

## The Religious Naturalism of Rabindranath Tagore

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### *Abstract*

*The aim of this paper is to argue that Tagorean religious naturalism is the most appropriately formulated doctrine of spiritual naturalism. There are two prongs of attack against religious naturalism. Firstly, religious naturalists adhere to scientism — the view that scientific principles are the authoritative and regulative principles of all disciplines. Secondly, reductive religious naturalism consequently leads to anthropocentrism. The paper will argue that Tagorean religious naturalism does not commit to scientism and anthropocentrism. In addition, it harmonizes spirituality, nature, and humanism. The divinity can be manifested in the natural world and in human creativity. The scientific way of explaining reality is just one way of approaching reality. Terms such as God, self, morality and values have an epistemic significance in the naturalistic explanation of reality.*

*Keywords: religious naturalism; serendipitous creativity; poetic naturalism; scientism; anthropocentrism*

### *Introduction*

Religious naturalism advocates a scientific understanding of nature with a spiritual reverence for the natural world. Nature itself suffices as a source of inspiration, wonder, and ethical guidance. Religious naturalism is rooted in the principles of science. The modern scientific explanation on the origin and function of the universe, evolution, cosmology, and ecology are the plausible and best approaches for an explanation of the universe. Even though religious naturalism rejects supernaturalism and theism, it acknowledges the importance of meditation and rituals which deepen one's connection with the natural world.

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In this paper, we will focus on a naturalistic reading of Tagore's work. The first section of the paper deals with the definition of religious naturalism and with the positive and negative claims of religious naturalism. The second and third sections examine the argument of reductive and non-reductive religious naturalism and show how reductive religious naturalism is vulnerable in regard to scientism and anthropocentrism. Non-reductive religious naturalism overcomes the above two prongs of attack against religious naturalism. The fourth section will emphasize the religious naturalism of Tagore. The poetic naturalism of Tagore will be discussed in the fifth section of the paper.

### 1. *What is Religious Naturalism?*

Religious naturalism<sup>1</sup> is a set of beliefs and attitudes that focuses on the natural world as a primary source of religious meaning, values, and morality. There is no ontologically distinct and superior realm — a transcendental realm, in which concepts such as God, soul, and heaven can be localized. According to Stone (2017, 5) »religious naturalism is the attempt to lead a religious or spiritual life without the traditional beliefs in God, the afterlife, and the soul«. It is an approach to understanding the wonder of science and value of religion in the contemporary world. It is about the interrelatedness and constative relationality of human beings with nature.<sup>2</sup> It addresses questions on how human beings are part of natural reality and connected with other natural processes.

Religious naturalism makes two primary claims as follows: 1) The positive claim that the beauty, wonder, and science of nature are the essential foundation for our pursuit of knowledge and personal fulfillment. Values, beliefs, attitudes, and meaning — everything can be naturalized. *Whatever is natural is real whatever is real is natural.*<sup>3</sup> 2) The negative claim that there is no transcendental realm. There is nothing beyond nature. Religious naturalism rejects a supernatural God.

Religious naturalism attempts to make science accessible in a poetic way to everyone. One can attempt to understand the beauty of the cosmos and the beauty of life by rejecting the nihilistic and pessimistic worldview. Religious naturalism, even though it rejects supernatural entities, still acknowledges ecological aesthetics. Religious naturalism is grounded in traditional religious traditions such

1 Religious naturalism is the antithesis to religious supernaturalism — the view that some supernatural entities such as God, the soul, heaven, etc. exist which are beyond nature. The Kantian notion of the transcendental realm is an example of supernaturalism.

2 According to Tagore, we are mesmerized by the beauties of nature. We, as human beings, celebrate our connection with nature. We love the sunset and sunrise. We love to climb a mountain because that is how we realize our spirituality. Here, spirituality for naturalists refers to the way nature affects one internally or spiritually. The feelings of reverence, assent, joy, and gratitude are expressions of spirituality.

3 See Rue (2011, 97) for an informative and elaborated discussion.

as Buddhism,<sup>4</sup> Jainism,<sup>5</sup> and Confucianism, etc. All of these religious traditions have rejected supernaturalism which is also one of the fundamental principles of religious naturalism. These religious traditions have advocated the fundamental principle that we human beings, as members of the entire cosmos, are embedded in a profound interdependence with nature. We are not distinct from nature but rather an integral part of nature. Human beings and objects of nature are not atomistic but rather relational because of their interconnectedness. Each of us has a different individuality and at the same time we are all connected to family, society, politics, nature, and the cosmos itself. Evolution is one of the most important and exciting sources of both ecopoetics<sup>6</sup> and ecomorality.<sup>7</sup> Traditional religions are an integral part of human culture, and culture is a part of nature.

- 4 Buddhism advocates anti-essentialism and, at the same time, acknowledges reverence towards nature. Unless we have reverence towards nature, we cannot generate compassion within our hearts towards others. Hatred, dominance, and compassion cannot go together. Loving nature and at the same time detaching oneself from it through *Sunyatā* is one of the important aspects of Buddhism. Śāntideva (1979) in *Bodhisattvācāryāvātāra* (“A Guide to the Bodhisattava’s Way of Life”) proclaimed that our relationship with nature should not be grounded in the principles of dominance, rather it should be based on reciprocal altruism. Lin (2019) has defended the view that Buddhism is compatible with naturalism.
- 5 Mitra (2018) acknowledges the fact that everything is interconnected with nature — *Asparopagraha Jīvanam*. Jainism is a propagator of ecological balance. Rajan (2025) argued that Jainism and anthropocentrism are incompatible. I partially agree with him on this point because, although he rejected the traditional version of anthropocentrism, he has defended a moderate version of anthropocentrism and absolutism. Environmental values are not grounded in anthropocentric morality but rather are based on biocentric morality. Jainism, as a defender of biocentrism, propagates an extreme form of non-violence and compassion towards all living organisms. All living beings and things are part of one ecological organism, and we are all interconnected with a unifying organism. Each and every living being — both human and non-human — has intrinsic value, hence is worthy of moral consideration for its existence despite its instrumental value to human beings. The principles of Jain ethics are deeply rooted in biocentrism. It propagates its doctrine of non-violence and compassion by advocating vegetarianism, non-killing, and non-injury through thought, speech and action, conservation of nature, animal rights and sustainability.
- 6 Ecopoetics is the theory that addresses the relationship between human beings and nature through poetic expression. It is a way of understanding the metaphors of interrelatedness and constitutive relationality through poetry. It addresses the question of how poetry (through emotive and rational persuasion) deals with the issues of environment, ecology, and sustainable development. The objective of ecopoetics is to investigate the way in which poetry reflects, critiques, and influences ecological awareness, preservation, and human responsibility towards nature and ecology. Tagore (1972, 7) has placed the emphasis on sustainability and the human-nature relationship.
- 7 *Ecopoetics* and *eco-morality* are two technical terms in religious naturalism. Ursula Goodenough (2023, 198) coined the term *ecomorality* in her work. Economic prosperity sometimes conflicts with ecological responsibility. It seems that there is a dichotomy between economic values and ecological values at the superficial level of reality; however, if we look at reality at ground level, we will find that both these values are interrelated and interdependent. For the sake of sustainability, we must eliminate the duality between material and non-material and between individuality and collectivity. We need to establish a union between them because issues such as climate change, racial discrimination and religious conflicts are going to affect everyone. We all agree on planetary issues even though we may belong to other religions and other ethnicities. We need global ethics and moral principles of ecology for our sustainability, because we are living in a “global village”. We are part of a vast, evolving universe. All our actions will affect others either directly or indirectly.

Human culture is not separate from nature. Therefore, when speaking of natural reality, we must include human culture.

There are two broader categories of religious naturalism. These are reductive religious naturalism and non–reductive religious naturalism.

## 2. *Reductive Religious Naturalism*

Reductive religious naturalism proclaims that nothing is sacred. Terms such as agency, freedom, meaning, values, and purpose behind the universe are mere illusions. We live in a meaningless and mechanistic universe. The scientific description of reality is the sole explanation for natural reality. Drees (1996) and Hardwick (1996; 2003) are the proponents of restrictive or reductive religious naturalism. Drees (1996, 14) holds that »the natural world is a unity in the sense that all entities are made up of the same constituents. Physics offers us the best available description of these constituents and thus our natural world at its finest level of analysis.« Reductive religious naturalism does not use theistic expressions like God, soul, and spirituality in order to define reality. Scientific expressions are sufficient to define reality.

Hardwick (1996, 43) stated that »all truth is determined by physical truth«. Hardwick (2003, 111) also argued that »theology is significantly constrained by physicalism«. Both Drees (1996) and Hardwick (1996; 2003) argued for the ontological level of natural reductionism; however, they place an emphasis on explanatory autonomy,<sup>8</sup> and claim that one can define reality without using the vocabulary of fundamental physics. This view of defining phenomenal reality (even though they advocate for ontological reducibility) is called the semantic or explanatory irreducibility thesis.

There are two prongs of attack against reductive religious naturalism, namely scientism<sup>9</sup> and anthropocentrism. If we critically evaluate the position of reductive religious naturalism, we can easily find that the reductive religious naturalists are committing to scientism by claiming that scientific explanations are the only possible descriptions of reality. There are two kinds of scientism, namely strong scientism and weak scientism. Strong scientism claims that a knowledge claim will be considered as knowledge if and only if its validity is testable through the pre–established paradigm of science. Weak scientism does not reject non–scientific explanations of reality. It acknowledges the disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. However, it claims that science is the authoritative discipline over other academic disciplines.

Strong scientism is the view that only hard sciences, such as physics, chemistry, biology, etc., provide a genuine knowledge of reality. Only science has intellectual authority over knowledge, and the scientific paradigm of truth and rationality

8 See Drees (1996,16) and Hardwick (1996, 36) for an informative discussion on explanatory autonomy.

9 See Sorell (2013) and Williams & Robinson (2015) for a detailed discussion on scientism.

are the sole methods of inquiry. Reductive religious naturalism is grounded in the claim of strong scientism.<sup>10</sup> Reductive religious naturalists are so impressed with scientific achievements and discoveries that they will believe in anything labeled as scientific and resist any criticism.

The reductive religious naturalist tends to think that science is about certainty and absolute truth. However, in reality, science is not about certainty at all. Scientists are usually cognizant of the fact that their theories or results can always be disproved at a later time with more evidence. They not only provide reasons for supporting their scientific theory but also give sufficient reason for which their proposed theory can be falsified. In order to avoid confirmation bias, one has to adopt Popper's "falsification strategy". There is no final truth in science. Science is a dynamic process and self-rectified through a rigorous peer review process and scrutiny. Science is an ongoing process of discovery rather than a set of cold, hard facts. People who adhere to scientism are very quick to extrapolate from scientific results grand conclusions about big issues. The problem with the reductive religious naturalist's approach is that science is always progressive, and old results are constantly being rejected. There is no foundational basic claim that is grounded in infallible certainty. In fact, there is no infallible certainty at all in science. We should not always blindly accept science as fact and as the only foundational source of knowledge. We cannot construct or discover ontological foundationalism based on the principles of science because of its nature of fallibility and constant longing for novelty. It is less probable that epistemic foundationalism will be built through science, which could be a necessary component in establishing faith. Faith has a pragmatic utility value that cannot be refuted by anyone, even if one accepts for a while the plausibility of reductive religious naturalism for the sake of argument. Faith in nature or science (as religious naturalists have emphasized) rather than in supernatural entities cannot be possible without adhering to some form of epistemic foundationalism.

Reductive religious naturalism is grounded in the principles of anthropocentric<sup>11</sup> morality. Anthropocentrism is the view that human beings are the centre of the universe. Whatever exists in the universe is there for the needs of human beings. The earth, living, and non-living beings, have utility value only and have

10 One of the interesting facts about strong scientism is that it is deeply rooted in the idea of excessive greediness for instant wealth generation and hence is only concerned with the practical aspect (application of science), completely neglecting the theoretical aspect. Strong scientism supports the view that if a scientific theory is unable to generate wealth, then the specific branch of science has to be abandoned or marginalized. For this reason, the theoretical aspect of science has been neglected in academia. The theoretical aspect of science has been threatened in the academic space (i.e., theoretical physics, chemistry, biology, etc.), which has become the biggest concern for the future progress of science. In the long run, those who advocate for strong scientism are going to be affected by their own principle. We are heading towards a technocratic universe where human relations will be determined by the boundary set by technological narcissism, for in this age of the algorithm, the space for critical thinking, ethical reasoning and empathy is going to be marginalized.

11 See ten Have & Patrão Neves (2021) and Goralnik & Nelson (2012) for a detailed discussion on the origin and development of anthropocentrism.

no intrinsic value. Non-human animals, ecosystems, and other natural entities are considered morally relevant only in so far as they serve human interests. Only human beings have intrinsic value. Anthropocentric morality prioritizes economic growth and technological advancement over ecological preservation and biodiversity. Human-centered morality is responsible for current problems such as environmental degradation, climate change, and the extinction of the species. The natural world has been exploited by the human species. The exploitation of the natural world and speciesism have been justified through the paradigm of man-centered morality.

### 3. *Non-Reductive Religious Naturalism*

Non-reductive religious naturalism is based on the emergence theory. The religionists such as Goodenough & Deacon (2006, 854), Peters (2002), Kauffman (2008, 31–43), Crosby (2015, 30) and Rue (2011, 52) are the proponents of non-reductive religious naturalism. Kauffman and Clayton (2006, 503) construed the theory that »reality is divided into a number of distinct levels of order«. Crosby (2015, 30) explains that »new properties of matter come into being through complex organization«. Emergent properties are not reducible to physical properties. The emergentist argues that higher-level properties such as meaning, normativity, values, consciousness, freewill, etc., are irreducible properties, that is, they cannot be reduced to the level of fundamental physics. There is an explanatory gap in regard to »how greater or more complex things can come out of simpler and lesser things«. <sup>12</sup>

Most religious naturalists, especially reductive religious naturalists, are fundamentalists. For them, a scientific conception of reality is the sole description of reality. However, non-reductive religious naturalists claim that there are many ways of speaking about the world. The scientific description of the natural world is not the only description of natural reality. As long as those descriptions that are different are rendered on the basis of the causal efficacy of the functioning of the world, they are true and accurate descriptions of reality. The different perspective in explaining the natural world (as long as it does not appeal to supernaturalism) has to be accepted as a true description of reality. For instance, the objects of the external world are real even though we accept the “quantum field wave function theory” as a reliable scientific theory for explaining the underlying deeper reality.

The objects of the external world are still real to us even though there are different ways of speaking of the underlying deeper reality. The aesthetics of paintings, flowers, mountains, and other objects of the natural world, and moral principles, etc., are also ways of defining the universe. Although they are not fixed by phenomena and are independent of our observation, they are still va-

12 See Kaufman (2004, 92) for a more detailed discussion.

lid. These descriptions might not be universal and may be subjective, however, they are not arbitrary. These descriptions have an epistemic role in describing how the world works. Our sense of aesthetics, moral judgment, and qualitative properties of experience fall under the domain of collective phenomenality. The acknowledgement of phenomenal subjectivity — which is an integral part of collective phenomenality — does not threaten the naturalistic explanation of reality. Phenomenal subjectivity is a part of the natural world.

Non-reductive religious naturalism,<sup>13</sup> although it does not commit to strong scientism, is not free from the allegation of weak scientism. Weak scientism argues that before investigating any aspect of reality, a scientific attitude must be evident in our perspective. The non-scientific disciplines such as the arts, humanities, and social sciences should be guided by the norms of the hard sciences. The allegation that non-reductive religious naturalism is prone to weak scientism is not applicable to all non-reductive religious naturalists. We have to acknowledge the fact that there is an exception when we deal with Tagorean religious naturalism. The Tagorean version of non-reductive religious naturalism is free from scientism and anthropocentrism. Tagore clearly demarcated the line between hard science and other disciplines, unlike scientism. He has acknowledged their independent explanatory role. For instance, the role of poetry cannot be replaced by hard sciences nor *vice versa*.<sup>14</sup> Tagore was a defender of the use of creativity in literature and other non-scientific disciplines because he always believed that there has to be a separate academic space for non-scientific disciplines.<sup>15</sup> Unlike scientism, Tagore construed that the paradigm for experiencing nature — the human relationship with nature and fellow human beings, and other human enterprises — should not be assessed and rooted in the principles of science only. Tagore has criticized the exploitative behaviour of science in regard to nature. He has criticized the reductionist approach taken by science in his writings.<sup>16</sup>

13 See Bishop & Perszyk (2025), Stenmark (2013), and Steinhart (2025) are the contemporary non-reductive religious naturalists. Bishop & Perszyk (2025) argued against the mechanistic purposeless universe.

14 The main foundation of the two prongs of attack (such as scientism and anthropocentrism) on reductive religious naturalism is grounded in non-reductionism. Tagore as a soldier of non-reductionism, acknowledges the fact that neither can the role of artistic expression (i.e., literature) be replaced by empirical reasoning (i.e., hard science) nor *vice versa*. The sense of aesthetics, the role of human emotion in the thinking process, creativity and anything that falls under the domain of subjectivity cannot be reduced to hard sciences which always seek to attain objectivity. The dichotomy between subjective certainty (the subject's certainty about human experience) and objective truth (objective assessment through concept formation and empirical reasoning) cannot be resolved unless we acknowledge their independent epistemic role. See Sahu (2024) for a more detailed assessment of the debate on the resolution of the subjective-objective dichotomy issues.

15 Tagore (1914), in his essay *Amar Jagat*, has demonstrated the conflict between literature and science. In this essay, Tagore has dramatized the poetry-science conflict and shown the adverse effect of scientism.

16 Tagore (1922), in *Raktakarabi* and *The Waterfall*, has criticized reductionism. See Bhattacharya (2006) and Chattopadhyay (2000) for a detailed formulation of Tagore's non-scientism.

The anthropocentric attitude towards nature has its repercussions.<sup>17</sup> Tagore (1919), in *The Message of the Forest*, has made the distinction between the Eastern and Western perspectives towards nature. The Western perspective towards nature was backed by anthropocentrism, grounded in the utility principle that justifies the exploitation of nature as it does not have intrinsic value, whereas the Eastern perspective is grounded in cosmocentrism, rooted in the principles of integralism which advocates the preservation of nature and treats nature as a sacred entity. Tagore has depicted nature as a divine teacher and a source of moral guidance. Nature is a divine unifying force. Tagore identifies himself with nature<sup>18</sup> and sees himself as being an integral part of it. For him it is a process of spiritual awakening.<sup>19</sup>

Tagore acknowledged the role of science in human evolution despite his strong critique of scientism. Tagore's love and concern for scientific progressivism can be found in his notable work *Biswaparichaya* in which he perceives science beyond its utilitarian aspects. Tagore (1958, 4) in *Biswaparichaya* ("Our Universe") writes that »I am no devotee of science, but since childhood I have always been curious about it, deriving endless pleasure from it«. Tagore's advocacy for scientific progressivism does not lead towards scientism because of his adherence to non-reductionism and acknowledgement in his writings of the epistemic role of different disciplines. He clearly marked the distinction between faith in science — which may potentially lead to pseudo-science and scientism — and enthusiasm for scientific knowledge which leads to scientific progressivism and provides immense happiness. However, he was against reductionism. He has acknowledged the role of the humanities in the making of a good person and preservation of human values, the role of critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and empathy. There is space for literature, sociology, philosophy, and religion in the natural evolutionary process which cannot be replaced by science. At the same time, he was against all kinds of practices and the discipline which promotes dogmatism and pseudo-sciences. During the 1934 Bihar earthquake, Mahatma Gandhi declared that the Bihar people have been practising untouchability, and that this is the cause of the Bihar earthquake: God has punished them for their sin. Tagore opposed Gandhi in regard to this particular remark and replied that it will promote dogmatism and pseudo-science. Tagore's concern might be that if we accept Gandhi's view, there will be no space left for science to study the earthquake scientifically, and there will emerge a conflict between science and religion on this issue. Tagore has attacked the practice of untouchability and

17 Tagore (2015), in his *The Religion of Man*, criticized the mechanistic civilization that alienates human beings from nature.

18 Tagore (1986, 8:94), in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, defends cosmocentric morality. He identifies himself with nature and claims that trees are the reflection of his own self.

19 Tagore (2015, 96), in *The Vision* of his *The Religion of Man*, writes that nature is a divine spirit that repeatedly empowers him to experience spiritual awakening through his creative force in the process of unification of the self with nature. He acknowledged the fact that unification with nature gives him immense pleasure and bliss.

casteism, not because of any religious reason but for the sake of the principles of humanity. Tagore, in *Chandralika* and *Samaskara*, stated that casteism and untouchability are inhuman and a degradation of Being. They go against the principles of universal brotherhood and unconditional love, according to Tagore.

#### 4. *The Religious Naturalism of Tagore*

Tagore's religious naturalism should not be confused with romanticism<sup>20</sup> which only emphasizes human emotion and individualism and glorifies the past and nature. Even though he is a poet, his religious<sup>21</sup> naturalism covers a broader aspect of reality. Tagore was influenced by the creation myths of Rig Veda. His religious naturalism is grounded in the naturalistic view of the Rig Veda.<sup>22</sup> It is Tagore's understanding that the Rig Veda puts an emphasis on the phenomenal world for the realization of divinity. One should not denounce the phenomenal world in one's search for divinity. The divine reality has to be experienced within this phenomenal world. The phenomenal existence has to be appreciated without making any attempt to reject or transcend nature. The worship<sup>23</sup> of nature leads to the worship of God. One should not search for God in another world by transcending nature.<sup>24</sup> God can only be found within the divinity of nature. God is not a transcendental and supernatural being.

- 20 Whitman and Yeats are proponents of romanticism. They emphasize subjective realities in their work. See Hayes (2010, 482) for a more detailed discussion on how the Tagorean version of religious naturalism does not align with romanticism.
- 21 Tagore has made the distinction between institutionalized religions and true religion (Dharma). See Tagore (2012, ch. 11) and Lal (1990, 61) for an elaborated discussion. True religion (Dharma) should not be confused with institutional religion. True religion advocates freedom, whereas institutionalized religion curtails human freedom. Institutionalized religions treat their followers as slaves. There is no scope for the application of the creative force in the case of institutionalized religion. It is institutionalized religion that gives rise to religious exclusivism because of its strict adherence to the religious principles of a particular religion. This is the reason why almost all institutionalized religions are advocators for religious extremism. A true religion is well known for its qualities of spontaneity and naturality. Until and unless we acknowledge human freedom, subjectivity, and various perspectives, human creativity is not possible. Religion or any other institutions that force us to follow mechanistically pre-established principles are the propagators and defenders of slavery — mental slavery. The moment we follow a pre-established principle mechanistically without applying the faculty of reason, we become a part of a herd mentality and no longer are free. Tagore was well aware of this. For this reason he has prioritized the application of creative force throughout his writings. Tagore has attempted to divinize human creativity in his writings.
- 22 Rig Veda is one of the sacred texts of Hinduism. In Rig Veda, it is clearly defined that human beings are dependent upon nature. Tagore was influenced by the philosophy of integration with nature. See Griffith (2013) for a detailed discussion on human–nature relationships in Rig Veda.
- 23 Here the word *worship* is used in a technical sense. It means appreciation of the beauty of nature, according to Tagore.
- 24 The two-world theory of Kant has been rejected by Tagore. He has criticized those philosophers who appeal to another world by affirming the meaninglessness of the phenomenal world. See Tagore (2012, ch. 11) for an informative discussion.

Human beings are not separate from nature. Humanity's experience of alienation and one's sense of separateness from nature is the product of illusion (*māyā*).<sup>25</sup> It appears to us, due to the cosmic illusion (*māyā*), that human beings are distinct from the integrated whole of nature, however, in reality, they are part of the divine nature. The Tagorean concept of cosmic illusion (*māyā*) seems to be identical to the Advaita Vedanta concept of *māyāvāda*. However, according to Tagore, Advaita Vedantins has failed to provide a plausible explanation for the diversity of the world.<sup>26</sup> For this reason Advaita Vedāntins has formulated the *māyāvāda*.<sup>27</sup> Tagore has rejected the Advaitic conception of reality because for Advaitins there is no multiplicity or diversity in reality. The world is not real. The diversity of the world is an illusion. Tagore disagrees with the Advaitins and has accepted the diversity of the world. Different subjects can have different perspectives on the world, however, a creative unity is possible through love, according to Tagore. Various perspectives are equally important in the process of comprehending reality.

Concepts such as divinity, God and self are rejected by some religious naturalists due to their appeal towards otherworldliness for their existence. However, in the Tagorean form of religious naturalism, these concepts are compatible with nature. He has naturalized these concepts. The objective of religion should be the realization of the interconnectedness of human beings with nature. One has to realize the divinity within nature and cultivate a universal feeling of love. Man cannot achieve anything if he runs away from the mundane. In rejecting asceticism,<sup>28</sup> he stated, »No, my friends, I shall never be an ascetic, // whatever you may say [...] // no friends, I shall never leave my hearth and home, // and retire into the forest solitude, // [...] if its silence is not depended by soft whispers. // I shall never be an ascetic«.<sup>29</sup>

Tagore, in his poetry *Life (prāna)*<sup>30</sup> illustrates: »I do not desire death in this resplendent universe. I want to live amidst the ocean of humanity. I yearn for acceptance by hearts filled with vitality. Life on Earth ebbs and flows in transient waves. Partings and encounters are filled with tears and joys. I want to bead these emotions into melodic strains, To create songs that will be eternal and spirits buoy. If I cannot achieve that, then as long as I live, let me find shelter in your midst. Let me every morning and evening, give you Lyrics that bloom like flowers

25 See Lal (1990, 60) for more details.

26 See Mandal (2015, 211–212) for a comparative study of Tagore and the Advaita Vedāntic concept of *māyāvāda*.

27 The Sanskrit dictionary meaning of *māyāvāda* acknowledges the fact that multiplicity (i.e., subjectivity or perspectivity) is a theory of illusion. There are a couple of instances where Advaita Vedāntic texts consistently use the term *māyā*. For a comprehensive study of *māyāvāda* read primary sources such as *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* (verse 108 & 123), and *Vedāntasāra*, and secondary sources such as Sharma (1960, 261–267), Nayak (1978, 345–347) and Chatterjee & Datta (1948, 56–60).

28 Asceticism is the view that for the realization of the self, one has to denounce the world. The realization of the self is not possible unless one detaches oneself from this mundane world.

29 See Tagore (1919, 43) for a detailed analysis.

30 See Tagore (1886) for an elaborated discussion.

waiting for a tryst. Pluck the blossoms happily, and then, without a sign, Throw them away, alas, if they wilt or dry.«

Tagore has placed an emphasis on finding meaning within this phenomenal world. The denunciation of the phenomenal world is a form of escapism, according to Tagore. One should not escape from one's worldly duties and responsibilities.

### 5. *The Poetic Naturalism of Tagore*

Naturalism means that fundamentally there is only one reality and that is nature; however, there can be various ways of speaking of natural reality. The physicist's explanation of the object is completely different from the explanation of the chemist. The physicist can explain the physical object, namely, a table as a combination of atoms, while a person might describe it as furniture. Both descriptions are accurate within their respective framework. One can define the natural reality through poetic expression. Complex phenomena such as consciousness, morality, poetry, art, love, ethics, etc., are non-reducible emergent phenomena. Poetic naturalism is one way of defining natural reality. It rejects the theistic conception of God and the soul. In the West, religionists such as Carroll (2017), Tomlinson (1964) and Esslin (1968) advocate poetic naturalism. Concepts like good and bad, purpose and duties, and beauty and ugliness are not inherent to nature. However, these moral and aesthetic terms can be considered as a way of defining reality.

Tagore, through his poetic naturalism argued that God can be realized through the beauty in nature, art, and life itself.<sup>31</sup> Tagore (2012, ch. 12), like other poetic naturalists, rejects all forms of ritualism, theism, and supernaturalism. He argued that the sacred can be found in the natural world and in human experience. His poetic naturalism makes room for subjective experiences, such as beauty, morality, and meaning, within an objective naturalist framework. The "divinization of nature and humanization of God" is the main motto of Tagore's philosophy. Tagore has naturalized God and, according to him, God has to be humanized (Tagore, 2015, 3).<sup>32</sup> As he stated, »Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! // Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with the doors all shut? // Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before

31 See Tagore (2012, 12) for an elaborate discussion on this expression. The term *God* is used here in a technical sense. Tagore has rejected any form of a theistic God. The expression *God* means serendipitous creativity, according to Tagore (2012, ch. 11). Serendipitous creativity is the result of artistic creation which is also considered a divine process.

32 Tagore, since his childhood, was influenced by Brahma Samāj. His father was a member of Brahma Samāj. Brahma Samāj is a monotheistic system of Hinduism that has been advocating reform in traditional Hinduism. Tagore was also influenced in midlife by the Upanishads. Some religionists, for instance, Ayyub (1973), Bhattachārya (2014), and Collins (2008) argued that Tagore became an atheist and ascetic in the last phase of his life. His adherence to asceticism from the observation of the last phases of his literary works is more aligned with the influence of Buddhism.

thee! // He [God] is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground // and where the path-maker is breaking stones. // He is with them in sun and in shower, // and his garment is covered with dust. // Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down upon the dusty soil!«<sup>33</sup> Tagore has criticized the theistic version of Hinduism, which advocates a personal God. He has rejected the creationistic theory of the universe.

Tagore has defined the finite and infinite aspects of the self without adhering to the metaphysical notion of the self. In *Two Birds*, Tagore allegorically defined the nature of self through two birds.<sup>34</sup> Allegorically, the caged bird represents the finite aspect of the self, whereas the forest bird signifies the infinite aspect of the self. Tagore illustrates that human beings have both a finite and infinite nature within themselves. Finite nature represents the mechanistic aspect of life. There is a constant longing for every human being to transcend his limitations. This aspect signifies the infinite aspect of life.

There are two poles of reality, namely, order and chaos.<sup>35</sup> Order represents faith, structure, traditions, systems, and rules, while chaos represents reason, liberation, novelty, and freedom. The genealogical origin of the conflict between order and chaos is deeply rooted in two guiding forces, namely, “the will to power” and “the struggle for survival”<sup>36</sup> that generates fear (i.e., insecurities). Since human evolution, we have gained enough evidence in which both faith and reason<sup>37</sup> have been used as a tool of manipulation and control either through dogmatism or by promoting pseudo-science and scientism. Sometimes, the conflict between faith and reason seems to be apparent because rationality itself as a tool has been used as an effective instrument for defending dogmatism, anthropocentrism, scientism, and pseudo-science through the instrumentalization of reason. At the same time, we have some positive cases where both faith and reason have been used as a tool to address scientific progress and human suffering. Faith always tries to build boundaries in order to protect people from all

33 See Tagore (2012, ch. 11) for more details.

34 *Two Birds* is a poem composed in 1894 by Tagore. Tagore tells the story of two birds—one is a caged bird and the other a forest bird. The forest bird once met with the caged bird. The forest bird insisted that the caged bird come out of the golden cage and fly with it into the forest. The caged bird refused to be freed from the cage because the caged bird felt secure within the cage. The two birds share intense feelings of love for each other; however, they have different perspectives on life. See Tagore (1894) *Sonar Tari* for the detailed story.

35 The caged bird represents order because only order can provide security, whereas the forest bird represents chaos (freedom). Even though the forest bird is free, insecurity is always present.

36 See Nietzsche (1883) for a comprehensive analysis.

37 For instance, people have been manipulated and controlled in the name of faith and reason since the evolution of human beings. On the one hand, faith as a tool has been used to build empires and legitimize fanaticism, terrorism, religious fundamentalism, and religious violence through sectarianism and dogmatism. On the other hand, reason as a tool has been used in defending horrendous acts such as feudalism, colonialism, slavery, pseudo-science, and scientism. Human beings have been used as tools, for instance, from hunter-gatherers to supporters of a dogmatic practice, being used as a part of someone’s vote bank politics, to intentional or unintentional supporters of terrorism for the sake of satisfying someone’s greed for power. Those who successfully manipulate people through the instrumentalization of faith and reason became rulers.

sorts of insecurity, whereas reason always tries to break boundaries, give freedom by raising questions on human conditioning and achieve something higher than the limitations of human conditioning. We have to acknowledge the fact that both faith and reason have separate roles in human progress. For any functional system, there needs to be a balance between order and chaos. The equilibrium of these two poles of reality is very difficult to achieve because there is a constant struggle between them to acknowledge each other's value.<sup>38</sup> In other words, there are two fundamental forces always working within us. There is a constant conflict between our instinct for survival and our instinct for progress: there is something within us that is constantly forcing us to progress and develop. When we are concerned about the instinct for survival, we build walls around ourselves (e.g., constructing rigid social, ethical, religious principles, and making strict laws and regulations) in order to protect us from all insecurity. The survival instinct is insufficient for human beings. For instance, scientific progress cannot be achieved if we adhere to old principles of science and primitivism. If we always focus our thoughts on our insecurities, we cannot make progress as a human species. We need to realize that the walls of self-preservation lead towards self-imprisonment. The survival instinct, which means self-preservation, has to be synthesized with the instinct for progress. It is a necessary condition for any functional system that there be a balance between faith and reason, masculinity and femininity, order and chaos, the survival instinct and instinct for expansion, and self-preservation or self-imprisonment and self-exploration. According to Tagore (1886, ch. 56), »Only in love, are unity and duality not in conflict«. The unconditional love and compassion toward others makes us better human beings. Only when we cultivate these values in our lives does the exploration of serendipitous creativity become possible.

### *Conclusion*

In the conflict between faith and reason, we need to be vigilant of the fact that faith and reason can be tools to address human progress and human suffering or, on the other hand, these can simply be tools of exploitation which legitimizes the greed for power and the sadistic pleasures of a group of people. Whether it is religion or science, we need to beware of the fact that our own psychological insecurity and vulnerability are being used (in science, religion, and politics) against us as a tool of manipulation and control. We need to always ask whether these principles and conduct empower us and make us progressive through true knowledge and wisdom or do they try to control and enslave us through fearism.

38 The conflict between science and humanities or religious studies is rooted in this principle of equilibrium between order and chaos. We need scientific progress to enable us to question all things: we want to break every boundary and break free from human conditioning, while at the same time we need the psychological security provided by disciplines such as the humanities or religion. Unless, we acknowledge the independent epistemic role of these disciplines, we cannot achieve human progress in the true sense.

It is clear that the Tagorean form of non-reductive religious naturalism is one of the best forms of spiritual naturalism since other forms of religious naturalism somehow commit to scientism and anthropocentrism, which Tagore avoids in his spiritual naturalism. In addition, Tagore's religious naturalism prioritizes freedom and human creativity. He advocates the realization of divinity in the product of artistic expression and human creativity. Non-reductive religious naturalism can serve to satisfy our religious inclinations without endorsing a supernatural entity. The interconnectedness and the experience of the sacredness of nature are the most fundamental elements of religious naturalism. Current problems in the world, such as the issue of climate change, natural disasters due to environmental issues, and sustainable development, can be addressed through religious naturalism. In order to find meaning, purpose, and the foundations of morality, we do not need to accept any dogmatic concept without using our reason. Nature is sufficient to fulfill the above purposes as per Tagore's religious naturalism. The natural world is a manifestation of the divine. Tagore has synthesized the scientific understanding of reality with other disciplines which deal with human experience.

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### *Religijski naturalizam i Rabindranath Tagore*

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#### *Sažetak*

*Cilj je ovoga rada dokazati da je tagoreanski religijski naturalizam najprikladnije formulirana doktrina duhovnoga naturalizma. Dva su pristupa kada se napada religijski naturalizam. Kao prvo, religijski naturalisti su pristaše scijentizma. Dakle, njihov je stav da su znanstvena načela autoritativna i regulativna načela svih disciplina. Kao drugo, reduktivni religijski naturalizam dovodi posljedično do antropocentrizma. Ovaj rad tvrdi da se tagoreanski religijski naturalizam ne opredjeljuje za scijentizam i antropocentrizam. Nadalje, on dovodi u sklad duhovnost, prirodu i humanizam. Božanstvo se može manifestirati u prirodnom svijetu i u ljudskom stvaralaštvu. Znanstveni način tumačenja stvarnosti samo je jedan od mogućih pristupa stvarnosti. Pojmovi poput Boga, jastva, moralnosti i vrijednosti imaju epistemsku važnost u naturalističkom tumačenju stvarnosti.*

*Ključne riječi: religijski naturalizam; seredipitozna kreativnost; pjesnički naturalizam; scijentizam; antropocentrizam*

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