

## Book Review

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

As Jerome Stone notes, religious naturalism has been experiencing a revival after a forty-year hiatus, and from this reviewer's point of view that is very important. It is also very important that a comprehensive and knowledgeable history of religious naturalism be written, and Stone has given us that in spades. The first part of the book, dealing with early religious naturalism, provides concise but thorough summaries of the thought of the major philosophers, theologians, and humanists who Stone believes can correctly be called religious naturalists. These include such philosophers as Santayana, Samuel Alexander, Dewey, John Herman Randall, and Roy Wood Sellars, and such theologians as G.B. Foster, Henry Nelson Wieman, Bernard Meland, Bernard Loomer, Ralph Wendell Burhoe, and the Unitarian leader Frederick May Eliot. The humanists include John Dietrich, Julian Huxley, and Kenneth Patton. Stone includes shorter discussions of others in the Chicago School, and he offers a fine treatment of the Jewish scholars Mordecai Kaplan and Jack Cohen. Each thinker receives several tightly packed pages, including appropriate quotations. His scope is impressive. His use of many well-chosen quotations to describe the thought of these thinkers is helpful, but there were times when I would have preferred Stone's own words interpreting what was said in the quotations. Nevertheless it is important to read the thinkers in their own words as much as possible.

After this extensive history, Stone devotes a chapter to an analysis of five major issues in religious naturalism which he considers to be matters needing ongoing study: the meaning of naturalism, the moral determinacy of God, the unity of God, the legitimacy of the term "God," and the nature of empirical inquiry in religion. Many of the thinkers previously dealt with are now discussed in the context of these issues, and we see how they approached these concerns and where they disagreed. The issues Stone chose are important, and the reader's understanding of the naturalists' thinking is deepened by this format.

Part two deals with those thinkers responsible for the renaissance of religious naturalism, which Stone dates as 1987 with the publication of Bernard Loomer's *The Size of God*. Stone organizes these thinkers into six "sources of religious insight." Philosophers, theologians, and scientists discussed are: Charley Hardwick, Ursula Goodenough, William Jones, Sharon Welch, Stone himself, Delores LaChapelle, Gary Snyder, Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, Michael Cavanaugh, Connie Barlow, William Dean, Willem Drees, Karl Peters, Henry Levinson, and Charles Milligan. Again, the scope of Stone's knowledge is remarkable, and his two-to-four-page treatment of each of these individuals is compact yet inclusive. From my own acquaintance with several of these thinkers I can attest to the accuracy Stone's interpretations.

I counted forty major and thirteen minor (of which this reviewer is one) figures treated on these pages—a tour de force to say the least!

Two short chapters are less scholarly but quite valuable. One, an “Interlude,” deals with “Religious Naturalism in Literature” and mentions Wordsworth, Thoreau, Robinson Jeffers, Alice Walker, and several others; it whetted my appetite for more. The last chapter, “Living Religiously as a Naturalist,” is a personal statement and is a gem that includes the following helpful statements: “...*what we mean by religion is that it is our attempt to make sense of our lives and behave appropriately within the total scheme of things*” (226, italicized in the book); “Religion can be a quest or an answer” (226); and “My claim is that...the good news of religious naturalism is that we can have the values of religion within a naturalistic framework. We can celebrate the wonders of life. We can aspire to nobler living. One does not need a god who is a conscious agent, supermind, or intelligent designer to enjoy ecstasy or sustaining moods or to lead a moral life” (227).

Jerry Stone has accomplished several things in this book. It is at once a superb history of religious naturalism that provides succinct but detailed summaries of the thinking of the principle religious naturalists. Yet at the same time it is a major philosophical contribution to the subject by identifying specific issues that require continuing discussion and by organizing the thinkers around those issues. Thus it is both intellectual history and a significant contribution to the contemporary discussion. It should be widely read and studied, but its price (\$75 retail, \$55 on Amazon) will be prohibitive for many. We can look forward to a less expensive paperback edition (\$27) in July.