Mikael Leidenhag’s *Naturalizing God?* is a twofold project. It is primarily a philosophically sophisticated critical analysis of contemporary religious naturalism (hereafter: RN), with special attention given to prominent RN and RN-adjacent metaphysical frameworks and discursive practices. In addition, it is a constructive argument for panpsychism as a more plausible RN ontological framework.

As Leidenhag describes it, RN is situated in the broad space between un- or anti-scientific supernatural religious worldviews, on the one hand, and non- or anti-religious scientistic worldviews, on the other. RN is less a specified set of religious construals of nature than a constructive religious discourse oriented by naturalism. In contrast to anti- or un-scientific supernaturalism, RN is committed to the naturalistic presuppositions of scientific inquiry. And in contrast to anti- or non-religious secular scientific presuppositions, RN proponents argue that a naturalistic orientation to the world can engender rather than foreclose constructive religious thought and experience. Thus, RN seeks to embody a philosophically rigorous, naturalistic approach to interpreting and producing religious knowledge. Arguably, RN’s philosophical, religious, and scientific iconoclasm owes to its attempt to integrate two projects often viewed as antithetical: a religious interpretation of nature and a naturalistic interpretation of religion.

The obvious problem with this conceptual definition of RN is that the meaning of every significant concept it uses is subject to debate: Nature? Religion? Religious? Naturalism? Leidenhag’s book responds to this demand for conceptual analysis and clarification. Fortunately, his primary motivation is not to define RN comprehensively, once and for all. Instead, the purpose seems to be to shore up the plausibility of the RN project by refining its internal philosophical discourse. Towards this end, Leidenhag closely interprets prominent RN and RN-adjacent proposals and surfaces critical questions about how coherently their ontologies and normative beliefs and concepts (or normative vocabularies) hang together. Whether or not one agrees with all of Leidenhag’s conclusions, his rigorous analysis of various combinations of RN metaphysics, ontologies, and religious language is undoubtedly a significant philosophical contribution to the RN discourse.

Leidenhag takes a critical metaphysical approach to his task. Metaphysics, for Leidenhag, ‘is in the business of bringing into light and analyzing the variety of ontological assumptions that we employ, consciously or unconsciously, in philosophy, theology, the natural sciences, and everyday life’ (p. 7). This business is important, given that the plausibility and integrity of our everyday and specialized discourses (such as RN) depends in no small part on how our ontological assumptions cohere (or don’t) with the beliefs and concepts our discourses
employ. What Leidenhag refers to as a ‘metaphysical grounding problem’ arises when there is a conflict between a normative vocabulary and ontological framework, and where there is a grounding problem, there is a need for a revision of or intervention into either the vocabulary or the ontology. In the case of RN, in which naturalism is the core philosophical position, the focus of revision or intervention will be ontological.

In pursuit of identifying RN’s metaphysical grounding problems, Leidenhag leads readers through an exacting series of explications and critical analyses. He closely interprets and evaluates the work of prominent RN (and RN-adjacent) scholars including Willem Drees, Karl Peters, Stuart Kaufman, Arthur Peacocke, Charlie Hardwick, Gordon D. Kauffman, Philip Clayton, Donald Crosby, and Ursula Goodenough, among others. Along the way, he parses the core issues that internally differentiate RN discourse. He identifies, analyzes, and critiques softer and harder versions of naturalism (e.g., pluralist-emergentist, monist-physicalist), various approaches to the religious objects of RN (e.g., the whole of nature, some aspect of nature), different accounts of the relationship between RN and traditional religion (naturalistically informed religion, religiously informed naturalism, independent or ‘global’ religious naturalism), and diverse approaches to the nature of religious language (realist, antirealist, pragmatist). The first chapters provide a helpful introduction to RN’s boundaries, contours, and internal fissures.

Leidenhag turns to his critical work in Chapters 3—8. Chapter 3 critically evaluates monistic and pluralistic naturalisms, while Chapters 4 and 5 analyze and compare varieties of realist, antirealist, and pragmatic RN religious discourse. Chapters 6—8 examine alternative ontological frameworks to see how they might fare concerning the metaphysical grounding problems surfaced in previous chapters. Each raises important questions and presents challenging critiques. The arguments in all of them are basically convincing and have given this reader much to consider. Chapter 8, on panpsychism, will be especially inviting for anyone compelled by the evocative linkages between dual aspect ontologies and bio/pansemiotics. Since there is no space here to trace the analysis of any of these chapters, let alone each of them, I will conclude with a general question and offer a general assessment.

Ferreting out a discourse’s metaphysical grounding problems is a worthwhile project. One question for this reader is what threshold of conflict is necessary to describe it properly as a metaphysical grounding problem? The threshold question is vital for several reasons. Does any tension, asymmetry, or ambiguity between ontology and normative vocabulary constitute a grounding problem? Such a low threshold makes critique easier but may insufficiently respect language’s elusive, elastic, polyvalent qualities, even philosophical language, and sometimes especially panpsychist language. Or must there be an outright contradiction for there to be a grounding problem? This higher threshold would be more hermeneutically generous toward constructive RN scholarship and demand more humility in critique. It seems that for Leidenhag, detecting a grounding problem in an RN proposal is sufficient to defeat the proposal. If that is so, there is a lot riding on the threshold question, which should be clarified. But the need for that question to be more fully addressed is hardly defeating. Mikael Leidenhag’s Naturalizing God? A Critical Evaluation of Religious Naturalism should be required reading for any scholar or student of RN—it is exacting, systematic, and provocative.

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