

Biologist discusses sacred nature of sustainability

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The hot topics of global warming and environmental sustainability are concerns that fit neatly within the precepts of religious naturalism, according to Ursula Goodenough, Ph.D., professor of biology in Arts & Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis. In addition to being a renowned cell biologist, Goodenough is a religious naturalist and the author of *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, a bestselling book on religious naturalism that was published in 1998.

Religious naturalism neither requires belief in God nor excludes such faith. Rather, the movement is based on what Goodenough describes as "an exploration of the religious potential of nature." Goodenough will speak on this topic at the annual American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) meeting on Feb. 14 in Chicago.

Like all religious traditions, religious naturalism is anchored in a cosmological narrative, a set of stories accounting how the earth and its inhabitants came to be.

While conventional religions are generally based on older cosmological narratives such as those found in the Old and New Testaments, religious naturalism is based on a much more recent narrative.

"During the past 100 years or so, we have been provisioned with a new story that tells us about the universe," Goodenough explains. The story she refers to is one derived from groundbreaking advancements in science that help explain the Big Bang, the origin and nature of

biological life, consciousness and the mind, and humanity's interconnectedness with nature. Goodenough admits, "It's a pretty big story."

"It's not ever going to be something written down on some tablet or a one size fits all kind of thing," she explains. "It's understanding nature."

The core of all religious traditions

Goodenough proposes that cosmological narratives serve as a basis for three kinds of activities that are at the core of all religious traditions, including religious naturalism.

The first activity is interpretation of the narratives. Goodenough likens this process to "what the preacher says on Sunday or how Talmudic scholars revisit ancient texts." In religious naturalism, science is the primary interpretive tool.

"Scientific inquiry is the primary tool for deriving the narrative", she says, "but the interpretive mode, in this schema, has to do with how the religious person interprets this narrative - for instance, theistically, atheistically, and so forth." The second activity is spiritual practice, which Goodenough defines as one's spiritual response to these stories

She describes this reaction as including "awe, wonder, humility, and gratitude... that about which we sing and pray." Religious naturalists exhibit such reverence towards the earth, existence, and to what Goodenough refers to as "the epic of evolution," a scientific worldview of the origins and evolution of the universe, earth, and life.

The third activity, ethics, is the basis for Goodenough's presentation at this year's AAAS meeting. In religious naturalism, a scientific understanding of humanity's impact on the Earth combined with a

religious viewpoint of nature gives rise to "ecomorality," a planetary ethic that prioritizes stewardship of the environment.

The expanding human footprint

If the cosmological narrative of religious naturalism is one based on science, then the story has taken a scary twist, she explains. Scientific evidence suggests that humanity is on a dangerous trajectory. Human activities are very likely the primary driver of global warming; experts predict that accumulation of greenhouse gases will lead to climbing temperatures, rising sea levels, and shifting weather patterns.

Degradation of ecosystems is increasing human susceptibility to natural disasters such as hurricanes, tsunamis, pest-outbreaks, and disease. The expanding human footprint is contributing to a mass extinction of species at a scale comparable to that of the end of the Cretaceous period, when the dinosaurs disappeared. And the list goes on.

Goodenough suggests that taking a religious perspective of the earth (and of the science that elucidates our complex relationship with the earth) might prompt us to take better care of it.

Although Goodenough and her colleagues were viewed as "a bunch of hippies" ten to fifteen years ago for their take on the potential for synergy between religion and science, this attitude is changing. She explains, "In more and more mainstream religions, you're seeing an increased emphasis on the earth and its creatures as sacred." This paradigm shift is due, at least in part, to a growing awareness that the old stories might not be sufficient to frame an ethic that alters the environment's current trajectory. She suggests that the new story offers a basis for understanding what a sustainable trajectory might look like.

Source: Washington University in St. Louis

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