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Naturalism as Religion

Scripture: Romans 1:20–22

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Thanks to the theory of evolution, naturalism is now the dominant religion of modern society. Less than a century and a half ago, Charles Darwin popularized the credo for this secular religion with his book *The Origin of Species*. Although most of Darwin's theories about the mechanisms of evolution were discarded long ago, the doctrine of evolution itself has managed to achieve the status of a fundamental article of faith in the popular modern mind. Naturalism has now replaced Christianity as the main religion of the Western world, and evolution has become naturalism's principal dogma.

Naturalism is the view that every law and every force operating in the universe is natural rather than moral, spiritual, or supernatural. Naturalism is inherently anti-theistic, rejecting the very concept of a personal God. Many assume naturalism therefore has nothing to do with religion. In fact, it is a common misconception that naturalism embodies the very essence of scientific objectivity. Naturalists themselves like to portray their system as a philosophy that stands in opposition to all faith-based world-views, pretending that it is scientifically and intellectually superior precisely because of its supposed non-religious character.

Not so. *Religion* is exactly the right word to describe naturalism. The entire philosophy is built on a faith-based premise. Its basic presupposition—an a priori rejection of everything supernatural—requires a giant leap of faith. And nearly all its supporting theories must be taken by faith as well.

Consider the dogma of evolution, for example. The notion that natural evolutionary processes can account for the origin of all living species has never been and never will be established as *fact*. Nor is it "scientific" in any true sense of the word. Science deals with what can be observed and reproduced by experimentation. The origin of life can be neither observed nor reproduced in any laboratory. By definition, then, true science can give us no knowledge whatsoever about where we came from or how we got here. Belief in evolutionary theory is a matter of sheer faith. And *dogmatic* belief in any naturalistic theory is no more "scientific" than any other kind of religious faith.

Modern naturalism is often promulgated with a missionary zeal that has powerful religious overtones. The popular fish symbol many Christians put on their cars now has a naturalist counterpart: a fish with feet and the word "Darwin" embossed into its side. The Internet has become naturalism's busiest mission field, where evangelists for the cause aggressively try to deliver benighted souls who still cling to their theistic presuppositions. Judging from the tenor of some of the material I have read seeking to win converts to naturalism, naturalists are often dedicated to their faith with a devout passion that rivals or easily exceeds the fanaticism of any radical religious zealot. Naturalism is clearly as much a religion as any theistic world-view.

The point is further proved by examining the beliefs of those naturalists who claim to be *most* unfettered by religious beliefs. Take, for example, the case of Carl Sagan, perhaps the best-known scientific celebrity of the past couple of decades. A renowned astronomer and media figure, Sagan

was overtly antagonistic to biblical theism. But he became the chief televangelist for the religion of naturalism. He preached a world-view that was based entirely on naturalistic assumptions. Underlying all he taught was the firm conviction that everything in the universe has a natural cause and a natural explanation. That belief—a matter of faith, not a truly scientific observation—governed and shaped every one of his theories about the universe.

Sagan examined the vastness and complexity of the universe and concluded—as he was bound to do, given his starting point—that there is nothing greater than the universe itself. So he borrowed divine attributes such as infinitude, eternity, and omnipotence, and he made them properties of the universe itself.

Sagan's religion was actually a kind of naturalistic pantheism, and his motto sums it up perfectly. He deified the universe and everything in it—insisting that the cosmos itself is that which was, and is, and is to come (cf. Revelation 4:8). Having examined enough of the cosmos to see evidence of the Creator's infinite power and majesty, he imputed that omnipotence and glory to creation itself—precisely the error the apostle Paul describes in Romans 1:20-22:

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools.

Exactly like the idolaters Paul was describing, Sagan put creation in the Creator's rightful place.

Carl Sagan looked at the universe and saw its greatness and concluded nothing could possibly be greater. His religious presuppositions forced him to deny that the universe was the result of intelligent design. In fact, as a devoted naturalist, he *had* to deny that it was created at all. Therefore he saw it as eternal and infinite—so it naturally took the place of God in his thinking.

The religious character of the philosophy that shaped Sagan's world-view is evident in much of what he wrote and said. His novel *Contact* (made into a major motion picture in 1997) is loaded with religious metaphors and imagery. It's about the discovery of extraterrestrial life, which occurs in December 1999, at the dawn of a new millennium, when the world is rife with Messianic expectations and apocalyptic fears. In Sagan's imagination, the discovery of intelligent life elsewhere in the universe becomes the "revelation" that affords a basis for the fusing of science and religion into a world-view that perfectly mirrors Sagan's own belief system—with the cosmos as God and scientists as the new priesthood.

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