoption of an RN orientation will not happen without the kick-start of global catastrophe, the optimists in our midst envision an alternate sequence wherein global adoption of this orientation staves off global catastrophe. In this scenario, RN evangelism becomes a moral responsibility, even if we are only now struggling to figure out how best to deploy it.

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Web Links

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Notes on Contributors

Ursula Goodenough is President of RNA. She is Professor of Biology at Washington University in St. Louis, USA. She has written a religious naturalist book, *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (Oxford University Press, 1998), and numerous articles in the journal *Zygon*. Archives of her writings and presentations are posted here <http://religious-naturalist-association.org/ursula-goodenough-2/>

Michael Cavanaugh is a Louisiana lawyer who retired early to concentrate on figuring out the relation between science and religion, which resulted in his deep involvement with The Institute on Religion in an Age of Science and with the journal *Zygon*. He is a co-founder of Religious Naturalist Association.

Todd Macalister is Communications Director at RNA. He works as a medical writer, developing professional education/training programs. He attended the School of Theology at Boston University and is the author of *Einstein's God: A Way of Being Spiritual Without the Supernatural*.