

NATURISM AS A FORM OF RELIGIOUS NATURALISM

by Donald A. Crosby

Abstract. The version of religious naturalism sketched here is called *naturism* to distinguish it from conceptions of religious naturalism that make fundamental appeal to some idea of deity, deities, or the divine, however immanent, functional, nonontological, or purely valuational or existential such notions may be claimed to be. The focus of naturism is on nature itself as both metaphysically and religiously ultimate. Nature is sacred in its own right, not because of its derivation from some more-ultimate religious principle, state, being, beings, or order of being. Humans, their cultures, and their histories are conceived as integral parts of nature, manifestations of potentialities that lie within it and have been actualized by biological evolution. While there is no purpose of nature, the natural order contains beings capable of purposive behavior. With this purposive behavior, and the goals and ideals implicit in it, humans have the capacity to give significant direction to their ongoing cultural evolution and to discover and maintain their appropriate place within the community of creatures.

Keywords: biological evolution; chance; cosmic epochs; cultural evolution; freedom; God; gods; humans as integral parts of nature; *natura naturans*; *natura naturata*; natural sciences; nature; novelty; purpose; purposive behavior; religious ultimacy of nature.

I should first like to respond to the four-point characterization of religious naturalism in Jerome Stone's presentation (see Stone 2003, 112).

First, I agree that only nature is real. 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.

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Second, I agree that no reason beyond itself is required to explain nature's existence or its continuing existence in some shape or form. However, I do not think that any given "cosmic epoch" (see Whitehead 1978, 91) is "necessary." I make a distinction between *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*. The former is nature as we now experience it, the present cosmic epoch in which we live. But I believe that there is a succession of such epochs, and *natura naturans* is the term I use to indicate the fecund, restless, and relentless power that underlies and gives rise to each of them. In fact, I believe that there *could not be but one cosmic epoch*, because novelty will inevitably erode all existing constituents, laws, and principles of our epoch, replacing it eventually, over eons of time, with other epochs.

Third, I agree that nature as a whole can be understood without appeal to any kind of intelligence or purposive agent. Nature itself has no overarching, all-inclusive purpose or goal. However, I would add that, while nature has no purpose, there is abundant manifestation of purpose *within* nature, e.g., in the outlooks and actions of purposive beings.

Fourth, the idea that all causes are natural causes is acceptable to me so long as it is understood that nature exhibits not just the workings of efficient causes and effects but also the presence of novelty, chance, freedom, and genuine purposiveness. My insistence on the importance of *natura naturans* grows out of my firm belief in novelty, a novelty that continues, as Henri Bergson puts it, to "gnaw" at reality and to produce unpredictable changes in it (Bergson 1919, 48). This novelty is nothing separate from nature but something immanent within it, something every bit as fundamental and real as efficient causality. Human freedom is one expression of this presence of novelty in nature.

I would add a fifth fundamental trait of naturalism as I conceive it. Humans are an integral part of nature; they are fully, completely, and unequivocally natural beings. The distinctions between humans and other biological organisms are ones of degree, not of kind. Their histories and cultures are expressions of immanent powers of nature, not something existing independently of nature or over against nature. Moreover, humans are not the crown or apex of nature but only one of the myriad spinoffs of its irrepressibly creative workings. Instead of distinguishing human histories and cultures from nature, as is so often done, I distinguish between human and nonhuman aspects of nature.

I want to say something about what I consider to be the distinctive character of my version of religious naturalism. Some of this is already implicit in the modifications or additions I have just made to the description of naturalism in Stone's presentation. But let me add the following.

My version of religious naturalism contains no God, gods, or animating spirits of any kind. Nor do I speak of the "divine" or engage in God-talk of any kind, except to contrast such discourse with my own view. Nature in

and of itself is, for me, religiously ultimate. It is *a* fitting and in my judgment *the most* fitting focus of religious commitment and concern. In it we live, move, and have our being.

Accordingly, I prefer to call my version of religious naturalism *naturism* in order to distinguish it from conceptions of religious naturalism that make fundamental appeal to some idea of deity, deities, or the divine, however immanent, functional, nonontological, or purely valuational or existential such notions may be claimed to be. I do not do theology in my explorations into a religion of nature; instead, I do what might be called *physisology*.

Finally, what are chief issues or problems facing my particular type of religious naturalism today? The following seem especially important to me.

1. The assumption, especially in the West, that religion must focus on some kind of personal God or gods and the accompanying tendency to identify nontheism with a denial of the meaning, importance, or value of religion.

2. The notion that the universe as a whole must have some purpose or goal given to it by a creator God in order for there to be significant purposes and goals in human lives. The two issues are separate, not intimately related, as has long been thought. We can and do find many kinds of purposes, values, and sources of meaning in our lives, ones that can be discovered and cherished from within and do not need to be conferred upon us from without.

3. The supposition—long taken for granted in the West—that nature requires a transcendent ground or explanation for its existence. I argue that nature is self-explanatory and self-contained. It is the context within which all meaningful explanations take place. It makes sense to attempt to explain things within nature and in terms of natural processes and nature's immanent powers, but there is no need to think that we must seek some explanation for nature itself. Nature in some shape or form always has existed and always will exist; it is for me metaphysically as well as religiously ultimate.

4. The idea that the term *nature* refers exclusively or primarily to the accounts of nature or aspects of nature provided by the natural sciences. There is much more to the concept of nature than can be captured adequately by scientific descriptions and explanations. More complete understandings of nature require all of the resources of human thought and creativity, including philosophy, history, the arts, morality, and religion. The fullness of nature cannot be reduced to any one of these modes of inquiry; it requires complementary relations and interactions of them all.

5. The arrogance, presumption, and narrowness of thought that sees humans as the apex of nature as a whole or even as the culmination or goal of evolutionary processes on this planet. We are radically interdependent

parts of nature, not lords over nature. Our consciousness and freedom give us important responsibilities as citizens of nature, but they are responsibilities that grow out of our humble place within a natural order that includes us but is not focused on us.

6. The belief, growing partly out of Western theism and Platonic mind-body dualism, that the ideal form of existence is disembodied and independent of the physical world. This belief is reflected in the traditional Western conception of God as pure spirit and as utterly transcendent over the world, and in the idea that we humans are created in the image of this God. As natural beings, we are embodied beings through and through, and we must take our bodies and the bodies of all things around us with utmost seriousness. Our home is here, not in some wholly spiritual, disembodied realm beyond this world. And all our prospects and duties focus here, not elsewhere. Our nature and destiny are those of embodied beings who come into being and will pass away. But before we do so, we can make our contributions to those who will live after us, not only other humans but the nonhuman life forms with whom we are privileged and obliged to live in mutually nurturing community. In other words, religion need not have as its reason for being the hope of an afterlife. It can center on the quality of one's life and contributions here and now. Salvation and salvific living can take place within a limited time frame. It need not be something everlasting. Religion and the hope of immortality are not one and the same.

7. The common, deep-rooted tendency to draw a sharp line of separation between human beings and their cultures and histories, on the one hand, and nature, on the other hand, rather than seeing all features and productions of human life as manifestations of nature. The proper contrast, as I noted earlier, is not between culture and nature but between the human and the nonhuman aspects of nature.

8. The assumption that nature is wasteful, cruel, and indifferent and thus in no sense a fitting focus of religious commitment. In chapter 7 of my book *A Religion of Nature* (2002) I respond to these three characterizations of nature and explain why they do not hold up under careful analysis. In doing so, I seek to show, among other things, that these assumptions about nature display ignorance of its functionings, false attributions of intentionality to it, one-sided ways of thinking about it, or forgetfulness of the fact that we human beings are integral parts of the natural order.

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