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Reading *Some New World* through Naturalistic or Religious Eyes

Peter Harrison has gone to great lengths in *Some New World* to uncover the oft-concealed origins of naturalism and its attendant understanding of religion. In this response paper I draw out what I take to be some of the lessons of Harrison's book for those who are committed to some form of the secular naturalism whose history it traces. I also ponder some of the potential readings of and reactions to the book from those who are committed to some form of Christianity, out of which modern naturalism (so Harrison argues) emerged. These reflections are an invitation to its author to elaborate further on what he thinks the implications of the book should be.

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1. Introduction

Peter Harrison has gone to great lengths in *Some New World* to uncover the oft-concealed origins of naturalism and its attendant understanding of religion. At various moments throughout the book and especially in its final chapter he gestures toward some of that history's implications, but does not develop them in detail. In this response paper I draw out what I take to be some of the lessons of Harrison's book for one group of readers: those who are committed to some form of the secular naturalism whose history it traces. I also ponder some of the potential reactions to the book from another key group of readers: those who are committed to some form of Christianity, out of which modern naturalism (so *Some New World* argues) emerged. My reflections on how different readers might interpret and respond to *Some New World* are an invitation to its author to elaborate further on what he thinks the implications of his book should be[1]. My hope is that he might

1 I can readily imagine Harrison saying that readers are entitled to respond to his book however they wish to. Some responses, however, are objectively better than others, and no one is better placed than Harrison to catch the misunderstandings, deceptions, and evasions that could characterise potential readings of his book.

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correct them, unpack them further, offer thought-provoking alternatives, or otherwise, and thereby help his readers to grasp the full extent, and the intellectual and existential impact, of his arguments.

2. Harrison's Approach

I first came across Harrison's work in 2004, through a recommendation to read his 1998 book *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* (Harrison 1998). Thanks to the predominantly science-focused education I had up to that point in time received, I found it heavy going. It wasn't until I revisited the book some years later, in a course on the history of biblical interpretation at Duke University, that I finally began to appreciate what Harrison was up to, both there and in his other works. In mid-2011 a small group of us at Duke read the text of Harrison's Gifford Lectures, which he had delivered earlier that year at the University of Edinburgh and which he published some years later as *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Harrison 2015). Having developed an interest in historical work during my studies at Duke, and having slowly started to appreciate the significance of his work in that domain, I contacted Harrison that same year – right as he was transitioning from holding the Andreas Idreos Chair in Science and Religion at the University of Oxford to directing the Centre for the History of European Discourses (later the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities) at the University of Queensland – to see whether he might take me on as a doctoral student. Since completing a doctorate under his supervision in 2016, I have remained an avid reader of his work and have done my best to keep up with his latest thinking. Almost every time I have read one of his journal articles, book chapters, popular pieces, or books I have come away convinced that I can see more deeply into the heart of things than I had previously been able to.

Over the years of reading Harrison's work, several of its features gradually have become clearer to me. Together those consistent features help to give it (in my view at least) its explanatory breadth and power, while also preserving the surprising (although not, as my early experience suggests, total) degree of accessibility it possesses. First, Harrison's work is cumulative, in that he tends to build on his earlier interpretations of specific historical eras and intellectual changes in later works. Perhaps the clearest example of this is his characterisation (in his first book *'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment*) of the early modern emergence of the ideas of 'religion' and of multiple 'religions,' and of the former's more abstract,

depersonalised, and propositional form in the early modern period, both of which have featured in several subsequent studies (Harrison 1990). His desire to unearth the biblical and theological contexts out of which modern science grew – first in *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science*, and then in *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science* – together represented an expansion in the scope of his research, putting natural philosophy, natural history, and other historical precursors to modern science at the forefront of his analyses, and introducing arguments about the historical relations between religion/theology and the study of nature that he has likewise built upon in later works (Harrison 2007). In *The Territories of Science and Religion* Harrison further fleshed out his views about the emergence of modern understandings of the concept 'religion,' now joining it to a comparable narrative about the rise of contemporary understandings of 'science,' this time to combat erroneous modern claims about the supposedly perennial nature of religion-science conflict. Now in *Some New World*, Harrison has again drawn on several of the arguments he had developed in these works and elsewhere to provide historical insights into one of the characteristic dimensions of secularisation today – naturalism – understood (by way of contrast with religion) as disbelief in, or denial of, the supernatural (Harrison 2024)[2]. By revisiting, expanding, and synthesising so many of his prior arguments in these ways, Harrison gives his readers helpful maps to large domains of intellectual history, ones that are useful for locating other thinkers and historical trends. His frequent return to, and development of, past arguments and claims also helps to make his more recent writings – including *Some New World* – feel familiar to readers of his earlier work, even as he extends his earlier arguments and applies them within new settings and contexts with each new book.

The second feature of Harrison's work of which I have become increasingly aware is its growing focus on understanding the historical emergence of specific features of the present day, one that makes it an invaluable guide to aspects of the world we currently inhabit. Long an expert on the early modern period, Harrison has broadened his horizon to encompass developments in the nineteenth century and, increasingly, the twentieth and twenty-first. His "Plato to NATO" approach (as he once described it to me) provides crucial insights into the present by tracing long-term continuities and changes in how we human beings think about our world, rather than by connecting them only to our more immediate past. The deep history of the

2 *Some New World* also draws on work he did for Harrison 2019 and Harrison and Roberts 2019.

present that this gives us, third, frequently reveals stark differences between how people today think and how our predecessors thought. Informed as Harrison's interpretations of past thinkers and eras invariably are by recent historical scholarship, those interpretations make it much harder to construe past figures as possessing the same preconceptions and preoccupations as we do, or to think our concerns are identical to theirs. At the same time as he establishes their distance from our own ways of thinking, however, Harrison tells compelling stories that connect those figures to the present in plausible ways. In doing so he confirms the past's strangeness, while reminding us that what at first blush might appear an odd way to think may not be as far removed from our own ways of thinking as we first imagined. This admixture of continuity and change reminds us that past ways of looking at and acting within the world might be embraced again – if not by us, then maybe by our future descendants.

Two further features of Harrison's scholarship that are on display throughout his works, and which are especially important for *Some New World*, are also worth noting. These two features make it possible for readers holding diverse personal commitments – whether secular-naturalist, Christian, or otherwise – to in principle be receptive to and persuadable by its arguments. First, Harrison assumes in *Some New World* that secular naturalism and its associated view of religion came about through a sequence of historically contingent intellectual developments, ones that together represent a marked shift from one way of thinking to another. Even though those intellectual developments are themselves often profoundly theological in character, the current book – much like his others – does not require the reader to share the commitments of the historical actors responsible for those developments. The contemporary reader's personal commitments may make them more or less sympathetic to the contents of specific historical actors' views, but those commitments should not impact their ability to be persuaded by the arguments Harrison himself makes. The secular reader thus should in principle have no objection to Harrison's method and be open to where he takes them through it, even if they might disagree with the claims made by the historical actors out of which he constructs his historical narrative.

Second, Harrison tells a story of historical emergence by way of a non-teleological understanding of history. Each of the historical developments he includes in his narrative is presented as one or more historical actors responding to immediate intellectual pressures and conditions. Each, that is to say, is made understandable in terms of its local context, rather than as intrinsically directed toward an ultimate destination (naturalism) and as intentionally seeking to bring about that destination and its associated

implications. Viewed from the present looking backwards in time, the various developments Harrison assembles together *appear* to be teleologically ordered to naturalism such that it seems as though naturalism was the goal of those changes all along. Viewed from the past looking forward to the present, however – viewed, that is, in the direction in which the history he tells was actually lived and unfolded – Harrison's narrative treats modern naturalism as the product of a cumulative series of gradual intellectual changes over many centuries, each of which makes sense locally, and none of which have the final endpoint he is tracing through them explicitly in mind. Put slightly differently, Harrison assumes that it is possible to write the history of the emergence of something without regarding that thing as necessarily preordained or assumed within the historical developments that lead to that thing, or as the inevitable end-point toward which history is moving. By offering what is for all intents and purposes a religiously or metaphysically neutral account of historical development based on locally explicable changes rather than on an intrinsic teleology, the narrative in *Some New World* should in principle be one that any reader can embrace. That is so regardless of whether readers agree in practice with the philosophical and theological contents of the eventual destination reached, with every detail of Harrison's explication of the historical actors' arguments, or with the particular set of drivers responsible for the historical changes that he identifies.

3. Consequences and Implications of *Some New World*

Although they may not welcome them with open arms, the lessons of *Some New World* for secular naturalists appear to be relatively straightforward. First, the history presented in *Some New World* suggests that the intellectually honest naturalist can no longer narrate the past in the triumphalist ways that the historical actors Harrison analyses in the book do. If naturalism's emergence is as clearly tied to bankrupt narratives of societal progress as he says they are, then responsible naturalists surely must turn their backs on such narratives. Second, given naturalism's actual historical origins, contemporary naturalists must recognise and accept that their naturalism is largely the product of intra-Christian arguments and disagreements. Even if the naturalist thinks that naturalism is right and true, their recognition that naturalism is indebted historically to Christian theological sources and debates would seem to require them to regard its emergence as a fortuitous by-product of prior religious developments, developments that –

purely by happenstance – eventually hit upon the correct way of looking at the world, of understanding its contents, and of constructing explanations within it. Naturalism may indeed have emerged from Christianity, the naturalist might concede, but given the past pervasiveness of Christianity in world history, there is simply no other way (so they might argue) for it to have come into being except out of or through Christian sources and commitments. Perhaps we eventually would have hit upon naturalism through a different historical pathway had our past been different from what it was, and had Christianity been less prominent than it in fact was; it is impossible, the naturalist might say, to know. Third, Harrison's account of naturalism's intellectual history suggests that naturalists need to put more energy into grounding their views in non-theological commitments, rather than benignly or intentionally ignoring the covert theological ideas that still undergird naturalism today.

As a religiously neutral historical story featuring theological convictions held by widely- and less well-known thinkers from the Christian tradition, Christians should in principle have no objections to Harrison's narrative, even if in practice they don't agree with some or all of its details. Some Christian readers might however find themselves wanting to read *Some New World* against the grain that its author has set for it. In the closing pages of the book Harrison notes his reservations about declension narratives, such as those promulgated by Brad Gregory and John Milbank. Those narratives are problematic, Harrison claims, for among other things they "tend to discount positive features of the present and overemphasise the glories of the past" (Harrison 2024, 374). Although Harrison may not like such stories of decline, I wonder whether Christian readers might nevertheless construe *Some New World* as a narrative of a decline of sorts, not least because of a comment he makes at the outset of the book: "Christianity came to assume a form that made its denial possible" (3). This comment suggests that among the various forms that Christianity could take, some make its denial more straightforward, while others make it more difficult[3]. Assum-

3 How one would know whether one has on one's hands a form of Christianity that is more difficult to deny, or more straightforward, seems far from straightforward to determine. Like other religious traditions and their accompanying theologies, Christianity is extremely diverse, and versions of Christianity and of Christian theology that some regard as highly problematic are ones to which others have little trouble devoting their lives. It may be that the hindsight that comes from subsequent contingent historical developments arising from different forms can shed the only meaningful light on which form – more assailable or less so – one is dealing with at any given moment. The fact that we now live in a world in which belief in God represents one option among

ing that they would judge the latter to be superior to the former, Christians might well read the book's depiction of the emergence of a less promising theological formation from a more promising one as a decline, even if they don't go so far as to view that emergence as a wholesale decline from the many-splendored wonders of one era to a later and less resplendent one. By following its author's lead and seeing *Some New World* as tracking intellectual movement away from a more robust, less deniable form of Christianity toward a weaker, more easily repudiated one, that is, Christian readers might be forgiven for thinking that the book possesses *something* akin to the form that Harrison rejects.

If movement from a theologically more robust (because less easily repudiated) version of Christianity to a less robust form does not constitute a decline as Harrison defines the latter, Christian readers might still view him as arguing that naturalism arose when a longer-standing and arguably more traditional form of Christian thinking gave way to a newer, deviant, view, with later thinkers then further developing and building repeatedly on those initial deviations. Understood thus, I wonder whether Christian readers would be wrong to view Harrison's account of the rise of secular naturalism as the cumulative consequence of a series of theological mistakes. Many of the Christian thinkers in *Some New World* could be seen as contributing to an instance of theological "breakdown" such as theologian Kathryn Tanner writes about in her book *God and Creation in Christian Theology* (Tanner 1988)[4]. Having employed a scrupulously neutral historical method that tracks intellectual change over time without assigning any of those changes positive or negative valence, Harrison qua historian might not be willing to say whether the changes he has tracked should be regarded as mistaken movements away from correct or superior ways of looking at things. Yet a couple of statements in the book's final chapter – that the natural sciences "might be thought of as a Christian heresy," and that naturalism might be

many – and one that is "frequently not the easiest to embrace" (Taylor 2007, 3) – is a salient reminder that *all* versions of Christianity are today deniable.

4 In that book, Tanner lays out the logic of Christian claims about God's relationship to the created order by identifying the rules that Christian theologians throughout the centuries reportedly have upheld (even if only implicitly) when speaking about the God-creation relation. Taking those who maintain these rules as representative of a longstanding historical tradition of consistent Christian speech about that relationship, Tanner argues that in the modern era a growing number of theologians started to make ill-formed statements that broke the traditional logic; hence her depiction of a modern "breakdown" in theological discourse (Tanner 1988, 120).

construed as a "fratricidal offspring" of "Western religion" (Harrison 2024, 367) – suggest that such a reading may nevertheless be a plausible one[5].

Finally, I wonder whether Christians might reasonably conclude from Harrison's history and its attendant implications for science that he identifies that it might be worthwhile to develop – or perhaps to rediscover – a non-naturalistic form of science akin to that of many early modern natural philosophers. Harrison readily acknowledges that naturalistic science represents an admirable pursuit to the extent that it yields "useful results" (379). Yet as his history shows, naturalism is by no means intrinsic to, or necessary to, science (343). He also asserts that it is "at least possible" that scientific theories based on a naturalistic metaphysics "represent an abstraction or even a … distortion" of reality, rather than "directly mirroring" it (371). In response to such claims, Christians might say that naturalistic science's utility for helping us navigate certain aspects of our world, though helpful, is insufficient, and that Christians should have higher expectations for knowledge of the natural world (371). Those expectations might include scientific insights and theories mirroring or reflecting (as closely as possible) reality as it actually is – a modern version of Kepler's notion of nature-knowledge as "thinking God's thoughts after him," perhaps – and theological work as taking up and deploying scientific insights confident in the knowledge that those insights reveal something true about the world God creates. Such a non-naturalistic science might of course face similar difficulties to naturalistic science in overcoming pessimistic meta-

5 As I understand them, both *Some New World* and a more recent popular essay (Harrison 2025) call into question the wisdom of the natural/supernatural distinction itself, and suggest that the distinction is itself a major part of the problem. In both the book and the essay, however, Harrison also acknowledges that figures such as Aquinas did not understand that distinction as others subsequently did. Elsewhere in this journal issue, Eugenia Torrance argues that members of the Greek Christian theological tradition have for centuries made frequent and productive use of the distinction, and in my own work I have explored its constructive theological use by early modern figures beyond those whom Harrison includes in his book. If Christian theologians of diverse stripes have for centuries been able to make productive use of the distinction, the extent to which the distinction itself is to blame would seem to be limited. If early users of the distinction managed to deploy it in theologically illuminating and productive ways, and if later users have done similarly, then the problem might instead be what Tanner refers to as theology's "socialization" process (Tanner 1988, 169). When operating properly, that process allows theology's unwritten rules for coherence to be inculcated across generations. From this vantage point, the emergence of the later, problematic, tradition of understanding of natural and supernatural that Harrison has traced can be understood in terms of a breakdown in understanding of how the distinction should be deployed – a forgetfulness of its proper use – and the later reiteration of that problematic understanding by others, rather than it being a consequence of the distinction itself.

induction objections. But Christians might reply that – at the very least – a non-naturalistic science would not needlessly hamstring itself by pre-emptively ruling out (as naturalistic science does) real features or aspects of the world to which the lived experience of much of the human race – "our religiously inclined forebears, the myriad adherents of religious traditions, and the vast bulk of past philosophers", as Harrison puts it – seems collectively to testify (375)[6].

What such a non-naturalistic science might look like is anyone's guess. But the fact that the pursuit of such a science might constitute a plausible response to Harrison's research indicates how radical his book may turn out to be. My hope is that by provoking Harrison's response to the speculative implications, readings, and reactions laid out above, we readers might be helped to appreciate just *how* radical *Some New World* actually is.

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6 I have examined how a range of early modern Christian thinkers accommodated their desire to explain as much as possible through natural causes to a providential understanding of the world – one in which the regular order of things can be overturned, and the created order can act as a communicative medium – by describing their overall way of looking at the world as an instance of "providential naturalism" (Jordan 2022). In such a context, a non-naturalistic science would try to account for as much as possible through theories that rely on natural causes to explain what goes on in the world, without assuming (as secular naturalism does) that absolutely everything is reducible to such causes.

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