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Chapter 6

Race and ethnicity

Carol Wayne White

Introduction

In this chapter, I argue that one effective way of addressing race and ethnicity within the paradigm of ecology and religion is through the lens of religious naturalism. As mentioned in the opening chapter on religion in this volume, religious naturalism includes a variety of perspectives and ideas that often depart from traditional forms of religion, specifically in rejecting or reinterpreting traditional concepts (e.g., God or supernatural theism), and in using current developments in science to conceptualize humanity and our ethical orientations, aesthetic appreciations, and religious value. Religious naturalism shifts humans’ thinking back to ourselves as natural processes, encouraging us to question our values, behaviors, and resource uses as we conceive and enact new forms of relationality with each other and with the more-than-human worlds that are an integral part of our existence here. As such, religious naturalism offers a capacious ecological worldview that promotes justice for all of myriad nature. Specifically, religious naturalism deepens our awareness of the subtle, yet important, conceptual issues at stake in conjoining ecological initiatives with race and ethnicity. As an emerging religious discourse, it helps unmask a binary logic that has helped justify forms of environmental racism affecting communities of color, and it increases our awareness of subtle forms of anthropocentrism in our ecological discourses, which retain problematic views of the more-than-human worlds as “other.” In this chapter, I emphasize the potential of religious naturalism to help us move beyond this problematic binary logic.

In the first section, I provide the necessary backdrop to my general argument. I first introduce an influential, early modern binary construction (nature-culture) that divided reality into spheres of lesser-greater value, and then explore how it was further extended within the development and presence of white supremacy in the Euro-American context. I specifically describe dominant cultural norms and practices strengthened by this binary logic, which viewed the humanity of U.S. blacks and other ethnic and racial groups as closer to nature and not as important as that of white Euro-Americans. In this section,
I also draw on recent insights of Critical Race Theory to support the claim that white supremacy is a further extension of this binary logic, and I provide fuller understandings of key terms, such as nature, race, ethnicity, racism, and the construction of whiteness.

In the next major section, I respond to these historical and conceptual problems by introducing religious naturalism as an ecological religious framework that helps to address both white supremacy and problematic conceptions of the human-nature continuum. As an alternative model of conceiving nature, religious naturalism helps us reconfigure human animals’ relation to land, to animal others, and, indeed, to ourselves. Furthermore, its emphasis on deep relationality in biology and cosmology provides a viable model of ethical engagement with myriad nature.

I also discuss race and ethnicity in recent ecological perspectives, specifically examining religious naturalism’s response to what some environmental historians and activists have called the racialization of nature or the environment. While the specific examples I offer are primarily from African American history, I attempt to make important references and connections to other ethnic and racial groups.

Following these conceptual explorations, I offer in the third section a brief discussion of some ethical implications of religious naturalism as an ecological religious worldview. I suggest it can bring diverse groups together that share a common goal of both enriching human–human relationships and transforming humans’ relationality with the more-than human worlds of which we are a part.

The nature-culture binary logic and its extension to race/ethnicity

In her classic work, *The Death of Nature*, Carolyn Merchant draws important parallels between early modern European views of nature and cultural perceptions of various groups, including women, indigenous peoples, and Africans. In works of literature as well as artistic representations, influential writers and thinkers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries imposed a nature/culture dichotomy or dualism, which assumed the superiority of culture to nature (Merchant 1983: 143). In this context, an older organicism, where humans felt some form of intrinsic kinship with other natural processes, was eventually passed over in favor of a utilitarian approach to natural processes that favored humans’ distinction from and superiority to them. This new dominant ethos led many influential thinkers, with a wide range of emphases, to distinguish active, creative human culture from inert, brute environment. Merchant focuses primarily on the gender implications of this binary differentiation, examining its role in justifying a hierarchal order of nature where women were situated below men and their physiological functions of reproduction, nurture, and childrearing were viewed closer to nature and less important in
the functioning of culture. As she argues, “At the root of the identification of women and animality with a lower form of human life lies the distinction between nature and culture fundamental to humanistic disciplines such as history, literature, and anthropology, which accept that distinction as an unquestioned assumption” (Merchant 1983: 143). (For more on the relationship between gender, sexuality, and nature, see Bauman and Eaton’s chapter in this volume.)

As Merchant notes, this ideology of dualism was also an integral component of Western European cultural imperialism and expansion, where the purported “civilized” races of Europe identified and distinguished their own normative humanity against other groups they encountered in the Americas, Asia, and Africa. As an extension of the nature-culture dichotomy, racialized notions of differentiation helped to justify the West’s colonization and exploitation of various groups, leading to such disparaging views as savage Indians and morally or intellectually inferior blacks ( Merchant 1983: 132, 144). Similar derogatory racial differentiations are found in the 19th century observations of Percival Lowell, the famous American astronomer and businessman who traveled extensively in Japan to study aspects of its culture. In The Soul of the Far East (1888), Lowell wrote:

As for Far Orientals, they are not of those who will survive … If these people continue in their old course, their early career is closed. Just as surely as morning passes into afternoon, so surely are these races of the Far East, if unchanged, destined to disappear before the advancing nations of the West.

(Lowell 1888: 225–6)

These examples serve as early indicators of the social construction of Euro-American “whiteness” as a system of representation and cultural value based on differentiations of superiority and inferiority. In this context, as African philosopher Emmanuel Eze has persuasively argued, Enlightenment reasoning provided an ideal intellectual and epistemological basis for establishing and legitimating the hegemony of the West over other peoples and traditions Europeans encountered in Asia, Africa, and the Americas (Eze 1996: 5).

Traditions, values, and folk practices, often associated with groups and identities radically different from, or not easily compatible with, Enlightenment ideals, were often viewed suspiciously and assigned lowly positions on the hierarchy of value, beneath the required level of cognition or scientifi city (White 2016: 22). In some cases, as with the earlier gender example, dominant groups also attempted to legitimate their position via ideological means or a set of beliefs that explains or justifies some actual or potential social arrangement.
Rethinking race and racism

These historical practices anticipated current scholarly debates on race and ethnicity, two terms used as cultural markers of group identity. For many contemporaries, race is commonly viewed as a social construction used primarily to describe an individual's appearance—chiefly the color of someone's skin. Ethnicity, often used interchangeably with race, is properly understood by most as descriptors of cultural factors such as nationality, culture, ancestry, language, and beliefs.

Within the growing field of Critical Race Theory (CRT), however, these terms are imbued with theoretical complexity as they are examined within the context of power structures based on notions of white supremacy and white privilege (Crenshaw 1989; Crenshaw and Gotando 1996; Valdes et al. 2002).

At its inception, CRT emerged from legal scholars’ awareness of the machinations of white supremacy in perpetuating and reinforcing the marginalization of select groups perceived as non-whites. As noted by CRT scholars, however, race is mistakenly used as a sole descriptor of genetic traits such as skin color, eye color, hair color, bone/jaw structure, etc. With different points of emphasis, CRT scholarship shows that even though such terms as “blackness” and “whiteness” are constructions that are projected, they take on meanings that apply to certain groups of people in such a way that it becomes difficult to think of those people without certain affectively charged associations. Thus, the blackness and whiteness of individuals and groups are regarded by a racist culture—which takes too seriously the associations adhering to these terms, as their essential features—as, in fact, material, biological features of these individuals and groups (White 2016: 23). In this context, race and racism are central concepts in understanding the complex of social relations derived from perceived identity differences in U.S. history. In recent years, CRT has extended a study of these terms with other forms of subordination, as in the work of Chicano critical theorists applying the inextricable layers of racialization subordination based on gender, class, immigration status, surname, phenotype, accent, and sexuality (Dixson and Roussau, 2006: 171). Additionally, race as a social construction has been specifically aligned with the idea of whiteness as a normative category for establishing a group’s humanity (Delgado and Stefanie: 2012).

6A
Can you provide examples of the construction of race from your own experiences? How does it matter that “race” is a socially constructed category?
One of the earliest academic explanations of racism was offered by sociologist Marable Manning, who identified structural racism as “a system of ignorance, exploitation, and power used to oppress African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Americans, American Indians and other people on the basis of ethnicity, culture, mannerisms, and color” (Delgado and Stefanie, 2012; 2013). Manning’s formative definition emphatically shifted the discussion of race and racism from a problematic and limited black-white discourse to one that includes multiple faces, voices, and experiences. In a later article, he also spoke of a fuller theoretically astute view of “race” operative in racism:

When we talk about race, we don’t mean a biological or genetic category, but rather, a way of interpreting differences between people which creates or reinforces inequalities among them. In other words, “race” is an unequal relationship between social groups, represented by the privileged access to power and resources by one group over another. Race is socially constructed, created (and recreated) by how people are perceived and treated in the normal actions of everyday life.

(Manning 2001: 6)

Embedded in this definition are the crucial points made earlier by Merchant about nature and gender: one group believes itself to be superior and has the material, ideological, and institutional power to implement behaviors and establish a hierarchy of social order that adversely affects large groups of individuals perceived to be different. A similar, fairly robust conception of race is offered by Laura Pulido, who describes race’s pervasive and hegemonic presence, its “multiscalar nature, and its multiple forms of existence, including ideas, words, actions, and structures” (Pulido 2000:15).

**Religious naturalism: conjoining ecology, race, and religion**

A central point of this chapter is that the forms of cultural imperialism and racism supporting the Euro-American construction of whiteness have subtly evolved from the nature-culture dichotomy described by Merchant. Equally important to note, much of American literature has been founded on the underlying assumption of the superiority of culture to nature (Merchant 1983: 144). Addressing the fuller complexities of this dualistic ideology or binary logic may require scholars to explore anew the very categories of nature and culture as organizing concepts in our various humanistic discourses. For our purposes, these insights are especially relevant when considering race and ethnicity within the paradigm of ecology and religion, and they generate important questions. Is it possible to integrate concerns for race and ecology in ways that depart from this entrapment of binary thinking? Can we avoid re-inscribing pernicious forms of this binary logic
and yet remain fully committed to endorsing justice for all aspects of nature, including human nature?

Religious naturalism can help with these questions. The conception of myriad nature found in religious naturalism offers theoretical insights that help reframe humans as natural processes in relationship with other forms of nature. Advancing philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic reasoning that affirms the inherent value of the “more-than-human world(s)” of which humans are a part, religious naturalism offers itself as a capacious ecological religious worldview. It has the potential to address in creative ways the familiar human-nature binary that has perpetuated the various isms targeted by critical race theorists, eco-justice advocates, feminists, queer scholars, postcolonial critics, and social justice activists of all persuasions.

Religious naturalism describes a general religious worldview that is scientifically credible and emotionally satisfying. It does not use “supernatural” concepts or theories in comprehending humans’ need for value and meaning; instead, its focus is the realm of nature, which includes both natural processes and human culture for most religious naturalists. Religious naturalists draw on two fundamental convictions in understanding basic human quests for meaning and value: (1) the sense of nature’s richness, spectacular complexity, and fertility, and (2) the recognition that nature is the only realm in which people live out their lives. In this context, then, religious naturalism offers an ecological model that explains and advances human animals’ deep, inextricable homology with the rest of the natural world, an inexhaustible connection or entanglement with other natural processes.

The fuller significance of religious naturalism is possible if, and only if, we continue to keep our focus on material human organisms, or on the efforts of relational human animals. Within the context of ecology and religion, this means that any truths we are ever going to discover, and any meaning in life we will uncover, are revealed to us through our own efforts as natural beings. This religious view expressly rejects any suggestion of the supernatural – there is nothing that transcends the natural world.

6B

Donald Crosby provided an elegant summary of the prominent status of nature in religious naturalism:

Nature requires no explanation beyond itself. It always has existed and always will exist in some shape or form. Its constituents, principles, laws, and relations are the sole reality. This reality takes on new traits and possibilities as it evolves inexorably through time. Human beings are integral parts of nature, and they are natural beings through and through. They, like all living beings, are outcomes of biological evolution. They are embodied beings whose mental or spiritual aspect is not
something separate from their bodies but a function of their bodily nature. There is no realm of the supernatural and no supernatural being or beings residing in such a realm.

(Crosby 2008: ix–x)

Nature itself becomes a focal point for assessing our human desires, dreams, and possibilities – for assessing what can emerge from the past. More specifically, this religious ecological worldview compels all people to reflect meaningfully on the emergence of matter (and especially life) from the Big Bang forward, promoting an understanding of myriad nature as complex processes of becoming. 3 Its theoretical appeal is the fundamental conception of humans as natural processes intrinsically connected to other natural processes. This insight helps to blur the arbitrary ontological lines that human animals have erected between other species and natural processes and us.

The model of religious naturalism I endorse portrays human beings as star-born, earth-formed creatures endowed by evolutionary processes to seek reproductive fitness under the guidance of biological, psychological, and cultural systems that have been selected for their utility in mediating adaptive behaviours (Rue 2005: 77). Humans maximize their chances for reproductive fitness by managing the complexity of these systems in ways that are conducive to the simultaneous achievement of personal wholeness and social coherence. Appreciating human life as one distinct biotic form emerging from, and participating in, a series of evolutionary processes that constitute the diversity of life has monumental implications for a religious worldview. Here, the scientific epic becomes the starting point for positing an understanding of our humanity constituted by a central tenet: humans are relational processes of nature. In short, we are nature made aware of itself.

In declaring such, I contend that our humanity is not a given, but rather an achievement. Consider that from a strictly biological perspective, humans are organisms that have slowly evolved by a process of natural selection from earlier primates. From one generation to another, the species that is alive now has gradually adapted to changing environments so that it could continue to survive. Our animality, from this perspective, is living under the influence of genes, instincts, and emotions, with the prime directive to survive and procreate. Yet, this minimalist approach fails to consider what a few cognitive scientists, and most philosophers, humanists, and religionists tend to accentuate: our own personal experience of what it is like to be an experiencing human being. Becoming human, or actualizing ourselves as human beings, in this sense, emerges out of an awareness and desire to be more than a conglomeration of pulsating cells. Our humanity is not reducible to organizational patterns or processes dominated by brain structures, nor by DNA, diet, behavior, and the environment. Human animals become human destinies
when we posit fundamental questions of value, meaning, and purpose to our existence. Our coming to be human destinies is structured by a crucial question: How do we come to terms with life?

6C

Why do you think most U.S. citizens are reluctant to see themselves as part of myriad nature? What role might traditional views of religion play in this refusal? How does religious naturalism confront some of these perspectives?

In this religious view, sacrality is a specific affirmation and appreciation of that which is fundamentally important in life, or that which is ultimately valued: relational nature. Humans are interconnected parts of nature, and our sacrality is a given part of nature’s richness, spectacular complexity, and beauty. Notwithstanding the diverse cultural and individual approaches of articulating this truth, there is, for me, the sacrality of human deep interconnectedness with all that is. Finding meaning and value in our lives within the natural order presupposes our fundamental interconnectedness. We can claim and become our humanity in seeking and finding community with others – and with otherness. This is a simple value that religious discourse has advanced and reiterated again and again. As Ursula Goodenough observes:

We have throughout the ages sought connection with higher powers in the sky or beneath the earth, or with ancestors in some other realm. We have also sought, and found, religious fellowship with one another. And now we realize that we are connected to all creatures. Not just in food chains or ecological equilibria. We share a common ancestor. We share genes for receptors and cell cycles and signal-transduction cascades. We share evolutionary constraints and possibilities. We are connected all the way down.

(Goodenough 1998: 75)

Religious naturalism and the racialization of nature

In light of these theoretical convictions, religious naturalism helps us acknowledge a thorny but important issue: the traditional exclusivity of the category of the “human” itself. The theoretical violence perceivable in how the category of the human has been constructed has been acutely recounted in feminist, liberationist, and post-colonial critiques. Their persuasive critiques stress that the normative human subject has been primarily conceptualized as, and associated with, the lived experiences of white males of European-descent, into whose ranks African Americans and other minoritarian subjects have not
traditionally been admitted. In short, all human subjects have not traditionally been included in what is “properly” human.

With this understood, we can become much more aware of the “racialization of nature” that is unique to North America’s dominant environmental narratives. This term aptly describes how certain racialized groups’ experiences of nature were dramatically and adversely affected by the “institutions, legislation, and the social mores and beliefs of the dominant culture” (Finney 2014: 35). It is part of a legacy that details the inextricable and intimate connections between race/ethnicity and nature. Within the context of African American culture, Paul Outka describes this legacy as one where

whites viewed black people as part of the natural world, and then proceeded to treat them with the same mixture of contempt, false reverence, and real exploitation that also marks American environmental history – inevitably makes the possibility of an uncomplicated union with the natural world less readily available to African Americans than it has been to whites, who, by and large, have not suffered from such a history.

(Outka 2008: 3)

The nature-culture dichotomy introduced earlier becomes a clear extension of white supremacy. This development belongs to a “legacy of making people of color signify the natural” as a prelude to exploitation of nonwhite peoples and the natural environment (Finney 2014: 38). As Finney suggests, a fuller, complex rendering of the U.S. environmental narrative emerges in which some of the earliest specific conservation and preservation initiatives to protect “pristine nature” led by John Muir and Gifford Pinchot can be juxtaposed to other legislature acts that prohibited certain racial groups, who were deemed closer to nature. Finney writes:

While Pinchot and Muir explored, articulated, and disseminated conservation and preservation ideologies, legislation was being enacted to limit both the movement and accessibility for African Americans, as well as American Indians, Chinese, and other nonwhite peoples in the United States. This included the California Land Claims Act of 1851, the Black Codes (1861–65), the Dawes Act (1887), and the Curtis Act (1898).

(Finney 2014: 37)

Dianne Glave’s Rooted in the Earth (2010) brings in another dimension of the racialization of nature and the complexities that arise when conjoining race and ecology. Her study unearths an unexamined (and important) aspect of American environmental history in challenging an influential stereotype of African Americans as divorced from environmental and ecological concerns. Countering this assumption, she reconstructs a historical narrative of African Americans offering a range of attitudes, activities, and perspectives based on
their experiences with land and other natural processes. As she writes: “From ancient African to the modern-day United States, people of African descent have continued the legacy of their relationship with the land” (Glave 2010: 3).

On the one hand, Glave argues that the creation of African Americans’ connection to nature was initially set within a context of trauma and violence, illustrative of the crisis of exile and alienation experienced by Africans taken from their native lands to American shores, which hinged on the critical “middle passage” (Glave 2010: 4). Additionally, the mass migrations of African Americans to northern urban cities after slavery – a process that continued into the 1970s – distanced them from the rural experiences of their parents and grandparents, who lived and worked in fields, gardens, and woods. In summarizing this dimension of the legacy, Glave observes: “Scorn, distaste, and fear of nature became the emotional legacy of a people who had been kidnapped from their homelands and forced to make the long journey across the Atlantic Ocean to pick cotton and prime tobacco for often violent and abusive masters...” (Glave 2010: 5). On the other hand, Glave identifies a conscious environmentalism as one key strand of this African American legacy, associated with such notable figures as George Washington Carver, Ned, Cobb, and Thomas Monroe Campbell (Glave 2010: 6). These early pioneers engaged in preservation and conservational efforts that showed an intimacy with the land. Their efforts reflected an ethical mode of treatment that often sought to avoid extreme exploitation and mere instrumentalism. For instance, Carver, a paradigmatic figure and leader of the Tuskegee Experiment Station, championed recycling and waste control, lectured on horticulture at leading universities, and wrote numerous pamphlets explaining to farmers how improved techniques could raise their standard of living.

6D

According to George Washington Carver,

Unkindness to anything means an injustice done to that thing. If I am unkind to you I do you an injustice, or wrong you in some way. On the other hand, if I try to assist you in every way that I can to make a better citizen and in every way to do my very best for you I am kind. The above principles apply with equal force to soil.

(Glave 2010: 7)

In light of these divergent experiences, Glave raises an important question: What makes the environmental experiences of African Americans distinctive? Unlike their freed (white) counterparts, she notes, enslaved people did not simply discover wilderness; rather, they actively sought healing, kinship, resources, escape, refuge, and salvation in the land. Associating this
relationship with a lack of ownership leads Glave to offer a different model for how blacks have historically related to nature and land (Glave 2010: 8). This different model of relationality, she suggests, has helped perpetuate the current, dominant assumption that African Americans are not keen on environmental concerns.

Following the lead of Merchant, we must continue to ask whether our socially-conscious ecological views are still couched in an outdated binary system that keeps nature as other than human, or in the predictable binary of a dynamic human culture and passive natural environment (Clark 2002: 101; Beck 2009). While it is crucial to demonstrate white supremacy’s role in maintaining the invisibility and marginalization of African Americans and other groups in mainstream environmental discourse, people of color (indeed all of us) must be vigilant in contesting the popular (and problematic) view of nature that constitutes much of U.S. history.

This is a narrative that overestimates human animals’ autonomy, positioning us outside of complex, myriad nature and rendering invisible our inextricable connections. As shown by Glave’s examples, non-human nature is still accorded value according to its usefulness to racialized humans, judged by whether it mirrors what we value in ourselves. Additionally, as Carver’s example suggests, and as found in the responses of some religious traditions, the notion of humans being honorable stewards makes humans’ ethical relation to nature a matter of our generosity.

Religious naturalism aids us in confronting these complex and thorny issues. On the one hand, as a model of ecological discourse, religious naturalism helps us reconstruct the category of the human in such a way that it can address the tyrannical presence of white supremacy, as well as its concomitant “isms” that have denied black (and other marginalized) subjects their rightful claims to becoming human and actualizing their humanity in myriad ways. On the other hand, in adopting its retrieval of the human, we are necessarily compelled to reject the aims of traditional humanisms that have positioned humans outside of myriad nature and eclipsed the interrelatedness of all natural processes. In short, the primary conception of human nature that religious naturalism evokes is ontologically enmeshed and entangled with other forms of natural life.

6E

Ideas of “humanity” that radically distinguish our species from all others can clearly harm not only the world beyond humanity, but also human beings who are dismissed as “more” natural and so “less” human. Are there any dangers to the naturalistic idea that being human is fundamentally about being connected and enmeshed with all other forms of natural life?
Promises of religious naturalism: ethical considerations

The basic conception of the human as an emergent, interconnected life form amid spectacular biotic diversity has far-reaching ethical implications within the context of ecology and religion. First, as we have seen, its theoretical reasoning contributes to an intellectual legacy that has attempted to overcome the deficit conceptions of our myriad nature couched in problematic binary constructions. In doing so, religious naturalism not only presents human beings as biotic forms emerging from evolutionary processes sharing a deep homology with other sentient beings, it also emphasizes humans valuing such connection. Accordingly, while challenging racially-constructed views that have persistently placed blacks and other “racialized groups” outside of the circle of humanity, religious naturalism also rejects a view of our humanity solely as an individualistic phenomenon – some type of communal ontology is implied. A crucial lesson here is that notwithstanding the cultural and national differences and specificities we construct, humans are all genetically connected and part of a greater whole – any harm done to another sentient life is essentially harm done to ourselves. In this religious worldview, we are essentially celebrating relational selves that can resist solipsistic tendencies and egoistic impulses; there are no isolated individuals standing over against the fields of interaction. Put another way, there is no private self or final line between interiority and exteriority – we always include the other (even if by acting to exclude it). We are constitutionally relational and inevitably entangled in temporal becoming.

With such reasoning, religious naturalists are compelled to postulate ethical theories that provide as fully as possible inclusive and global analyses of intersectional oppressions, insisting that ethical solutions to global problems will not be found without attention to the interconnectedness of all life. The result may be what Ursula Goodenough calls planetary ethics, where the vital forces of love promote an understanding of, and commitment to, the importance of valuing and preserving ecosystems (whether understood as organisms, individuals, populations, communities, and their interactions). Additionally, we no longer see evolution as the meta-narrative of an increasing capacity of humans to manipulate other forms of nature, or the progressive development of increased specialization. Instead, we emphasize the successive emergence of new forms of opportunity, or the continual diversification of new modes of being, or new patterns of harmonious coexistence among myriad nature. Religious naturalism, then, is one current attempt to assess, even celebrate, the fullness (the “More”) of life as we reflect on processional nature, challenging the ideological dualisms that deny our radical and mutual relatedness as natural entities.

Finally, religious naturalism shares affinities with some key premises emerging from the Deep Ecology Movement (DEM), and other ecological initiatives that recognize the inherent value of all living beings and the use of this view
in shaping environmental policies (Naess, 1973: 95ff). Those who work for social changes based on this principle contend that we cannot go on with the conception of “nature” operative in the industrial culture and its forms of development. Deep ecologists often assert that without changes in basic values and practices, humans will destroy the diversity and aesthetic value of the natural world, and its ability to support diverse human cultures. This movement has been primarily initiated and supported by philosophers and environmental activists. Religious naturalism dovetails nicely with many of DEM’s goals and aims, enabling us to work with civility toward harmony with other creatures and beings (Naess, 1989). As an ecological religious perspective, religious naturalism provides the conceptual apparatus that can inspire cultural, economic, and ethical practices designed to shape expanded views of the human and the non-human world, providing the basis for a different personal and bio-political future. In the following case study, we will consider the usefulness of religious naturalism to address the inherent value of myriad nature.

**Case study – “Environmental justice: a grassroots movement anticipating religious naturalism”**

As featured in popular culture, the U.S. environmental movement is dismissively viewed as a favorite cause of affluent, white Americans who consume organic foods, contribute to causes devoted to the fate of extinct animals, and vacation in eco-villages in Costa Rica. In this dominant environmental narrative, the lives, interests, and well-being of poor people of color are seldom mentioned or acknowledged. As environmental justice advocates have shown, however, the paradoxical nature of this popular narrative becomes obvious when we see that the “human” populations most often affected by forms of environmental degradation are poor communities of color. These communities are routinely susceptible to host facilities that spawn adverse ecological effects affecting myriad nature: neighboring hazardous waste landfills, incinerators, chemical manufacturers and radioactive waste storage areas, garbage dumps, diesel bus and truck garages, smokestack industries, industrial hog and chicken processors, oil refineries, and waste transfer stations.

Even more problematic are popular assumptions that communities of color are passively indifferent to these various forms of environmental assaults in their neighborhoods, or that they lack a critical ecological consciousness that might contribute to the larger U.S. environmental movement. The reality is just the opposite. In the early 1960s, Latino farm workers led by Cesar Chavez fought for workplace rights, including protection from harmful pesticides in the farm fields of California’s San Joaquin valley. In 1967, African American students in Houston opposed a city garbage dump in their community that had killed two neighborhood kids. In 1968, West Harlem residents fought unsuccessfully against the siting of a sewage treatment plant in their community.
In 1982, a small rural African American community in Warren County, North Carolina also protested the dumping of 6,000 truckloads of soil laced with toxic PCBs into a newly constructed hazardous waste landfill. The dump trucks first rolled into Warren County in mid-September, headed for a newly constructed hazardous waste landfill in the small community of Afton. Residents and their allies met the trucks in protest, insisting that PCBs might leak into drinking water supplies despite reassurances from state leaders. With bodies sprawled on roads leading into the landfill, community members engaged in nonviolent street protests; they also held marches and other forms of protest in the following six weeks. More than 500 people were arrested—the first arrests in U.S. history over the siting of a landfill. Although the activists of Warren County ultimately lost that specific battle—the toxic waste was deposited in the landfill—their cries were not in vain. The struggle to protect their lives, their children, and their homes from the dangers of toxic waste materials garnered national media attention, heralding the advent of the environmental justice grassroots movement.

In the years since the unfolding drama in Warren County, the U.S. environmental justice movement has emerged as a coalition of various racial and ethnic groups (primarily African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans) developing multifaceted forms of resistance to environmental racism. As defined by those in the movement, environmental racism describes a harsh reality in North America: people who live, work, and play in the nation’s most polluted environments, far away from clean water and soil, are commonly people of color and the poor. In this context, environmental racism becomes a pernicious extension of the various forms of racism and economic injustices these groups have encountered in securing housing, educational, political, and employment.

The proximity of certain groups to environmental disasters is not incidental. Rather, decision makers, regulatory agencies, and local planning and zoning boards have too often made it easier to place such facilities in low-income African American or Latino communities than in primarily white, middle-to-upper-income communities. Economically challenged communities of color too often lack the resources (e.g., technical and legal expertise) required to challenge these sitings. They also frequently lack political influence that could help them advocate for their neighborhoods. Additionally, these communities seldom have access to crucial research and technical information that would relay the potential harm to humans’ health that the proximity of the specific facility would bring to the community. Furthermore, in the case of Latino communities, important information in English-only documents prevented residents who spoke only Spanish. The movement for environmental justice will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 13, but the problem of environmental racism is a clear sign that race and ethnicity are necessary parts of any conversation about environmental issues.

In making these crucial connections among problems that are perceived as isolated, the environmental justice movement anticipates religious naturalism.
With its capacious cosmology, religious naturalism strengthens the case for addressing with concerted effort ecological degradation on various levels. Its theoretical and ethical claims alert us to the dangers of isolationist agendas that environmental justice advocates resist. For example, the environmental justice movement demonstrates religious naturalism’s sense of the irrefutable interconnectedness of all life when it concurrently advocates against the depletion of natural resources, challenges the policies that both create land polluted by landfills, oil refineries, and nuclear-waste repositories and force poor racial and ethnic communities to live near these sites, and fights for referendums that preserve the delicate ecosystems supporting whales and dolphins.

As these efforts suggest, religious naturalists and environmental justice advocates share a general maxim: harm done to any one sector of natural processes, inclusive of human organisms, is harm done to all.

Inspired by the claims of religious naturalism, a more robust environmental justice movement intentionally challenges and unmasks subtle binary differentiations that ground the most recent variations of the nature-culture continuum. Honoring all materiality, religious naturalism compels us to cast aside problematic bifurcations of human materiality cast in racial and ethnic terms that often result in an us-them mentality. With such a religious worldview, we can better identify and resist the ill effects of white supremacy on all of us, resisting its power in determining how certain racial and ethnic bodies are treated; we can also detect and challenge the subtle processes of the racialization of nature endemic to American environmental history. Social justice advocates can extend these ecological values to enact important ethical, political, economic, and social changes in American life.

Religious naturalism compels us onward in these struggles, as we continuously expand our views of nature, including human nature, and refuse to be distracted by the various entrapments of the binary logic outlined above. One possible future emerging from these efforts is a transformed sphere of existence, where humans make a claim on life and honor, to the best of our ability, our inextricable relationality with each other and with the more than human words that constitute our being here.

Discussion questions

1. In what ways do you see the binary logic discussed in the essay reflected in this brief account of the environmental justice movement?

2. How might religious naturalism help to build ongoing commitment to the environmental justice struggle? How might such commitment be different from that established by more traditional religious communities?

3. In the quote above, George Washington Carver insists that good citizenship means kindness toward other people and the soil. How could that ideal be brought into a dispute about the siting of toxic waste? What does “kindness” look like when toxic substances must be disposed of?
Notes

1 In this chapter, I follow the trajectory of religious naturalism within the science and religion paradigm that is best associated with the works of Ursula Goodenough, Donald Crosby, and Loyal Rue, and I discuss this viewpoint in much more detail later. Representative works that have shaped my thinking include Crosby 2008, Goodenough 1998, Raymo 2008, and Rue 2005.

2 In biological studies, “races” are associated with genetically distinct populations within the same species; they typically have relatively minor morphological and genetic differences. Although all humans belong to the same species (Homo sapiens), and even to the same sub-species (Homo sapiens), there are small genetic variations across the globe that engender diverse physical appearances, such as variations in skin color. Although humans are sometimes divided into races, the morphological variation between races is not indicative of major differences in DNA. For example, recent genetic studies show skin color may drastically change in as few as 100 generations, spanning 2,500 years, as a result of environmental influences. Furthermore, the DNA of two humans chosen at random generally varies by less than 0.1 percent. This is less genetic variation than other types of hominids (such as chimpanzees and orangutans), leading some scientists to describe all humans as belonging to the same race – the human race.

3 This brief section is adapted from my fuller discussion in Chapter Two of White 2016.

4 This general conceptual dilemma is found in most works addressing race and environmentalism. For further reading, see Cole and Foster 2001.

References


Further reading


