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June 23, 2011: The Promise of Religious Naturalism

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Title: The Promise of Religious Naturalism

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6/23/2011—The Institute on Religion in an Age of Science seems quite dominated by devotees of what is called Religious Naturalism. Prominent authors are here—Ursula Goodenough and Loyal Rue among others. Three days have been devoted to Michael Cavanaugh’s manuscript “Religious Naturalism: the Next 100 Years”. Tuesday night we watched the beautiful and moving movie, “Journey of the Universe”. And Gerald Robertson gave a presentation yesterday on the Science/Religion dialogue in Religious Naturalism. Until I got here, I would have said that Hallowed Secularism and Religious Naturalism were the same thing, more or less. I certainly felt right at home with Jerome Stone’s book, Religious Naturalism Today. Stone even wrote a blurb for my new book, which applied Hallowed Secularism to Establishment Clause issues. For me, naturalism was natural and was what caused me to leave Judaism. There is the rub, however. For me, naturalism was just a veto on religious truth. Nothing in my religious understanding could actually contradict something science had shown to be true. For example, if mind is what the brain does, then my mind could not survive the death of my brain. So, no after life, at least for my personality. But Our Religions generated the truths by which we could seek to live. Stone’s religious naturalists were consistent with this approach. They were basically philosophers and theologians. But the people here, not surprisingly, start with science. In the movie, Brian Swimme describes the trouble humans are now in as we abuse the planet. He says that “wonder will get us through”. If you believe that, then it is really important to teach the beautiful and awe inspiring universe story. It’s not that I disagree exactly. Our Religions have all taught the insignificance of the human from the power and beauty of nature. Maybe this new insight is even better. But science is ultimately value neutral. Even the story Swimme tells is value neutral in and of itself. My reaction to the movie was, if humans screw this up, nature will just start over.