

# OUTLINING A RELIGION OF NATURE: THE WORK OF DONALD CROSBY



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Donald A. Crosby, *A Religion of Nature*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2002. Pp. 200 + xi. ISBN 0-7914-5454-1. \$31.95. Cited as *RN*.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Living with Ambiguity: Religious Naturalism and the Menace of Evil*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2008. ISBN 0-7914-7520-1. \$21.95. Cited as *LA*.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Faith and Reason: Their Roles in Religious and Secular Life*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2011. ISBN 1-4384-3614-2. \$25.95. Cited as *FR*.

\_\_\_\_\_, *The Thou of Nature: Religious Naturalism and Reverence for Sentient Life*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2013. ISBN 1-14384-4670-7. \$25.95. Cited as *TN*.

\_\_\_\_\_, *More Than Discourse: Symbolic Expressions of Naturalistic Faith*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2015. ISBN 1-4384-5374-4. \$24.95. Cited as *MD*.

**Keywords:** Donald Crosby, religious naturalism, existential faith, religious symbol, ambiguous nature, religious rightness, moral rightness, perspectival epistemology, relational metaphysics

## ABSTRACT

*In five books, Donald Crosby has sketched out in some detail how nature, both as process and structure, can function as the ultimate religious object. He understands nature to unfold in morally ambiguous ways, but argues accepting the necessary truth of ambiguity is no obstacle to existential religious faith. Such faith is given particular content through sensuous religious symbols. He distinguishes the religious rightness of ambiguous nature from moral rightness. Although the purposes of living things establish relational values in nature, moral rightness for humans must largely be established on grounds other than nature. My assessment of Crosby's accomplishment in these books is generally appreciative, but I*

*raise questions about his notion of religious symbols and suggest that for his Religion of Nature to become a live option, grounds of morality need to be more clearly folded into his metaphysical and religious framework.*

## Introduction

In recent years, movements appreciative of both the significance of religious sensibility and the integrity of scientific discernment have been emerging. One expression of this broad movement typically goes by the name of religious naturalism. “Religious naturalists,” Michael Hogue writes, “interpret nature in whole or some aspect of nature, rather than the supernatural, as having maximal religious importance.”<sup>1</sup> In the books listed above, Donald Crosby develops perhaps the most fully elaborated version of religious naturalism yet presented. He distinguishes his version of religious naturalism from three other types:

Religion of nature is one of at least four general categories 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. Another is religious humanism, where humanity, rather than nature or God, is the principal focus of religious concern. The fourth is the “minimalist” form of religious naturalism set forth by Jerome A. Stone. Here no distinct ontological reality called “God” is affirmed, but Stone argues that we do experience “situationally transcendent” resources and ideals productive of good, and that these can properly be called “divine” (*RN* 172, n. 14).

Crosby’s comprehensive worldview has many affinities with Michael Polanyi’s thought. Indeed, Crosby relies more upon the philosophy of Polanyi than any other philosopher in *Faith and Reason*. He makes extensive use of Polanyian personal knowledge in describing existential faith, a notion which is crucial to his elaboration of a religion of nature. Existential faith “underlies, shapes, and supports the distinctive quality of a person’s existence or life, its fundamental sense of purpose and direction, aim and orientation” (*FR* 1). As indicated by this quotation, Crosby does not limit faith to religious belief. Rather it is an expression of Polanyi’s “fiduciary programme,” which may be religious or secular in nature. Existential faith describes the deepest values one indwells—the tacit acceptances that shape explicit belief and behavior. Faith and reason are interrelated for Crosby. He quotes Polanyi to the effect that existential faith is the personal pole inextricably bound to the universal pole we seek to truthfully discern

(*FR* 56, referring to *PK* 303 and 312). As is the case for Polanyi, so Crosby places the committed search for truth among the highest of values.

Crosby differs from Polanyi in the way he addresses the question of ultimacy in existence, although the difference between the two may not be as great as it first appears. Crosby sees nature itself as that which is ultimate; Polanyi refers to God. But it would be simplistic to see their different languages as representing a conflict between an atheist and a theist. Each thinker affirms the importance of religious sensibility and each has at times seen himself as a professed Christian. Indeed, when growing up in the South, attending Princeton Theological Seminary, and then serving as a Presbyterian minister for three years, Crosby was a more orthodox Christian than Polanyi ever seemed to be. For what reasons, then, did Crosby leave Christian ministry behind and come to advocate his current Religion of Nature?

## Evolution of Crosby's Thought

At the beginning of *A Religion of Nature* and in the concluding chapter of *Faith and Reason* Crosby tells the story of his personal journey of existential faith. He states that the primary emphasis for his change was “intellectual, but it also has had an important emotional or motivational aspect” (*FR* 132). What initially most seemed to raise intellectual questions for him was learning about “Biblical Criticism and its exposure of the all-too-human character of the Bible” (*FR* 135). Then when serving as a minister, he realized that his faith, nurtured among like-minded persons, had not prepared him well to answer the searching questions of his parishioners and the public at large. He felt called to seek out a teaching position where he could more honestly and openly explore religion. Work on his Ph.D. dissertation on the 19th century American theologian Horace Bushnell increased his appreciation of the role of metaphor and symbol in literature in general and religion in particular. The challenge of seeking adequate reasons for beliefs excited him and invited him to wider inquiry. “The study of Western philosophy and world religions opened up numerous fresh options for reflection, impelling me first to reassess my belief in the Incarnation and Trinity and later my belief in God” (*RN*7).

Philosophically, Crosby's thought is reliant upon and extends the American traditions of pragmatism and process thought. James, Dewey, and Whitehead are often cited influences.<sup>2</sup> But perhaps Spinoza most succinctly formulates the thesis about the nature of cosmological process that Crosby has come to adopt. “Spinoza's notion of *natura naturans* or 'nature naturing' can be conceived as the ultimate dynamic and creative principle or power implicit in nature itself and not residing in some transcendent divine Being” (*FR* 141). *Natura naturans* is to be contrasted with *natura naturata*, the natural structures that exist at any period of time. However, the former, which can

be linked to creativity in Whitehead's thought, is primordial. "At its most fundamental level, nature is process, not pattern" (*LA* 7).

Upon what does Crosby think natural processes are reliant? Does he refer to some Tillichian ground of being? Although he appreciates much that Tillich wrote, for Crosby nature itself is ultimate. "Whatever is real is either the whole, dynamic, ever-changing system of nature itself or some particular aspect or manifestation of that system. There is nothing beyond, behind, above, or below the powers of nature."<sup>3</sup> Because he understands nature to be ontologically ultimate, he rejects any references to God such as are found in pantheism, panentheism, or some varieties of religious naturalism. That being said, however, apart from avoiding any reference to God, Crosby's existential faith could be seen as a variety of pantheism, although not of the deterministic sort characteristic of Spinoza's version. Nature, not God, is the sacred whole.

Now it might seem that in replacing God with nature in his existential faith, Crosby has closed the door on any sort of *religious* faith. However, of course there are religious traditions that are not primarily theistic in nature, Theravada Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism among them. The Religion of Nature is an attempt to extend that list, and extend it in a way that is not simply an intellectual exercise, but in a way that attends to the emotion-evoking dimension of religious traditions as well.

Crosby appreciates many of the attributes of his youthful experience of religion: the warmth of church community, the felt relation to a providential God that cares, confidence in a life after death, and the like. He experienced the loss of his Christian faith as painful and anxiety producing, although also rather liberating.<sup>4</sup> So a natural question that loomed for him was whether he could recapture some of these earlier emotion-laden religious feelings in a way that he felt had intellectual integrity. That is, again, can a true *religion* of nature be formulated? There are some formidable obstacles.

## Ambiguous Nature

Perhaps the greatest obstacle is that nature seems not only uncaring, but often violent and destructive. How can that which produces earthquake, tornado, and wildfire—that which allows for a Hitler and Stalin as well as a Gandhi and Martin Luther King—be the legitimate object of religious devotion? One of the merits of Crosby's thought is that he does not flinch from engaging such questions. Indeed, the major objective of *Living with Ambiguity* is to confront them head on. Here are several ways he attempts to meet the challenge.

First, Crosby emphasizes the need to distinguish religious rightness from moral rightness.

My category of [religious] "rightness" does not require unambiguous moral goodness in nature. For one thing, nature is not a moral actor

in the sense that the theistic God is considered to be a moral actor, with conscious freedom of deliberation, intention, and action. So it makes no sense to hold nature morally responsible for its character or events. Nature can invite moral response and action from us as one of its species, as is shown in the concept of environmental ethics. But nature is not itself a moral being.<sup>5</sup>

In what sense, then, is nature a religiously right object? “What is right is for us to affirm our humble place in the whole scheme of things and to be thankful that we can be participants in this scheme, with the inestimable gifts of sentience and conscious awareness.”<sup>6</sup> Thankfulness in the Religion of Nature is a religiously apt state of mind, a reflection on the gift of existence, rather than an address to any entity. In some cases, religious and moral rightness overlap: “We should reverence all creatures of earth and the whole of nature as holy ground, even as we give due recognition to the reality of nature’s predations, disruptions, destructions, tragedies, and dangers” (*TN*139).

That a Hitler or Stalin can come into power and perform heinous acts is not best construed as a failure of nature. Rather it is an unfortunate possibility given human freedom. It is a failure of moral and political rightness, not religious rightness.

Indeed, an implication of the distinction between religious and moral rightness is that in “a religion of nature, there is no directive to emulate the ways of nature in one’s moral life...Nature as the object of faith can provide context and support for moral living but should not be expected to supply its specific precepts” (*LA* 85). Moral ideals arise out of reflection upon what actions and principles provide the best policies for living together harmoniously. Morality deals with actions under human control, while religion deals with the larger contexts of living, providing a “vision of what everything adds up to, what is its ultimate significance and worth...The religious search is a search for values and modes of awareness that can provide basis, orientation, and direction for the whole course of our lives” (*LA* 82).

Second, Crosby claims that nature is entitled to be regarded as religiously good not merely in spite of the ambiguities that occur within nature, but because these ambiguities are a necessary part of any life worth living. His quite ingenious approach to justify his position is to suggest that no more perfect world can be realistically imagined than the one we inhabit. What would a “world without risk or danger and devoid of any sort of ambiguity” (*LA* 24) look like?

The allegedly perfect natural world would need to be static and unchanging, or at least not exhibit any unexpected changes, in order to be entirely free of danger...If the changes were not always benign, they would have to be not only knowable but known in advance to the last detail, so that living beings could anticipate them at all

times and avoid being injured by them. Hence, there could be no such thing as novelty, unpredictability, or surprise in such a world. It would have to be causally determined in every detail and run with the smooth precision of a fine machine...There could be no such thing as death in this imagined perfect world. Some very basic things about the world would have to be fundamentally different from what they are now in order for it either to accommodate or avoid an exponentially increasing number of newborn creatures that would otherwise exceed its supply of natural resources and even its spatial dimensions (*LA* 24-25).

In sum, then, Crosby holds that in order to experience such goods as freedom, beauty, and creativity, there must be contrasting experiences devoid of goodness. “Love, compassion, and justice would merit no praise were there no contending impulses toward indifference, selfishness, bigotry, or hate” (*TA* 32). In a finite world, the creation of new species requires the extinction of old species; the birth of the young requires the death of the old. Any appreciation of goodness requires knowledge of its contrary.

Crosby’s demonstration that a “perfect” world would be sterile and uninviting involves taking a systemic, holistic view of why such a world is flawed. But another possible vision of perfection can also be conceived in which the sort of systemic problems Crosby chronicles are set aside. People sometimes dream of a world that is perfect *for them*, that grants their every desire, including the desires for challenge and novelty as well as pleasure. Indeed, such a vision has religious substance; it underlies many an offering and prayer. In this vision, Crosby’s view that nature must be ambiguous is denied.

If religion is to be understood as entailing recognition and honoring of that which is ultimate, then clearly the alternative vision just described must be seen as idolatrous—as a false version of religion.<sup>7</sup> For it exalts one’s own ego’s desires above the wishes of any other egos, or indeed over any other factors in the world. In prioritizing the desires of the self above all else, it fails morally as well as religiously. Crosby states that “religious symbols which focus primarily or exclusively on the wellbeing of oneself or only on that of those close to oneself are narcissistic rather than genuinely religious” (*MD* 127). Moreover, the systemic view Crosby offers of recognizing and dealing with reality in all its ambiguity is ontologically far more truthful than the egocentric monomania of the alternative vision, common though it may be.

A third argument Crosby employs to demonstrate the appropriateness of honoring ambiguous nature is that it does not fall subject to all the problems inherent in theodicy—in explaining how an all-good and all-powerful God allows so much evil and destruction in the world (*RN* 147). Crosby regards the book of Job as

a lame attempt to find some convincing explanations for why Yahweh would permit such a horrendous amount of pain and misfortune to afflict innocent persons. In Job's case, Yahweh brushes his anxious interrogator aside with the response that there is such an enormous distance and difference between Yahweh and a puny mortal like Job that Job could never hope to understand Yahweh's reasons or purposes (*LA* 53; see also *FR* 154).

By adopting this quite common interpretation of Job, Crosby disregards the section of the Bible that perhaps best supports his own Religion of Nature. For it is not the personal giver of laws that speaks to Job in Job 38-41, but rather a whirlwind, a force of nature. The many images that are offered in these three chapters are, again, images of nature and the processes of creation (Crosby's nature naturing) that bring things into being. Yes, the cosmology and cosmogony are archaic: God/nature is personified as one "who shut in the sea with doors, when it burst forth from the womb" (Job 38:8)—but ironically the womb is precisely the master cosmogonic and cosmological symbol for nature that Crosby suggests is most appropriate (see *MD* 91ff). I believe the poetic sections of Job were written out of recognition that the moral cause and effect view evident in Deuteronomy and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible is an illusion. One cannot control the divine by being good, and evil acts are not always punished. The vastness of creation, in which Behemoth and Leviathan dwell, where the ostrich deals cruelly with her young (Job 39:16), is an ambiguous natural order demanding respect, not a moral order.<sup>8</sup>

William James and some process theologians are among those who attempt to solve the problem of theodicy by postulating a limited God who honors goodness but who lacks the power to bring it about. Yet is it not weak and overly anthropocentric to try to manufacture a god that fits our yearning for moral leadership and ignores or at least leaves unexplained the vast and sometimes chaotic mystery of the universe?<sup>9</sup> "Such a God would be hopelessly small, limited, and abstract, in contrast with the vastness, complexity, and concreteness of the dynamic world of our experience" (*LA* 63). Henry Nelson Wieman attempts to escape ambiguity in religion by identifying God with those aspects of nature that are productive of goodness. But Crosby reiterates that goodness and evil go necessarily together in ways that are sometimes difficult to unscramble. He also notes that it "would be strange, if not incoherent, to affirm as religiously ultimate something that is not thought to be metaphysically ultimate" (*LA* 48). Again, religious wholeness should not be conflated with moral rightness.

## How Is Nature Best Understood?

Besides the ambiguity of natural occurrences, another potential obstacle to regarding nature as the religious ultimate is the very concept of nature itself.<sup>10</sup> Does the term “nature” have any determinate content or meaning? If nature is everything there is, then isn’t this term so impossibly broad and vague as to be useless as a religious object? Crosby recognizes that continually referring to nature as if it were a whole obscures the insight that nature has an uncountable number of facets which complement and oppose each other. Nature is both an “it” and a “they.” “Traditional notions of divine simplicity and unity, to say nothing of immutability, do not carry over into nature as I conceive it” (*LA* 114, n. 1). In contrast to such abstract theological attempts to characterize God, Crosby shies away from attributing any properties to nature as a whole. He does think that nature satisfies the six role-functions listed in footnote 7. Identifying functions, however, is different than naming attributes.

However, it is evident that a shift from regarding nature as a whole to a pluralistic conception of nature raises new issues with which the Religion of Nature must deal. If the onus is upon individuals to see as paradigmatically sacred those particular aspects of nature that speak to them, doesn’t that introduce a subjectivity into the Religion of Nature that is seriously in tension with any hoped for communal aspect of this existential faith? And isn’t there the threat of idolatry in emphasizing particular aspects of nature rather than the whole?

As at least a partial counter to such a threat, Crosby helpfully introduces the importance of synecdoches as tools for holding together parts and whole in a respectful unity. He argues that natural objects which are meaningful to one can stand as symbols of the whole of which they are a part. “Each part of nature, properly regarded, is a symbol of the whole and as such can evoke a sense of the sublimity and mystery of the whole. Each proclaims the glory of nature and our privilege as humans to be conscious participants in the processes of nature” (*MD* 141). The symbolic objects Crosby mentions from time to time—the pelican and the hummingbird, the setting sun and rising moon, a newborn child and the goods in one’s apartment—are affirmed because they are seen to be positive components of an examined life.<sup>11</sup> They conform to the emotionally meaningful aspects of living. Do these examples, however, contradict his claim that goodness should not be separated out from the ambiguity of nature as the focus of religiosity? Intellectually he argues that the destructive and painful aspects of living are a necessary part of the natural whole, but the Religion of Nature seems to have few emotionally significant resources for dealing with deep suffering. Yes, the death of a loved one may be compared to a leaf falling from a tree in autumn to enrich the soil (*MD* 145-147), but such an analogy offers little solace to a person whose child has died of cancer, or to the child of a parent who has committed suicide, or to any number of tragic events that occur.<sup>12</sup> Christianity and Buddhism provide responses to

suffering and tragedy that seem lacking in the Religion of Nature. To put the point slightly differently, the Religion of Nature seems suited to healthy-minded persons but offers little to the sick soul.

Crosby has a powerful response to the sort of concern I have just articulated. In reacting against theological positions that seem constructed to assure believers that their discontents register with a caring divinity, he notes that “*wanting* something to be a certain way is by no means an argument for its *being* that way” (*RN* 146). This again is the response of a healthy-minded individual who honors truth as perhaps the highest of values. With respect to the age-old controversy about whether to prioritize the loving illusion or the hard truth, Crosby is firmly on the side of the latter.

## Perspectival Truth and Relational Values

To be sure, Crosby understands that truth is often not easily secured. In fact, knowledge of the natural world as it is in itself is held to be impossible for epistemological reasons. Any human experience of the incredibly complex natural world is necessarily limited. “Experience is ineluctably partial and perspectival, and the many possible perspectives on any thing that is experienced, no matter how trivial it might seem to be, are inexhaustible” (*RN* 19). Crosby refers to Nietzsche as one who properly extends the notion of perspectivalism beyond human beings to the metaphysical structure of the world itself. Everything that exists, exists in relationship. “There are no isolated, entirely self-sufficient beings of any kind. What a thing is or becomes depends crucially on its contexts of relation” (*LA* 68). Perspectival epistemology is seamlessly linked to a relational metaphysics.

The relational metaphysics Crosby develops functions as an important vehicle for showing why the objective factuality of nature as interpreted in traditional epistemology is an abstraction blind to the actual qualities of their interactions with nature. “We can be powerfully stirred with feelings of awe and reverence as we behold a vista of rugged, snow-draped mountains stretching to the horizon, a soon-to-be mother bird’s patient, almost fastidious building of her nest, or the face and figure of a newborn child. The facts are taken into account in such experiences, but overtones of value surround these facts” (*RN* 65). In critiquing any strict fact-value dichotomy, here again Crosby and Polanyi share common ground. Developing his relational metaphysics, Crosby convincingly shows that “values are present in the *interactions* of subjects and objects rather than located in either aspect by itself” (*RN* 74). Humans are not the lone valuers; all sentient beings are purposeful sense-makers that can “identify, adapt to, and in many cases alter their environments by actively drawing upon resources within themselves” (*TN* 23). Throughout his writing, Crosby is sensitive to the philosophical and religious significance of tacit factors in animal life that typically come to expression as felt and emotional aspects of experience. Because of this, he argues that

“many life-forms in nature are richly deserving of carefully nurtured, resolutely practiced moral considerability and religious regard” (*TN* 25).

*The Thou of Nature* contains Crosby’s most fully developed perspective concerning some practical ethical implications of the Religion of Nature. Sentient beings are entitled, he argues, to the three ethical Rs of recognition, respect, and (human) responsibility. He adds a fourth R, one saturated with religious significance: reverence (*TN* 39-48). Based upon Schweitzerian reverence for life, Crosby lists six rights that accrue to conscious forms of life. These begin with the right to life and to a habitat that sustains life and end with the right to be free of needless suffering (*TN* 45-46). While he champions careful stewardship of all of nature, Crosby retains his awareness of the ambiguity of nature and distances himself from nature romanticism and sentimentality. Nevertheless, he argues that rodeos, circuses, zoos and aquariums impose harms that violate animal rights and should for the most part be abandoned (*TN* 136-137).

In *The Thou of Nature*, Crosby’s development of animal rights and environmental ethics is an example of responding to what he terms the “demand” side of the Religion of Nature. Besides a *demand* side, he also describes *assurance* and *empowerment* as experiential consequences that can and should follow from adopting an existential faith in the Religion of Nature. “The assurance aspect lies basically in the idea of our being at home in nature” (*FR* 150).<sup>13</sup> Assurance of our acceptance as creatures of nature leads to the demand that we “act in accordance with that assurance and...weave it ever more tightly into the fabric of our being” (*FR* 152). When we experience being at home in nature, knowing we are part of the drama of birth and death, we recognize not only the imperative to use the gift of life and our limited time wisely, but also experience how nature has provided us with the instincts, abilities, and resources to live well. That is, nature has empowered us individually and in community to develop and enjoy, with proper restrictions, our existence in this fascinating world.

I find myself wondering about the extent to which Crosby imports Christian concepts into his Religion of Nature without naming them as such. The demand dimension seems to correspond to the ethical and prophetic dimension; the assurance aspect to the Christian affirmation of God’s gracious love of all persons; empowerment to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. But of course what is important is not where concepts come from, but whether they truly illuminate the human situation and nurture human flourishing. This is not an issue that can be decided by argument, but only checked out existentially in life experience.

The question I am left with after immersing myself in Crosby’s writings is whether he has truly offered a *religion of nature*. *More Than Discourse* is his most sustained attempt to date to show how respect for nature can evolve into and take on forms of religious spirituality and practice. Let us examine this book to see how well it imbues ambiguous nature with religious qualities. Let us see how well it responds to a critique

offered some years ago by theologian Del Brown: “The objects of religious commitment and concern have a trait Crosby fails to note—they have social efficacy, they have the power to galvanize and move the social mind, to inspire collective loyalty and influence collective action.”<sup>14</sup> It is hard to see how ambiguous nature itself can motivate persons to form communities and undertake collective action, but can Crosby’s reconfigured Religion of Nature as a whole accomplish this?

## Religious Symbols

Crosby calls upon religious symbols (including synecdoches) as the key device needed to connect people existentially to nature understood religiously. Religious outlooks on life “crucially depend on symbolic modes of thought and conviction which frame vital meanings and truths that cannot be simply stated in literal terms” (*MD* xii). The term “symbol” is used in different ways. What does Crosby mean by the term? “I want to reserve the term symbol in this book for expressions of nondiscursive, nonpropositional, nonassertive types of meaning” (*MD* 4). In short, for Crosby symbols represent meanings evoked by sensuous experience. They seem to be what Susanne Langer called presentational symbols, as opposed to discursive consciousness reliant upon language. Langer describes what Crosby seems to mean by religious symbols in his initial description of them as non-discursive. “The symbolism furnished by our purely sensory appreciation of forms is a non-discursive symbolism, peculiarly well suited to the expression of ideas that defy linguistic ‘projection.’ Its primary function, that of conceptualizing the flux of sensations, and giving us concrete things in place of kaleidoscopic colors or noises, is itself an office that no language-born thought can replace.”<sup>15</sup> Let us look at some specific examples to better understand Crosby’s usage.

The opening passage in *More Than Discourse* describes a brown pelican spiraling in thermal updrafts far from shore just for the pleasure of it. The pelican’s flight functions for Crosby as “a compelling symbol of the numinous powers, presences, and wonders of the natural order to which we both miraculously belong” (*MD* 3). Crosby’s evocative response seems at first glance comparable to Kant’s understanding of how humans respond to the sublime. Kant did not reason from awe-inspiring experiences to the divine as did Rudolf Otto in *The Idea of the Holy*; rather Kant’s project of grounding the moral law provided him an indirect route to argue for the existence of God. Moreover, Kant understood experiences of the sublime to be merely subjective. More akin to Crosby’s religious symbols are Kant’s aesthetical ideas: “And by an aesthetical idea I understand that representation of the imagination which occasions much thought, without having any definite thought, i.e., any *concept*, being capable of being adequate to it; it consequently cannot be completely compassed and made intelligible by language.”<sup>16</sup> Thus Crosby’s imagination is stimulated by the beauty and glory of the pelican flying, and this evokes a state of reverence *for it as a symbol of creative nature*

(e.g., his state of mind has cognitive content and is thus more than a subjective feeling) without attaching that state to any definite concepts of nature and its processes. Nature in general is appreciated, but multidimensional nature is not coalesced into an object the way God is often thought of as some sort of transcendent object.

Crosby claims there are many types of religious symbols. They can be aspects or events of nature, historical settings or ways of life, imagined heroic quests, historical events, the ordeals and triumphs of persons, books or writings, sacred places, creation stories, parables, paradoxical expressions, rituals, buildings, gardens, paintings, and so on (*MD* 7-15). The multiplicity, diversity, and nature of these possible religious symbols suggest they are normally part of the mundane world, and there is nothing inherently religious about them. They function as religious symbols only when interpreted as such. Furthermore, in providing such a broad menu of possible religious symbols, Crosby shifts from a strict consideration of sensate material to include stories, historical events, sacred texts, and all sorts of discursive materials. The point he should be making, I believe, is that materials having religious significance, whether presentational or discursive, have felt tacit roots that resist full articulation in language and point beyond a literal understanding to issues of ultimate (or near-ultimate) significance.

Indeed, I do not find Crosby's privileging of imagery over discursive thought persuasive as a means of legitimating religion. Words can have diffuse but meaningful connotations as much as sensuous material. As Polanyi would emphasize, there are tacit factors equally operative in the formation of discursive and presentational thought.<sup>17</sup> What needs to be attacked on behalf of religious sensibility is overemphasis on the authority of logic and linear modes of thinking as the standards of cognitive reliability. Crosby's perspectival epistemology and relational metaphysics protect against the objectivism characteristic of much thought in the analytic tradition of philosophy as well as in scientism and its cognate forms. However, the earlier noted six role-functional categories Crosby thinks putative religious objects should have (Uniqueness, Primacy, Pervasiveness, Rightness, Permanence, and Hiddleness) might be an example of overly restrictive linear thinking if they were used inflexibly and exclusively to define true religious objects (see *RN* 118).<sup>18</sup>

As Kant's term *aesthetical* ideas suggests, religious symbols are similar in many respects to artistic symbols. They each rely on sensuous imagery, they cannot be fully captured in prosaic form, they cannot be substituted one for another since each is unique in meaning, and each has a holistic, non-reducible meaning (*MD* 31). However, a religious symbol is seen as different from an artistic symbol in two ways. It is "not self-referring, self-contained, or exclusively self-related... The distinctive value and meaning of the religious symbol lie solely in the source or basis of ultimate meaning and value to which it refers" (*MD* 31-32). Secondly, "a religious symbol is embedded within and

makes tacit, if not explicit, reference to many other religious symbols that help to give it its own character and import. Unlike a work of art, it is not self-sufficient or exclusively self-referring in this second regard" (*MD* 33).

The two ways Crosby thinks religious symbols are different from artistic symbols makes little or no sense to me. One could take Da Vinci's "Mona Lisa," Picasso's "Guernica," or Mondrian's "Broadway Boogie-Woogie" as self-contained and subject it to a purely aesthetic analysis in terms of its forms, textures, and colors. But one could do the same to an Eastern Orthodox icon, a medieval altarpiece, or Chagall's "White Crucifixion" as described by Crosby (*MD* 34-35). Likewise, an icon gains its capacity to function as a religious symbol by a network of traditional, theological, and topological influences, but the symbolic significance of, say, "Guernica" is also a situated meaning insofar as knowledge of the Spanish Civil War, the artistic genre of cubism, and placement in a museum is concerned. What is crucial in determining what functions as an artistic or religious symbol is the framework of intention one brings to the perception and interpretation of the object's meaning.<sup>19</sup> To be sure, crucifixes, mandalas, and prayer rugs have conventional religious functions, but unless a religious adherent makes use of them with a religiously informed disposition, they do not function as religious symbols. Reliance upon properly focused *personal* religious intentionality is particularly acute for the Religion of Nature, because it has established no socially established conventional religious symbols that evoke religious thought and practice.

One of Crosby's purposes in *More Than Discourse* is to suggest specific objects and events that might most forcefully function as religious symbols for those with an existential faith in the Religion of Nature. It should be noted that while he lists a vast number of things and events that might function as religious symbols, in the process of focusing on the relation of religious symbols to artistic ones he swerves from further consideration of the multiplicity of potential symbols and the role of intentionality in regarding them as symbolic. He reverts to a rather objectivist view of symbols. In this respect he deviates from Polanyi's understanding of meaning. For Polanyi, words and objects may have conventional meanings, but only through the personal act of sense-giving does this potential meaning become actualized.

Water is Crosby's candidate for functioning as the master symbol of the religious ultimacy of nature. Here the Religion of Nature seems to appropriate a notion central to Daoism. The cosmogonic and cosmological master symbol he selects, as mentioned previously, is the womb, "a symbol that can allude to the origins of the cosmos, its evolutionary developments, and its present character" (*MD* 91). For symbolizing the saving path that the Religion of Nature advocates, he offers first a historical narrative concerning how humans have wandered from an ecologically sound relation to nature by favoring instrumental reasoning, a mechanistic worldview, and resource

depleting technology. This is followed by a restorative ecological view featuring assurance, demand, and empowering love. Daniel Quinn's novel *Ishmael* is cited as providing a thought provoking literary expression of the needed pathway (MD 155-159). Crosby also recognizes that religions flourish best when models of righteous behavior are evident to those of the faith. His exemplar of the saving path of the Religion of Nature is John Muir (MD 112-116).

What must happen if these religious symbols are to take hold? They must evoke emotional responses attuned to questions of ultimacy. They must manifest existential truth, that is, "truths to be lived in the wholeness of one's life, not just truths to be believed or to warrant only intellectual assent" (MD 121). Crosby also thinks they must be supported by embodied practices. Somewhat surprisingly, he maintains that prayer is an important spiritual practice, although of course it is not meaningful to address prayer *to* nature, but only on its behalf. The power of rituals, stories, and music is also affirmed, although it is not Crosby's intention to flesh out such material.

## Conclusion: A Christian Religion of Nature?

Does this summary offer convincing evidence that Del Brown's criticism of Crosby's Religion of Nature is unwarranted? Alas, I think his honest portrayal of the ambiguity of nature as the religious ultimate continues to be an obstacle to the formation of any religious community or ongoing institution. Despite Crosby's attempts to dress nature in emotionally powerful symbolic clothing, ambiguous nature still seems to be a lonely intellectual at the party of world religions. Philosophical concepts, not religious symbols, are the soul of his Religion of Nature. This is not a criticism of what Crosby has written, for I admire what he achieves philosophically and for what he attempts religiously. But without some adjustments, it seems the Religion of Nature will not come to fruition as a religion, and instead Donald Crosby's name will be inscribed in the long list of prominent Americans who as individuals praise and emulate nature in a manner that is more philosophical than religious. That list includes Emerson, Thoreau, Walt Whitman, John Muir, and Annie Dillard.<sup>20</sup>

But Crosby's hope for religious vitality, and thus perhaps broader influence, need not be abandoned. What is first needed is considering how religious communities generally come into being. Almost without exception, they arise out of a critique or expansion of an existing religious tradition. I believe that with minor adjustments, the Religion of Nature can thrive in a similar role. What is needed is to bring moral considerations more directly into the fold of the Religion of Nature than Crosby does. Ambiguous nature needs to be complemented by a life-giving model of how to flourish in spite of injustices, different sorts of suffering, and life's culmination in death. I will briefly suggest one way this might be done within the Christian tradition,

acknowledging that there are many other possible ways in Christianity and other religious traditions.<sup>21</sup>

The concept of the Trinity can be used as a template for bringing into a kind of unity ambiguous nature, moral vision, and transformed spirituality. In place of the traditional God the Father (the Creator), ambiguous creative nature, especially in the form of *natura naturans*, nature naturing, has a position of ultimacy. Within a Christian Religion of Nature, the Son (Jesus the Christ) would be regarded as a sacred but not supernatural revealer of moral spirituality. And those who indwell and practice the loving spirit revealed by Jesus and further developed in the tradition by Paul, Saint Francis, and innumerable others would experience transformation from egocentricity into what could be called a Holy Spirit of compassionate ecological sensitivity.

The sort of transfiguration of orthodox theology called for in this new version of the Trinity seems no more radical than the transformation of Judaic legalism Jesus inaugurated. It has the merit of incorporating and integrating a scientific understanding of the world with moral vision and existential potency. Through Crosby's diligent exposition, the ambiguity of nature can be validated and shown to have necessary but not sufficient religious implications. I applaud him for his unflinching honesty, his persistent exploration of the possibilities resident in religious naturalism, and the rigor of his thought. I look forward to seeing what he develops in his next book, *Nature as Sacred Ground: A Metaphysics for Religious Naturalism*, which should be published by the time this review article appears.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Michael S. Hogue, *The Promise of Religious Naturalism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), xx. In this work Hogue carries out a quite thorough comparison and contrast between the theories of religious naturalism developed by Crosby, Jerome Stone, Ursula Goodenough, and Loyal Rue. For summaries of Hogue's findings, see my review of his book in *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 32:3 (September 2011), 271-276 and Diane Yeager's review with a helpful table of comparison in *Tradition and Discovery* 39:2 (2012-2013), 61-64.

<sup>2</sup>Crosby is the author of *The Philosophy of William James: Radical Empiricism and Radical Materialism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013). In harmony with the notion of radical empiricism, he cites James, Dewey, and Whitehead as being appropriately open to "a wide range of modes of experience" in addressing and assessing theological and philosophical theories and in constructing his own thought (see *RN* 49-50).

<sup>3</sup>Donald A. Crosby, "Naturism as a Form of Religious Naturalism," *Zygon* 38:1 (March 2003), 117.

<sup>4</sup>In *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources & Criticisms of Modern Nihilism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), Crosby elaborates on the many sources of nihilism that have emerged in Western culture, perhaps including some aspects of which he may have experienced in the process of leaving behind his Christian faith.

<sup>5</sup>Donald A. Crosby, “The Distinctiveness of Religion and Religious Value,” *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 26:3 (September 2005), 200.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 201.

<sup>7</sup>Crosby declares that there are six basic role-functional categories that determine whether a putative religious object is authentically religious. The six categories are uniqueness, primacy, pervasiveness, rightness, permanence, and hiddenness (RN 118). They can be seen as jointly contributing to a vision of ultimacy. The version of perfection involving a god that satisfies an individual's desires obviously fails to satisfy these criteria taken as a whole.

<sup>8</sup>This interpretation of Job depends upon distinguishing the prosaic account at the beginning and end of the book—the story in which God allows Satan to test Job and righteous actions are rewarded—from the poetic content in which Job's complaints about justice and Yahweh's answer as ambiguous nature appears. For a more detailed account, see Walter B. Gulick, “The Bible and Ecological Spirituality,” *Theology Today* 48:2 (July 1991): 182-194, especially 189-190.

<sup>9</sup>Crosby argues convincingly that the assumption that the universe needs explaining does not stand up to careful reflection. “The assumption, often unrecognized and unanalyzed, is that nothingness is a more natural state of things than somethingness...But sheer nothingness is unintelligible. Why should we assume that it is a more natural state than somethingness?” (LA 97).

<sup>10</sup>Jerome Stone's reflections on the adequacy of Nature to serve as the religious ultimate seem to the point here. “Is Nature enough? Hardly! Nature is not self-explanatory. Nature is not completely meaningful. Nature does not provide for complete and final fulfillment of our deepest desires and longings. Nature does not provide answers to our moral queries...But it's all we have, and it will have to do” See his “Is Nature Enough? Yes,” *Zygon* 38:4 (December 2003): 783.

<sup>11</sup>There is a challenge that Crosby has not yet fully addressed concerning how to make the Religion of Nature's conceptuality relevant to the worldview of city dwellers. In our culture it is more natural for urbanites to credit their everyday amenities to the creative work of scientists, engineers, economists, city planners, and human activities in general than it is to credit nature.

<sup>12</sup>Crosby recognizes that he has mostly led a happy and healthy life, and he respects the complaints of those who have been less fortunate than he. They may well feel he has “no business proclaiming the rightness of nature or its fitness as a focus of religious faith” (LA 65). Were his experience of life different, his perspective on nature would also likely be different, but he has to be true to the insights his experience has granted him.

<sup>13</sup>The phrase “at home in the universe” has in recent years been used to counter the existentialist notion that we live as alienated being in a meaningless world—a notion that follows naturally from the ontological dualisms that prevailed in positivism and other schools of thought featuring a fact-value dichotomy. It was the title of a book by Stuart Kauffman on emergent (and value creating) self-organization published twenty years ago, a cosmological view that Crosby affirms.

<sup>14</sup>Delwin Brown, “Religion and Reverence for Nature: Donald A. Crosby's *Religion of Nature*,” *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 26:3 (September 2005), 175.

<sup>15</sup>Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 93; see also 98 and 145.

<sup>16</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1966), paragraph 49 (157).

<sup>17</sup>To offset the confusing slipperiness of Crosby's understanding of religious symbols, some terminological adjustment may be useful. I have argued that religious symbols are best seen as a type of existential symbol, by which I mean "words, objects, images, or events that represent something of personal significance beyond what they literally seem to mean in everyday existence." See my "The Thousand and First Face," in Daniel C. Noel, ed., *Paths to the Power of Myth: Joseph Campbell and the Study of Religion* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 38. A religious symbol, then, is a type of existential symbol, one that has been shaped by a religious tradition. It is a vehicle for creating religious meaning.

<sup>18</sup>Crosby worked out these role-functional categories he thinks religions possess in his *Interpretive Theories of Religion* (The Hague: Mouton, 1981).

<sup>19</sup>Polanyi helpfully emphasizes what objects are taken to mean rather than focusing on the objects themselves. "Appreciation of a work of art requires belief in what it *means*." See Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 92. What Polanyi says about meaning in art applies even more to his thought about religious meaning.

<sup>20</sup>For an interpretation of how nature has been viewed throughout Christian history, a good source is H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985). Catherine L Albanese gives an account of the strong undercurrent of personal nature worship as it has unfolded in American history. See her *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>21</sup>See Walter B. Gulick, "Religious Naturalism: A Framework of Interpretation and a Christian Version," *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 34:2 (May 2013), 154-174.