

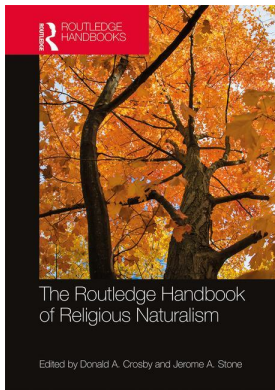
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## The Routledge Handbook of Religious Naturalism

Donald A. Crosby, Jerome A. Stone

### Whither Religious Naturalism?

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Walter B. Gulick

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# WHITHER RELIGIOUS NATURALISM?

*Walter B. Gulick*

What might be the future of religious naturalism? Might it take on some communal incarnation of its own, or is its destiny best understood as a theoretical perspective adhered to by dissociated individuals? Might it spice up existing religious traditions and thus have long-term influence, or is it an airy intellectualism that will soon fade away?

## **Religious naturalism: distinctive aspects**

Reliable answers to these questions depend on the conception of religious naturalism employed. The essays in this *Handbook* demonstrate that religious naturalist insights come packaged in a variety of forms. Some scholars restrict their understanding of what is religious to shared beliefs and actions that appeal to supernatural agency (see, for instance Whitehouse 2004: 2). In this view, religious naturalism, rejecting supernaturalism, would be an oxymoron. However, all varieties of religious naturalism support such functions as promoting social solidarity, offering wisdom about how to live well, providing psychological support during the transitions and crises of life, promoting social justice and general welfare, and so on. While these functions can be addressed on a purely secular basis, the addition of a religious orientation to naturalism introduces a more comprehensive and committed approach to these vital concerns.

Yet for many, the rejection of supernaturalism is the most dramatic characteristic of religious naturalism—an essentially negative stance. Is there a positive, emotionally evocative commonality underlying the various expressions of religious naturalism that might attract new adherents yet be affirmed by a strong majority of those who consider themselves religious naturalists? Here is my candidate definition that attempts to incorporate those attributes:

Religious naturalism is a richly endowed naturalistic worldview that seeks to develop and sustain existentially and morally positive relations with self, others, and the world. Scientific understanding of the structures and processes of empirical reality provide the framework within which its thought and practices unfold. But there are also normative dimensions of human experience that transcend scientific determination and are crucial for human flourishing. If shorn of dogmatism, authoritarianism, and any form of supernaturalism, the rich apprehensions and practices of some religious traditions offer powerful communal resources in support of excellence in living. Religious

naturalism appreciates how religious sensibility can nurture and validate such life-affirming emotions as gratitude, wonder, reverence, and compassion—all of which are healthy expressions of meaning in existence. In allegiance to the highest moral ideals, it also affirms actions that further justice, support non-violence, build caring solidarity, and honor wisdom wherever it is found.

If this delineation accurately reflects the views of most religious naturalists, it would appear that it contains attractive, existentially meaningful sentiments that can fund some sort of future embodiment. But what sort?

A logical first step toward answering that question would be to describe what makes religious naturalism so distinctive that it merits special attention.<sup>1</sup> First, it takes the verifiable understanding of reality opened up by science as its ground. The Epic of Evolution as set forth by Thomas Berry, Loyal Rue, Ursula Goodenough, and many others provides the basic narrative account of how things have emerged in the cosmos. In this story, revelation is displaced from its traditional supernatural locus and transferred to a combination of scientific discovery, cultural wisdom, and spiritual insight. Second, it unequivocally rejects any form of supernaturalism. But that does not mean it is committed to single level ontological reductionism or some variety of scientism. The notions of emergence and pluralism have a crucial place within religious naturalism. Third, the evidence-based curiosity that is a hallmark of science is also a defining characteristic of religious naturalism. When evidence about best policies is missing or ambiguous, religious naturalism treads lightly and is tentative. Dogmatic stasis has no place in religious naturalism. Attention to reliable evidence extends beyond grand theory to practical issues of daily living.

### Some questions

What sort of impact has religious naturalism had to date? Well, there are members of various religious denominations and traditions that accept some form of religious naturalism. Acceptance of themes from religious naturalism seems common within Unitarian-Universalism and religious humanism. Still, when one surveys the broad scope of religious thought and practice, religious naturalism plays a tiny role. Maybe this is because to date it has evolved as a fairly abstract intellectual program. Rarely has a novel theoretical vision of religious ideas become influential outside a major religious tradition. Charismatic leaders such as the Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, and Martin Luther have created new religious traditions, but they initially acted as reformers within a historical and social context of religious belief and practice. Naturalistic views have ordinarily been taken as contrary to and outside any religious tradition. Convincing others that there is a place for religious sensibility within a naturalist worldview is thus a formidable challenge.

So when contemplating the future of religious naturalism, several issues need to be considered, which I will list in the form of questions. 1) Are the winsome aspects of religious naturalism noted in the earlier definition sufficient to foster a drive among its adherents to seek an ongoing institutional home? 2) Even more basically, to what extent do religious naturalists think institutional or communal form enhances or advances their ideas and goals? Is there an evangelistic thrust inherent in religious naturalism? 3) Are there already thinkers and intellectual movements that share enough of the worldview of religious naturalism that it would be advantageous to engage them as potential partners or allies for the good of the cause? 4) How might the discernments of religious naturalism be developed and packaged so that it would have a good chance of becoming a flourishing association with its own identity? 5) If taking on its own organizational identity proves not to be a live

option, are there viable structures whereby the ideals of religious naturalism might be creatively combined with living religious traditions?

It is too early in the development of religious naturalism to give any reliable answer to the first two questions, important though they are. So in the balance of this essay I will first describe some thinkers and movements that have views mostly compatible with religious naturalism (question 3). Then I will describe the most sustained effort to date to locate religious symbols, rituals, and moral practices inherent in religious naturalism that have the power to generate a self-contained tradition (question 4). Finally, I will describe a structure within which key ideas of religious naturalism may be melded with existing religious traditions (question 5). Such a fusion of religious practices with a naturalistic worldview may offer the most likely way in which religious naturalism can increase its influence.

### Relationship to possible partners or allies

So far I have assumed that religious naturalism ideally needs either to become accepted as a legitimate theological option by some current and significant religious institution(s) or assume its own institutional embodiment. The essays in Part VI of this *Handbook* tend to sustain the view that novel religious visions become vital when grafted onto existing religious traditions with vibrant spiritual practices, ritualized enactments, and communal celebrations. What earlier and present day thinkers outside religious naturalism are influential and inspiring, yet have enough insights compatible with it to be candidates for alliance? What religious movements might be recruited as allies to help secure a substantial role for religious naturalism? In this section I will limit my comments to philosophical and theological views that have emerged in Western civilization.

Immanuel Kant is an earlier thinker whose thought significantly helped pave the way for religious naturalism. Perhaps he is the first influential philosopher to provide a profound vision affirming the scientific understanding of early modernism while also incorporating moral and religious insights. It should be remembered that in his pre-critical period Kant published scientific works on the rotation of the earth, the nature of fire, and cosmology (he was the first to suggest the Milky Way was a vast collection of suns). The thought of Newton was his standard of explanatory excellence. However, as early as 1773 he wrote that, in contrast to the prevailing metaphysics, he aimed “to give philosophy an enduring new turn that would be far more advantageous to religion and morals” (uncited quotation from Kant in Jaspers 1962: 95). His rationalistic religion supporting morality has little content in common with contemporary religious naturalism. However, it exhibits support for religion within a scientific framework, limits uncritical metaphysical speculation, understands the need for the regulative use of reason in attaining systemic coherence, and cautiously avoids religious dogmatism—all ideas compatible with religious naturalism.

In twentieth-century America, William James, Alfred North Whitehead, John Dewey, Henry Nelson Wieman, and John Herman Randall are among the prominent thinkers whose ideas have much in common with religious naturalism. Dewey’s *A Common Faith* is an early statement of essential themes in religious naturalism.

In the degree in which we cease to depend upon belief in the supernatural, selection is enlightened and choice can be made in behalf of ideals whose inherent relations to conditions and consequences are understood. Were the naturalistic foundations and bearings of religion grasped, the religious element of life would emerge.

(Dewey 1934: 57)

This is religious naturalism in full bloom.

Process theology, based on Whitehead's philosophy, has influenced many thoughtful laypersons and religious leaders. Yet as commonly construed (and indeed supported by Whitehead's postulation of the primordial and consequent natures of God), it still allows for a kind of supernaturalism. And the reach of Whitehead's metaphysics extends considerably beyond the evidence of contemporary science. Hence it seems best to regard process thought as a partial ally of religious naturalism.

A similar comment applies to thinkers associated with the continental theological turn in phenomenology, an expression of postmodern themes in theology. Paul Ricoeur's notion of a second naïveté (Ricoeur 1967: 351, 355) rejects the adequacy of literal understandings of scripture and theology, but in rethinking symbolic meanings it remains open to sophisticated forms of supernaturalism. The title of Richard Kearney's book, *The God Who May Be*, articulates the subjunctive mood taken by many participants in the theological turn. Kearney, a student of Ricoeur, supports what he calls atheism, "the space where an open theism and an open atheism can come into dialogue" (Kearney and Zimmerman 2016: 80). Openness to the unexpected, to the stranger, can reveal the sacred in the secular and invite one to respond freely with either hospitality or hostility. "In *Anatheism* I divide the wager of hospitality/hostility into three moments: protest, prophecy, and sacrament" (Kearney and Zimmerman 2016: 174). Connection to the sacred without theism is one option in Kearney's thought. Similarly, Jean-Luc Marion (2008) rejects any metaphysical attempt to define God. However, he remains committed to the distant God of love whose revelatory appearance in "saturated" phenomena obliterates our usual categories of thought. By disconnecting thought about God from notions of being and becoming, Marion's phenomenological notion of the divine is an attempt to escape its problematic controlling aspects—but a hermeneutics of supernaturalism remains.

All this leads to a key question, originally raised in relationship to the thought of Charles Hartshorne: "can one be a naturalist in his interpretation of the world and at the same time, within that naturalistic framework, also believe in a deity that is natural?" (Parsons 1964: 533). Dewey makes this move; so does Jerome Stone. "I am convinced that a naturalistic concept of God, particularly when employing both theoretical and devotional language, can provide a naturalistic principle of transcendence" (Stone 2011: 218). This claim might make it easier for religious naturalists to form partnerships with sympathetic theologians, but care would have to be taken to ensure that theological confusion was not the result.

Those taking the theological turn, primarily French thinkers, tend to approach theology via a Catholic background. In the Anglo-American context, progressive Christian theology is primarily Protestant in perspective. The social and historical context of the Bible is the starting point for the theology of such scholars as Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, Diana Butler Bass, Walter Brueggemann, and John Shelby Spong. For some progressive biblical theologians, the faith and actions of Jesus confronting the violence of the Roman Empire is roughly analogous to the spirituality Christians are called to now in order to confront the social, economic, and environmental injustice promulgated by profit-seeking corporate power in alliance with governmental forbearance. More positively, progressive Christians emphasize the importance of offering hospitality to all and establishing justice for all—especially those who are most vulnerable, but also those of other faiths, including agnostics and atheists. Religious progressives question many traditional theological tenets, such as the sacrificial death of Christ as necessary to atone for human sin, or belief in Christ as the only path to salvation (see John 14:6). Most theological progressives, however, continue to use "God-language," although without imputing to the divine such traditional attributes as omnipotence, omniscience, or immutability. In any case, the values of progressive Christians overlap with the values of religious naturalists, even

if progressive Christians maintain a more traditional theological vocabulary. Potentially some religious progressives are strong allies.

### Ignored voices?

Finally, in considering allies, three authors articulate views that fit well within the scope of religious naturalism, although they have not generally been included in discussions of religious naturalists. Don Cupitt, Lloyd Geering, and Daniel Maguire have written books in which the theme of accepting the moral heritage of Christianity without belief in God is central. “We are stuck now with our own culturally-mediated form of naturalism, and to an outlook therefore whose religion must be ethics-led and purely immanent” (Cupitt 2015: 138). This view, of course, would be radically incoherent to most traditional Christians, and incoherent for at least two reasons, one of which is worth pondering.

First, here is a highly influential argument for the divinity of Jesus, made most famous by C. S. Lewis.

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell.

(Lewis 1952: 54–55)

Lewis's way of treating statements from the gospel of John clashes with historical-critical scholarship that recognizes the imaginative, poetic character of the text, written many decades after the death of Jesus. Were one to take literally *all* the gospel statements attributed to Jesus, we would indeed be justified to view his worldview as incoherent. Members of the so-called Jesus Seminar have attempted to distinguish between which of Jesus's statements appear to be authentic, which are possibly attributable to him, and which are best attributed not to him, but perhaps express the needs of the early church community. John Shelby Spong, who appreciates the spiritual insights of the gospel of John, makes this comment in line with typical historical critical scholarship: “There is probably not a single word in the Fourth Gospel that Jesus ever spoke” (Spong 2013: 68).

Second, while Lewis's claim naively violates historical-critical scholarship, it offers a challenge to those who would base an ethical religion on the teachings of Jesus while denying the existence of God. For the thoughts and actions of Jesus, himself a first-century Jew, are not conceivable apart from recognizing his deep faith in the God of his ancestors. On what basis, then, does it make sense to be a follower of Jesus without also believing in God?

There is a human tendency to seek security beyond the chaos of history by relating to that which is seen as transcendent and thereby reliable. Religious naturalists note that all beliefs are influenced by the volatile particularities of the historical circumstances in which they are made. Jesus's faith in a reliable God is rooted in a culture 2,000 years old. That culture's knowledge of the natural world has been superseded, but ethical insights connected to human relationships may remain pertinent for millennia. Maguire indirectly affirms the relevance of Jesus's moral discernment apart from his belief in God: “As for religions, forget their deity and afterlife creations, and recognize that they are at root poetry-rich philosophies that have hit on things that are stunningly relevant, with no authority behind them other than good sense” (Maguire 2014:

130). Reconstructing the relevance today of Jesus's teachings requires a second poetic act of interpretation beyond the poetic interpretation by the author of the gospel of John. It is just as legitimate to take into consideration in a second poetic rendering of Jesus's words the lessons drawn from nearly two millennia of church history and contemporary knowledge as it was to take comparable issues into account in the original poetic rendering of the Fourth Gospel. We can only conjecture whether Jesus would still maintain his first-century faith in God today in light of current knowledge, but his practical insights and actions can still inspire.

It should now be clear that religious naturalists are not appropriately regarded as voices crying in the wilderness. The thinkers and movements listed so far are representative of a large group of persons sympathetic to most aspects of religious naturalism. Some of the persons discussed are active members of Christian denominations. So there are living options for possible amalgamation of religious naturalism into existing institutions. But it is not clear if such a move would have power. Notice the long-term trajectory of claims about the demise of supernaturalism. When Nietzsche first proclaimed the death of God (Nietzsche 1887/1974: 181), his claim was roundly renounced by virtually all Christians. When the death of God was proclaimed in the 1960s by Thomas Altizer, William Hamilton, and Paul Van Buren (and in a less radical form by Bishop John Robinson in *Honest to God*), it made front-page news. But the books of Maguire, Cupitt, and Geering, as well as most books by recognized religious naturalists, have made no comparable public splash. That suggests they may have lost the power to revitalize current institutions.

Anyway, it seems that ideas found in religious naturalism, while not generally embraced, are at least acknowledged as options in mainline theology and broad social consciousness. True, many both inside and outside the mainline churches may see this acceptance as but one more manifestation of Christianity's declining vitality. But some might interpret them in line with Phyllis Tickle's vision (Tickle 2008: 16–17) of the current Great Emergence as a stimulating and necessary adjustment of the church to how social media, globalization, etc. have changed the way we live.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps, but the challenge remains for religious naturalists to demonstrate to ordinary people that their views energize lives and improve society.

### Fleshing out religious naturalism as a religion

These considerations suggest that religious naturalism would have the most robust impact if all those excited by its claims resisted being swallowed up in some existing tradition in which the inertia of long-existing incompatible views would likely prevail. What is the prognosis for success if religious naturalists formed their own religious tradition? What might a religious community of naturalists look like?

If I were to choose one book that best qualifies as the "gospel" of religious naturalism, it would be Ursula Goodenough's *The Sacred Depths of Nature*. This work brilliantly combines spiritual sensitivity with biological expertise, and it does so with poetic flair. But just as the gospels do not establish church organization, so Goodenough's book requires elaboration if an organized religion is to be established. The person who has taken the lead in suggesting what such a religion might look like is Donald Crosby. Exposition and critique of his accomplishments may suggest the sorts of issues with which any practical development of religious naturalism must deal.<sup>3</sup>

Crosby helpfully distinguishes his "Religion of Nature" from three other types of religious naturalism.

A second is naturalistic theism, which rests belief in God on reflections about experience rather than on special revelations and usually regards God as a wholly immanent

being, presence, or power in the universe. Another is religious humanism, where humanity, rather than nature or God, is the principle focus of religious concern.

(Crosby 2002: 172)

The fourth version is Jerome Stone's understanding of transcendent ideals that establish goodness. Such ideals can be acknowledged as a minimalist notion of the divine.

Crosby understands nature—all of it—to be the ultimate reality and as such to be the sacred object of faith. “Nothing else lies before [nature], behind it, or beyond it as its ultimate ground, source, sustainer, or guide. Nature exists and persists by virtue of its own inherent, self-contained potentialities, principles, and laws” (Crosby 2013: 2). More briefly, “*Reality is nature in all of its manifestations*” (Crosby 2015: 10). That means that experiences humans regard as negative—suffering, evil, natural disasters, violence—are for Crosby to be accepted as sacred. The Religion of Nature “offers no pap, no panaceas, no empty promises” (Crosby 2008: 108). He distinguishes between religious rightness, the sacredness attributable to all that is, and moral rightness, which deals with what humans can control in order to live together harmoniously.

It is not anticipated that we should reverence nature by imitating it. There is an important disconnection between the object of faith and moral policies, principles, and practices. Nature as the object of faith can provide context and support for moral living but should not be expected to supply its specific precepts.

(Crosby 2008: 85)

The Religion of Nature, it can be seen, represents religious naturalism in its starkest, most unhedged form. If nature cannot supply precepts for moral living, does it embody values that generate prescriptions regarding how it should be treated? Crosby believes so, for ignoring nature's valuative dimension “would be shockingly inadequate and incomplete” (Crosby 2015: 109). “Salvation in the perspective of Religion of Nature ... consists in the continuing protection, betterment, and flourishing of the world as a whole here and now, not in the hope of being transported beyond this finite, fragile, vulnerable world into some other realm” (Crosby 2013: 127). Religious rightness means nature's “eminent fitness for unstinting religious reverence and devotion ... [whereas] religious evil is the absence of such devotion” (Crosby 2015: 125). Disciples of the Religion of Nature ought to care for the well-being of the natural environment in contrast to thoughtless exploitation of it.

Crosby understands that the “well-being” of nature applies chiefly to the various forms of life. The cover of his book, *More than Discourse: Symbolic Expressions of Naturalistic Faith*, displays a brown pelican in flight. The book is dedicated to these pelicans as “Symbols of the Marvel and Vulnerability of Life.” Reverent and responsible action, not passive worship, is called for in the Religion of Nature. His plea for responsibility in relation to animal rights (see Crosby 2013: 45–47) has implications for changes in the way animals are treated (or mistreated) in such realms as sport hunting and fishing, the farming of animals (especially factory farming), commercial fishing, zoos, aquariums, circuses, rodeos, endangered species, and animal experimentation. He also calls for rectification of ecological harms caused by various forms of pollution, exponentially increasing human population, and global climate change.

In portraying the free flying pelican as a symbol of life's delights, Crosby is supporting his conviction that non-discursive religious symbols provide indispensable access to the value-laden depths of nature. Crosby believes that religious symbols can make vital and lasting contributions



to apprehension of religious truths that speak to the whole beings of persons—emotional, volitional, valuational, and practical as well as rational—and that function to awaken and sustain a sense of the daunting, alluring, and healing presence of the sacred in the world.

(Crosby 2014: xi)

Crosby's use of terms such as assurance, demand, empowerment, and even love resonate with affective vitality (see Crosby 2011: 150–153; Crosby 2013: 129). Under the rubric of religious symbols Crosby includes emotionally evocative material from the visual arts, poetry, drama, architecture, ritual, myth, calligraphy, dance—wherever are found “expressions of nondiscursive, non-propositional, nonassertive types of meaning” (Crosby 2014: 4). Religious symbols immerse us in a world of religious meaning in which our behavior matters. Crosby distinguishes between minor, major, and master symbols, which differ in their capacity to orient, inspire, and motivate us. “Christ is the master symbol of the religious ultimate in Christian faith. He is also, of course, the principal exemplar for the Christian path of life” (Crosby 2014: 43).

It is obvious that Christ and the crucifix would function as master symbols in Christianity. It is far less obvious what might assume the role of master symbols in the Religion of Nature. Crosby chooses water. “Let us imagine ourselves seated below a cascading waterfall and adjacent to the stream that rushes away from it and finally enters into a quiet lake” (Crosby 2014: 86). For Crosby, this watery scene captures the wholeness of nature: reliable continuity as well as precipitous destruction, peaceful calm as well as bubbling transition. To symbolize the creative source of all things, Crosby selects the womb.

That master symbols need to be identified points out one of the great challenges facing a Religion of Nature. The passion of Christ, the teachings of the Buddha, the Quran as revealed to Mohammed—these symbols of meaning and obligation grow organically out of the historical (or legendary) beginnings of each of these world religions. Crosby's account of what he terms the salvific and tragic qualities observable in the course of human history (2014: 99–112) is not cloaked with the paradigmatic authority of a sacred history. From the perspective of Crosby's acceptance of all nature as sacred, his distinctions between salvific and tragic or evil events in history seem arbitrary and ungrounded. Similarly, citing John Muir as the exemplary traveler on the saving path of Religion of Nature seems forced and unconvincing when Muir's career is compared with what paradigmatic religious figures of other traditions accomplished, often at the price of great personal sacrifice.

Alas, no master symbols seem obvious for a Religion of Nature. There are powerful connotations associated with water and the womb, but there is also a certain unavoidable arbitrariness to their selection as master symbols. Nature is all-encompassing. What makes some aspects of nature, some symbols, more worthy of affirmation, more valuable than others?

Crosby provides a partial answer to this question by identifying three value domains seated in human experience. Epistemic, artistic, and moral domains set forth their own inherent standards of good and evil. What establishes epistemic and aesthetic excellence? “The goods of discursive knowledge and the goods of art are essential to human well-being” (Crosby 2015: 114). Likewise, moral goods establish personal and social well-being.

Relating epistemic, artistic, and moral values to human well-being raises a question of possible incoherence in the Religion of Nature. Crosby claims humans profane and diminish sacred nature by “centering unduly or exclusively on human beings” (Crosby 2015: 137). Yet, as just noted, he also says rational, artistic, and moral excellence are measured according to what

conduces to human flourishing. Perhaps Crosby's view that human morality is a subset of ecological ethics cancels any seeming incoherence.

In addition, the view that all nature is sacred, including what is seen as evil, clashes with the human hope that what is sacred is fundamentally good (although Crosby properly notes that issues of theodicy are problems for all religious ultimates, not just religious naturalism alone).

Crosby justifies his view that even life's problems are to be religiously affirmed by offering his readers a choice (see Crosby 2015: ix–x). Would we prefer to live in a chemically created fantasy world of perfect peace and harmony or in the real world with its risk, pain, and suffering but also its possibilities of real achievement and joy? He bets that most people would opt to live in the real world with all its ambiguities rather than subsist in an illusory state with no challenges and no motivating purposes. An implication of this preference is that we honor reality, and since reality (nature in all its manifestations) is ultimate, and since what is ultimate is generally acknowledged as the sacred horizon of existence (Crosby 2008: 48; Crosby 2014: 41), nature itself (including what is evil from a human perspective) is sacred. Still—can a religious community thrive when such a large gap exists between the cosmic scope of religious rightness and the narrow focus on human behavior in moral rightness?

In a world that is increasingly urban, nature has become an abstraction to many of its inhabitants. What does the claim that nature is sacred mean to city dwellers? Do the symbols suggested for the Religion of Nature have the capacity to appeal broadly and deeply enough to generate widespread religious devotion? Can what is sacred about humanly contrived aspects of nature such as cultural creations, the built environment, and technology be more clearly interpreted within the Religion of Nature? As Crosby notes, religious symbols “choose us” in the sense of “resonating with something deep inside us and arousing in us recognition of profound insights or truths in ways that ordinary metaphors or other figures of speech do not” (Crosby 2014: 139). Crosby is open to expropriating, perhaps in a reinterpreted form, religious symbols that have spoken with power to people in different social settings and in other religious traditions around the world. He mentions some possibly attractive symbols and practices, but more exploration is called for here.

Donald Crosby is to be commended for his pioneering work in suggesting what religious naturalism might look like as an organized religion. Before it can actually function in organized communal form, though, other persons need to join with Crosby in setting up organizational and administrative functions. As suggested earlier, it is rare that a unique religious tradition can be created from scratch. To create a functioning Religion of Nature is a daunting task. So I will now suggest hybrid structures that may have a chance of preserving crucial facets of religious naturalism in case the Religion of Nature or other “pure” versions of religious naturalism falter.

### **Triadic structures for housing religious naturalism**

Crosby's elaboration of his Religion of Nature has three different functional components: nature itself as the basic object of religious reverence, the religious symbols that articulate that reverence, and the spiritual state (thought and action) that results from appropriating reverence to nature through apt religious symbols. I have argued elsewhere that religious states of mind arise through the commitment to basic beliefs about what is of ultimate significance in the world, symbolic expression of those beliefs, and personal transformation affected by assimilating those symbolic expressions. The example I developed was a Christian Religion of Nature (Gulick

2013). I will more briefly sketch a hybrid Christian Religion of Nature as my chief example of hybridization even as I mention the possible use of the triadic structure by other religious traditions. Realization of any hybrid view of religious naturalism would ideally take place in a newly established organization rather than in an existing denomination that might dilute its key notions.

What if one replaced God with Nature as one of three co-equal ultimate objects of sacred attention? As Crosby and others suggest, nature in its ultimacy can evoke feelings of awe for its mysterious fecundity, respect for its power, amazement for its scope, and gratitude for one's existence. Reverent attention to nature as it is configured in all human contexts lifts one out of excessive self-concern. But nature is amoral; it does not tell us how we should live, a primary task of any religion. For that some sort of cherished *symbolic* exemplar is needed. Within Christianity, Jesus is the moral ultimate, the symbol of the fully human being. Through partaking of bread and wine in communion, one participates spiritually in Christ. Through indwelling his teachings, his parables, his acts of healing, one's life can be transformed. As Paul writes, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). The "I" who is crucified is the self-centered sinful self. In its place the third religious ultimate is realized, the internalized Holy Spirit. Being in Christ can be understood as a form of psychological identification that is consistent with religious naturalism. The sanctified self is the product of this identification. In this model, Nature is the ultimate object of concern, Jesus is the religious symbol of moral worth, and the Holy Spirit is the experience of personal transformation resulting from identification with Christ.

In this version of a Christian religious naturalism, prayer is an expressive, focusing function, not thought addressed to a higher being. Meditation and mindful attention to the problems and needs found in the wider world are useful spiritual practices. In support of the social nature of human existence, caring attention to others is called for, beginning with those in one's community. And with nature understood to be one of the objects of ultimate concern, devotion to nature's sacred ecological integrity is mandated. Those sections of the Bible that can legitimately be reinterpreted in non-supernatural terms will continue to have a special, but far from exclusive, place in religious thought and practice. In sum, such a Christian form of religious naturalism seems a viable outcome for those serious about creating a community of religious naturalists.

I believe hybrid forms of religious naturalism can be created in combination with most of the world's great religious traditions (see the articles in Part VI). Judaism and Christianity have been so entwined with Western cultural developments, including the rise of science, that non-supernatural forms of religion are plausible options. Many within Reformed Judaism have beliefs largely consistent with religious naturalism. Nature, the Torah, and traditional Jewish cultural identity can be interpreted as Judaism's three ultimates. The Torah, seen historically as based on Mesopotamian antecedents, modified by nomadic egalitarianism, expanded through Talmudic commentary, and interpreted via Enlightenment categories, functions as the central Reformed Jewish moral model. Liberalizing tendencies in Islam, which is strongly based on Allah's self-revelation as expressed in the Quran, have tended more toward mysticism than embrace of a scientific worldview.

In Asia, certain varieties of Daoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism seem quite compatible with religious naturalism, as other essays in this volume make clear. I will offer a few comments on Buddhism. The teachings of the Buddha, as expressed in Theravada Buddhism, suggest a path to individual enlightenment apart from any supernatural belief. Reverence for the creation would seem to come about indirectly in this tradition, not as an initially intended outcome. The immediate issue for the Buddha is dealing with the suffering inherent in the

course of life. All material things are seen to be impermanent. Human existence is marked by disease, old age, and death. All that is dear to one decays and slips away. Nature itself, then, is not regarded favorably by unenlightened humans. The Buddha taught a multifaceted way to transcend the negativities of life. The Middle Path he taught was a way between ascetic rejection of life's pleasures and addicted over-indulgence in life's pleasures. Buddhists are enjoined to give up the desires that bind one to impermanence and suffering and follow the disciplined life of the Eightfold Path. Right mindfulness and right concentration guide one following this path. Liberated from egoistic greed and anxious coping, the world is accepted as it is. One is freed to feel compassion (*karuna*) for others and wisely balance intellect and emotion. It is in this transformed state that reverence for nature becomes a possibility. The triadic ultimates of early Buddhism become, then, first the nature of reality (no longer understood through ignorance and illusion); second, the teaching of the Buddha; and third, the transformed understanding of nature/reality concerning the right way to live. It is evident that Buddhist doctrine dominates this hybrid form of religious naturalism, yet it is also clear that the emphases of religious naturalism harmonize well with Buddhist insights.

### Conclusion

The future of any program of thought and action is impossible to predict with any accuracy. But based on the foregoing discussion, I will hazard a few predictions regarding the future of religious naturalism.

1. The perspective on life of religious naturalism will continue to become more and more widely accepted unless some social trauma intrudes. During historical disasters, people tend to revert to traditional, conservative beliefs. However, the projected increasing acceptability of religious naturalism is occurring at a time when membership in organizations, including churches, is declining. Therefore, it is likely that persons sympathetic to the views of religious naturalism will either ascribe to their beliefs as discrete individuals or will fit as isolated individuals into existing religious communities. If this individualistic response persists, two possibilities emerge. Either the creative thrust of the movement will be dissipated and the names of its leaders will become entries in obscure historical tomes, or the increasing activity of religious naturalists involved in social media will be a vehicle for maintaining and even increasing its influence.
2. Religious naturalism's future could likely be made more secure if its adherents sought out partnership with some of the creative, largely compatible theological options being forged at present. There is risk: its signal ideas might be diluted if this path leads to institutionalization. Nevertheless, religious naturalism participates in a broad intellectual movement that increasingly focuses on thoughts and practices that provide existential meaning rather than insisting upon specific theological creeds, claims of institutional authority, or other aspects of religious provincialism.
3. It is rare that a movement like religious naturalism evolves into a free-standing organization. Donald Crosby's pioneering effort to describe the rationale for a Religion of Nature that stands on its own is a valiant attempt to beat the odds. But until its notion of nature is recast so potential converts can see more clearly its benefits, its program will struggle to gain long-term influence.
4. Finally, I suggested the advantages of a triadic model in which hybrid amalgamations of religious naturalism with current religious traditions might preserve the insights of both

parties. Indeed, without competing notions of the divine, it is possible that naturalism can serve as the midwife for a truly global religion—one that appreciates such things as Buddhist emptiness for some situations, Christian charity for others, Confucian structures for yet others, and, yes, reverence for nature.

5. It will be fascinating to see which of these options—or some other—comes to pass.

### Notes

- 1 See Dorrien (2006) for a thorough study of the theological milieu out of which religious naturalism arose. On pp. 463–472 he explores the thought of Nancy Frankenberry and Jerome Stone as exemplars of religious naturalism. Hogue (2010) examines the thought of Rue, Crosby, Goodenough, and Stone in his fine exposition of religious naturalism.
- 2 Tickle sees adulation of science, which she might attribute to religious naturalism, to have had priority in the past 500-year cycle of history. She thinks science has lost its authority as a guide to living. So religious naturalism would not be for her a candidate for the emerging theology in the next historical cycle. Rather she envisions theology as “evolving into something far more Jewish, more paradoxical, more narrative, and more mystical than anything the Church has had for the past seventeen or eighteen hundred years” (Tickle 2008: 162).
- 3 I offer a fuller exposition and critique of Crosby’s work in Gulick (2016). See also Crosby’s response (Crosby 2016).

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