

# METAPHYSICS MATTERS: METAPHYSICS AND SOTERIOLOGY IN JEROME STONE'S AND DONALD CROSBY'S VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS NATURALISM

by Stefani Ruper

*Abstract.* Religious naturalism is distinct from supernatural religion largely because of metaphysical minimalism. Certain varieties of religious naturalism are more minimalist than others, however, and some even eschew metaphysics altogether. But is anything lost in that process? To determine metaphysics' degree of relevance to religious function, I compare the soteriology of the "ontologically reticent" *Minimalist Vision* of Jerome Stone to that of the ontologically rich *Religion of Nature* of Donald Crosby. I demonstrate that for these varieties of religious naturalism: (1) metaphysics influences soteriology; (2) metaphysical minimalism limits soteriological potential; and (3) metaphysics enhances soteriological potential. These conclusions lead me to assert the relevance of metaphysics to religious function, specifically for these varieties of religious naturalism, as well as to urge investigation into religious experience and quality as they may relate to metaphysics.

*Keywords:* Donald Crosby; Clifford Geertz; metaphysics; religious naturalism; soteriology; Jerome Stone; ultimacy

---

Many varieties of religious naturalism have been deliberately constructed in order to create distance between them and supernatural religion. Each constructor has done so with different priorities, however, so the spectrum of beliefs in religious naturalism comprises immanent conceptions of personal theism on one end and wholesale rejection of metaphysics on the other. Jerome Stone (2008) stands out as one thinker who has championed the metaphysically minimal end of the spectrum. Forgoing metaphysics, he asserts, has the benefits not just of metaphysical honesty but also of solving the problems of "fanaticism" and "obscurantism" that are so often a part of the theistic package. But is anything lost in the process of stripping religion of metaphysics?

Stone is not the only thinker who denies the potency of metaphysics. As the foundationalism of modern philosophy has faded to the history books and the social aspects of religion have risen to the limelight via the

Stefani Ruper is a graduate student in Philosophy of Religion at Boston University, 745 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston MA 02215, USA; e-mail stefaniruper@gmail.com.

work of prominent theorists of religion such as Emile Durkheim (1912) and Peter Berger (1969), metaphysics has fallen out of academic vogue. Metaphysics as a part of the whole of religious belief serves a function to these thinkers, certainly, but this function is often cast primarily as sociological. Nonetheless, many prominent thinkers such as Mircea Eliade and Clifford Geertz have advocated for the centrality of metaphysics to religious function and quality as a whole, often emphasizing personal cognitive aspects of it. Geertz in particular believed that metaphysics was the pillar of religious function and quality and that it plays a significant role in delivering religious benefits to individuals and communities. Given that religious naturalism comprises a broad spectrum of degrees of metaphysical commitment, religious naturalism as it is evolving today provides fertile testing ground for Geertz's theory. Is metaphysics important, as theorists such as Geertz have asserted, or is it a thing of the past, something that can be done away with while maintaining religious quality and function?

This is a broad and complex question. Accordingly I narrow the analysis in two primary steps. First, I focus on the functional benefits that might be contingent upon metaphysics, bracketing substantive, sociological, phenomenological, and all other interpretations of religion. Second, within the realm of function, I narrow my focus even further to salvation. This may seem an odd choice, since salvation is a traditionally Christian term and might not immediately come to mind as a component of naturalistic religion. Salvation is, however, an excellent choice for this exercise since the varieties of religious naturalism I analyze here each address and articulate their own brands of soteriology. Furthermore, these soteriologies have far more in common than they do in contrast, which minimizes the potential variables with which we might otherwise have to wrestle. With fewer variables, the role of metaphysics is enabled to shine all the more brightly: more metaphysics, we see quite clearly, increases soteriological potential.

The varieties of religious naturalism I have chosen for this analysis are the "ontologically reticent"<sup>1</sup> *Minimalist Vision* of Jerome Stone and the ontologically rich *Religion of Nature* of Donald Crosby. I demonstrate how each version of salvation is at least somewhat contingent upon metaphysics, and therefore that metaphysics is relevant for their respective degrees and flavors of soteriological potential. The metaphysical willingness of Donald Crosby enables the Religion of Nature to offer a richer version of salvation than the Minimalist Vision does. This makes metaphysics a relevant, consequential component of religious naturalism.

#### CLIFFORD GEERTZ AND METAPHYSICS AS "INTERPRETIVE GLOSS"

Twentieth century anthropologist Clifford Geertz is crucial for this analysis in two respects. First, he provides the hypothesis for testing.<sup>2</sup> In religion, which Geertz considers to be a symbol system that helps individuals and

communities navigate an otherwise chaotic cosmos, metaphysics is the means by which people “establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations” (1973, 90). It is the “frame” that gives order to life and the religious quality to lived experience. Because of this potent orienting capacity, metaphysics is manifested in symbols, grounds rituals, and unites communities.<sup>3</sup> It is the root of all religious function. Does Geertz’s insistence that metaphysics has functional benefits hold to any extent for religious naturalism?

Second, recent scholarship on Geertz provides important elucidation as to what I mean by “metaphysics.” This is important given how loosely the term has been applied, not only in Geertz’s work, but also in the study of religion as a whole.

Nancy Frankenberry and Hans Penner (1999) have charged Geertz with committing the philosophical error of scheme-content dualism as articulated by Donald Davidson (1984).<sup>4</sup> This is because Geertz often uses ordering or categorizing language, such as “framework,” “order,” and “orientation” to describe the role that metaphysics plays in an individual’s life. Through metaphysics, says Geertz, religion provides the framework with which one becomes “generally oriented to nature”: people have a “drive to make form and order” that religion satisfies (1973, 99). Frankenberry and Penner demonstrate why this language is problematic, however: words such as “framework” and “order” indicate epistemic priority in their estimation. They believe that Geertz prioritizes religion as a “conceptual scheme” or some sort of pre-cognitive apparatus. This charge, if true of Geertz, would render his theory highly suspect, since Davidson has demonstrated the flaws inherent in prioritizing organizational schemes over content.<sup>5</sup>

Geertz does not commit this error, however. In a thorough response to Frankenberry and Penner’s charge, Kevin Schilbrack demonstrates that while Geertz used the language of “framework” in theoretical writings, the examples that Geertz cites from field work do not use metaphysics as pre-cognitive epistemic schemes, but rather, in Schilbrack’s words, as “interpretive glosses.” These interpretive glosses “orient and tell their members what to think” (Schilbrack 2005, 445). They do not pre-cognitively determine the shape of the world. I believe this is further demonstrated by the fact that when Geertz articulates four different perspectives on the world—the religious, the scientific, the common-sensical, and the aesthetic—he does not give religion world-defining power over the commonsensical or the scientific.<sup>6</sup> In Geertz’s words, the function of metaphysics is to order reality in such a way as to provide a “vocabulary” that helps individuals “grasp the nature of [their] distress and relate it to the wider world” (1973, 105). To be clear, metaphysical statements that religions are interested in *do* concern the nature of reality as such; the important point is that they are not prior to the secular perspectives. The real problem with engaging Geertz’s scholarship is not that he tangles reality up with epistemology, but rather

that the language of “frameworks” later became a signal in philosophy for this problematic position.<sup>7</sup>

Metaphysics as an orienting and interpretive layer is the real sense in which Geertz used the term “metaphysics,” and it is what I take metaphysics to mean as well. Metaphysics, to use Crosby’s words, “tackles the question of how the multiple dimensions of experience can be brought into coherent, meaningful relation to one another . . . its job is to understand how all of the domains fit together” (2002, 53). Metaphysics is what an individual believes the structure of reality is, not pre-cognitively but cognitively and formed through the whole variety of ways of knowing and navigating the world. “Metaphysics” in this article thus refers to overarching assertions concerning the nature of reality. Unfortunately, while Geertz and Crosby use the term “metaphysics” in this way, Stone uses “ontology”; the phrase “ontological reticence” denotes his commitment to refraining from making unjustified claims in this realm.<sup>8</sup> To that end, “ontology” and “metaphysics” are used here interchangeably.

Metaphysics does not belong solely to the realm of religion, yet religions often make metaphysical claims or take certain metaphysical claims to be of religious interest. When they do so, they interpret the cosmos in a particular light that necessarily entails a layer of interpretation and renders the cosmos significant to the individual in some regard. For example, a metaphysical view that includes heaven means that one may attain eternal life, or taking nature as ultimate may mean that the finite nature of human life needs to be accepted and affirmed. As such, at least some interpretive functions of religion require metaphysics. As a variety of religious naturalism that makes and interprets as few metaphysical statements as possible, the Minimalist Vision entails very little metaphysical interpretive gloss. As a variety of religious naturalism that is rife with metaphysical assertions, Crosby’s Religion of Nature is rich in religiously significant interpretations of reality.

The different degrees to which these thinkers embrace metaphysics hinges on their standards of justified belief. On one hand, Stone adheres to a “generous empiricism” that does not admit metaphysical statements without generous empirical backing, the stance he takes to be the most intellectually honest position. This does not mean that he does not accept or make metaphysical assertions. There is, in particular, one metaphysical claim significant to the Minimalist Vision: the notion that value is “objectively real.” There is some level of “depth” to reality according to Stone, and he recognizes it in the Minimalist Vision as values that exist in objective reality to be interpreted by subjects (1992, 84) and in “the continually transcendent presupposition and goal” of the pursuit of these values (1992, 40). Nonetheless, this is as far as Stone is willing to go. Crosby, on the other hand, finds nothing objectionable with easily integrating specific values such as life, creativity, splendor, and diversity (that exist in the

interrelation between subject and object; see 2002, 74) in his cosmos, the metaphysical ultimacy of nature, or the creative nature of the cosmos, all of which entail religious significance. These metaphysical claims are coherent with Crosby's own brand of empirical inquiry, one he bases on "broad experience" (2002, 52) and an "empirical-constructive" approach to nature (2002, 74). In this article, I do not argue that one system is more "true" than the other. I also do not assert that religious proposals that include metaphysics are in any way superior to those which do not.

#### JEROME STONE'S MINIMALIST VISION

Jerome Stone's Minimalist Vision is ideal for testing the relevance of metaphysics because the Minimalist Vision is about as ontologically bare as a religion can get. Stone deliberately crafted it this way. He set out to strip religion of its "fanatical" and "obscurantist" dangers while simultaneously preserving the power with which it orients human beings to the good—a task Stone believes is best accomplished by eschewing metaphysics. Stone's constructive method therefore is to investigate world religions, to develop a reasonably universal framework for them, and then to use this framework in conjunction with "generous empiricism" to construct, in his estimation, a worldview sufficiently similar in religious quality and function to that of religions in general.<sup>9</sup>

The framework Stone develops comprises the skeleton of most religions, and the bones are organized in what Stone calls the "triadic schema." In the triadic schema, each religion has a transcendent source, usually God or the gods, and two poles of relationship to that source.<sup>10</sup> These poles are those of "blessing or salvific transformation" on one hand and "obedience or divine judgment" on the other.<sup>11</sup> One example of the triad at work is the theology of Martin Luther. Luther's God (the transcendent source) offers eternal life on one hand (pole of blessing) but requires whole-hearted faith (pole of demand) on the other. The result of engagement with the triad is salvation. The triad does not necessarily *have* to be interpreted soteriologically, Stone asserts, but he cedes that the myriad of thinkers who have analyzed religion and have characterized it as soteriological such as John E. Smith (1970) have a fair point. In order to make sure that the religious vision Stone constructs is properly religious, then, Stone charges himself not just with crafting a naturalistic concept of a transcendent source, a pole of "blessing" and a pole of "demand," but also with providing means by which the Vision's triad can perform the salvific function. This version of salvation is a secular and ontologically reticent one. As such, it joins many of the naturalist conceptions of salvation in being somewhat distant cousins to more typical and supernatural conceptions such as heaven, eternal life, and God's eternal favor. Any naturalist version of salvation cannot contain these things. But the Minimalist Vision entails, in Stone's

preferred language, “transformation.” Transformation for him is processive, never ending, and concretely within the real world in the present time. It entails the amelioration of suffering and the continual betterment of the self on one hand relative to what is objectively real and important on the other.

#### THE REAL RESOURCES AND IDEAL CHALLENGES OF THE MINIMALIST VISION

The transcendent source of the Minimalist Vision constitutes “real creative processes transcendent in a significant sense to our ordinary experience” (Stone 1992, 12). Is the transcendent source an ontological reality from which all values spring? Stone states explicitly that it is not. Even while there is a sense of unity among transcendent resources in the world, there is no “one” that stands over and above the “many” resources. The “source,” then, is simply the nearly infinite but still discrete collection of real resources available in the world. By “real,” Stone refers to “the unexpected and uncontrolled processes in the universe insofar as they are productive of good” (1992, 13). These vary by situation and by individual discernment, but they are united by their appearance as blessings, and comprise the “pole of blessing.” Unexpected moments of healing, for example, flurries of productivity or insight, or surprising forgiveness are real blessings outside of any individual’s control. They are concrete parts of the world, but nevertheless they merit “sensitive appreciation” and grateful, trusting, and even reverent orientation.

The sense of unexpected grace that accompanies the pole of blessing is why this pole is salvific or “transformational.” In moments of despair, we can hope that some real aspect of the world will save us. In moments of sadness, we can count our blessings, and be grateful for all of the beauty, support, and love we have in other parts of our lives. In moments of hardship, we can lean on the real resources of community support, professional help, and healing around us. The world does act to bless, heal, and save us in unexpected and powerful ways.

The pole of demand, on the other hand, constitutes “the set of all continually challenging ideals insofar as they are worthy of pursuit” (Stone 1992, 16). The religiously important role of ideals is their function as a “lure.” Ideals cannot be fully achieved; instead, they “continually challenge us to new attainment beyond our present level” (Stone 1992, 16). Stone borrows from theologian Paul Tillich four categories of the ideal: reflective inquiry, art, the moral life, and social responsibility, which includes ecological responsibility. In each of these realms, ideal production and behavior forever lure us forward, demanding higher and levels of actualization. Ideals are meant to be transformational in that their “sensitively determined” objective worth demands a response. There is no ontological

impetus: there is, instead, a presupposition for action constituted by “our sense of the worthwhileness of the pursuit of meaning” (Stone 1992, 40). Ideals are salvific or transformational because they provide values around which lives can and should be oriented, and they provide purpose, healing, hope, and concrete benefits to individuals and communities.

#### THE SOTERIOLOGICAL POTENTIAL OF THE MINIMALIST VISION

Salvation in the Minimalist Vision occurs through orientation toward value—through appreciating the blessings and striving toward the ideals. Communities each “sensitively determine” the “worth” of a given aspect of the world, and this worth is “objectively real” (Stone 1992, 84). The fact that these communities have come to appreciate and interpret a real value that is discernible in the object(s) in question makes it imperative to take this value seriously—seriously enough, in Stone’s perspective, to merit religious devotion. Devotion to worth involves different actions for each community. No group or set of recognized and determined values is the same. To that end, each community should use whatever language, symbols, and practices available to it to facilitate religious orientation to values.

Orientation to the poles of blessing and demand is therefore the soteriological tool of the Minimalist Vision. The benefits from using this tool are resources for coping with suffering on one hand and advancing well-being on the other. The more one reveres blessings and feels grateful for them, the more positive she feels and the more positive change she can enact. The more she strives toward ideals, the more she can improve her life and the lives of people around her. Insofar as the Minimalist Vision can properly motivate communities to rally around and promote values, it bolsters the strength of the community and its relationship to value. This in turn comprises whatever salvation or ultimate transformation is available to individuals.

This is where soteriological potential ends for the Minimalist Vision, however. Stone strips religious belief down to an ontologically bare skeleton, and this necessarily limits the capacity of the Minimalist Vision to provide soteriological benefits that might otherwise be available to more metaphysical worldviews. We might therefore call the Minimalist Vision’s version of salvation Minimalist Salvation. Fortunately for the Minimalist Vision, the skeleton of Minimalist Salvation has the potential to provide significant benefit to individuals and communities. Real resources of and values in the world are nearly infinite and include community, reconciliation, support, and harmony among a powerful set of others. Few resources can transform individuals more powerfully than hope and belief in the power of ideals. This skeleton is still a skeleton, however. It has the ability to be covered by vein and sinew. It can be supplemented, and it can be

supported, and it can gain bulk that provides even more soteriological potential. Donald Crosby's metaphysically rich Religion of Nature reveals just what kinds of functions are forgone with the minimalist move.

#### DONALD CROSBY'S RELIGION OF NATURE

Donald Crosby articulates a version of religious naturalism that fits Stone's triadic schema. In a similar if less explicit way, Crosby defines a transcendent source, a pole of blessing, and a pole of demand, and the content of these poles are roughly the same: values are blessings, and ideals are demands. Additionally, much like Stone, Crosby emphasizes transformation in the salvific process, prioritizes openness as a crucial attitude toward unexpected and uncontrollable events, and describes value as perspectival. The Minimalist Vision and the Religion of Nature have far more in common than they do in conflict. Nevertheless, the primary point of difference—how willing they are to make ontological statements—entails significant consequences.

Contra Stone's ontological reticence, Crosby's Religion of Nature is rich with metaphysical and axiological truth claims. In the Religion of Nature, nature is a unique whole, "aboriginal and self-sustaining" with nothing "outside, beyond, or behind it" that is both metaphysically and religiously ultimate (Crosby 2002, 21). Ultimacy for Crosby comes in the form of Spinoza's distinction between "nature naturing" and "nature natured." "Nature natured," or *natura naturata*, is that which constitutes the pattern, unity, and regularities of nature: it has been observed as "established." "Nature naturing," or *natura naturans*, on the other hand, is the complex, unpredictable process that gives rise to *natura naturata*.<sup>12</sup> Being observable as "natured" and yet being the source of all actuality and possibility in its character as *natura naturans* makes the whole of ultimate nature the ground of all existence, values, and all meaning. It is the unified "one" that gives rise to the particular "many." This fact warrants whole-hearted religious devotion and awe. It also provides a thicker version of soteriology than Stone's Minimalist Vision. The soteriology of the Religion of Nature contains within it all of the same real resources and ideals that Stone's does, but then bolsters them with metaphysically contingent supplements: (1) a metaphysical context that promotes the acceptance of suffering, (2) personal identity with relation to the metaphysical whole, and (3) ultimate Nature as a transcendent other with which to commune.<sup>13</sup>

#### METAPHYSICAL CONTEXT: SUFFERING AND THE SELF IN AN INTERPRETIVE FRAME

One of the primary salvific functions of the Religion of Nature is perhaps best understood as a response to the problem of suffering: metaphysics



contextualizes. The metaphysics of the Religion of Nature tells a story<sup>14</sup> of the cosmos. Its metaphysics describes the origin and location of value, the origin and location of disvalue, the intricate interplay of value and disvalue over time, and the sacred history of the perpetually evolving and creative cosmos. The story of sacred Nature here as I describe it is not a myth in any traditionally religious or hermeneutical sense of the word. It is a rigorously philosophical description of reality. It is, however, similar to a myth in that it provides a more metaphysically and spiritually rich understanding of the cosmos—what Geertz would call a framework—than a metaphysically bare vision of the world such as the Minimalist Vision.<sup>15</sup>

The metaphysical context of the Religion of Nature is “a basis for hope in the face of frustration, futility, and despair” (Crosby 2002, 142) because it provides an explanation for and means by which to accept suffering. The comfort one can get from the Religion of Nature’s interpretive gloss may seem counterintuitive since Nature is rife with evil. How can one comfortably feel at home in a place with so much evil and suffering? But that is exactly the point. The metaphysics of the Religion of Nature accounts for suffering. Nature helps people “come to terms with the laws of our natural home, and with our susceptibility as finite beings to the operations of those laws. It provides an ability to be rooted in nature in a way that rejuvenates, inspires, and redeems” (Crosby 2002, 142). Suffering is naturalized and internalized as an inherent part of ultimate Nature. This might be a hard fact to bear, but at least it locates suffering in a meaningful place. This provides believers with a means by which to make sense of the evil in the world and the suffering that befalls them.

The benefit of metaphysical context has been deeply explored in the field of medical anthropology. Ethnographer Arthur Kleinman, for example, has demonstrated that cosmology and story-telling across world cultures facilitate physical healing.<sup>16</sup> Patients consistently refer to God, the gods, and other metaphysical realities when making sense of their physical and existential suffering. They also tie their suffering to the purposes or natures of these realities, doing their best to reasonably explain and justify what is happening to them. Together, the loom of the cosmos and the fabric of individual lives help people make sense of and process it all (Kleinman 1988). This is precisely what Crosby has done with the Religion of Nature. Just like with the Minimalist Vision, people cannot be supernaturally saved by any divine intervener. And just like with the Minimalist Vision, they *can* be saved by unexpected moments of grace and healing in the natural world. But more than the Minimalist Vision, the Religion of Nature provides an metaphysical context with which people can make sense of evil and suffering. (Indeed, they can make sense of everything relative to the broader context, as Geertz has argued extensively.) This enriches people’s ability to be transformed out of suffering and saved over and above Minimalist Salvation.

## METAPHYSICAL CONTEXT: MAKING SENSE OF THE SELF

Beyond just telling the story of the cosmos, the metaphysical context of the Religion of Nature specifies the nature of the human individual situated in that context. The Religion of Nature is explicitly meant to “provide a framework that points beyond itself to sources of assurance and affirmation that lie within *us* and within the world” (Crosby 2008, 92, emphasis mine). Adherents to the Religion of Nature are assured of elements in the universe at large. They are also assured by what the Religion of Nature tells them about who they are as human beings.

The Religion of Nature encourages understanding of the self as inherently human and flawed, but at the same time as having a sacred drive toward goodness. Nature “evokes the courageous life affirming powers of the human spirit—powers nature has implanted, by all indications, in each and every living being” (Crosby 2008, 92). There is a “persistent lure to goodness in the human breast” (Crosby 2002, 159) according to this view. People are not more good than they are evil, but this goodness is something worthy of affirmation and gratitude. Goodness is a gift of ultimate Nature. “Nature is the ultimate source of the good of human life itself. . . nature has evolved humans in such a way as to implant in them a yearning for the preservation of established goodness and for the attainment of ever-increasing goodness in themselves and in the rest of the world” (Crosby 2002, 159).

The metaphysical grounding of goodness in the human breast empowers individuals to have hope, to have purpose, and to feel like a part of the grand narrative of Nature. Moreover, it anchors transformation in the ground of sacred Nature, and it provides a metaphysical basis for loyalty to and belief in it. To be clear, there is no purpose of nature in the Religion of Nature. Nature has no designs, no agency, no desires, and no will. But nature is still the ultimate ground that sustains and generates the life and goodness of the cosmos. As such, humans situated within this metaphysically rich and good cosmos have the assurance of their own sacred goodness within sacred nature. Making this sort of metaphysical assertion in the Religion of Nature helps individuals make sense of, love, and revere not just the outside world, but themselves in relation to that world. In Kleinman’s ethnographical work, salvation is often about purpose and meaning as it related to the wider whole, as we saw in the above paragraphs. That necessarily includes, however, additionally defining, grounding, and sacralizing the journey of the self. If one is to make sense of her suffering, she must do so first and foremost by considering who she is, and then how her own story relates to that of the cosmos. She relies on a framework in which both she and the wider cosmos are interpreted.

HARMONY AND RIGHTNESS WITH NATURE AS TRANSCENDENT  
OTHER

In the Religion of Nature, nature is the ultimate ground of all that is. Nature is a unique, unified “one” that comprises the “many” of the world, and while it has no agency or concern for the world, it is still the sacred source of all good, all evil, and all life. Nature can as such act as a transcendent “other” to which people can be accountable, with which people can harmonize and feel at home, and with which people can reconcile. Certainly it is possible to harmonize and reconcile with community members alone, as is the case in the Minimalist Vision, but Mel D. Faber argues that individuals “feel centered in themselves, feel secure, attached, happy, joyous” the most when there is a transcendent other “out there” with which they can be in some sort of existential relationship (2004, 108). God as one example of ultimacy serves as an “other” with which humans can interact in a variety of ways including reconciling, harmonizing, and communing. Ultimate Nature can serve these functions, too, though without supernatural agency.

The primary function that Nature can serve as a transcendent other is harmonization. Harmony with sacred Nature can be achieved by living in accord with its laws and with other beings and their purposes. One can achieve harmony by submitting to the natural laws and the way of Nature. She can also achieve harmony by striving towards ideals. Crosby calls this sort of reconciling harmony “redemptive rightness.”

Just like in the Minimalist Vision, ideals in the Religion of Nature transform and make the world a better place. The difference for the Religion of Nature, however, is that ideals are imperatives from sacred Nature. “Religious faith in nature,” writes Crosby, “requires much of human beings in the way of work for maintenance of the health, diversity, beauty, and integrity of biological communities on Earth” (2002, 120). Sacred Nature has imbued human beings with lures for goodness and the ability to choose goodness, and harmony with Nature requires living up to that goodness. “Only by understanding the demands that our relations to nature impose upon us,” writes Crosby, “can we begin to become attuned to the natural order and experience a religion of nature’s transformative powers” (2002, 143). People meet the obligations of nature largely through the development of and progress toward ideals worthy of striving. These ideals “relate to our search for insight, inspiration, and power to heal our sense of failure and brokenness of spirit, our feelings of bewilderment and insignificance in the face of the enormity of the world, our feelings of fragmentation and lack of unifying purpose, our awareness of the chasm separating who we are from what we yearn to become” (Crosby 2008, 83). Ideals facilitate salvation in that they provide hope while at the same time generating wellness for individuals and communities, much akin to their function in Stone’s

Vision. They are made all the more powerful by their ability to redeem, their ability to harmonize with Nature, and their ability to foster feelings of rightness.

#### METAPHYSICS ENABLES A RELATIVELY RICH SOTERIOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

Many of the soteriological functions of the Religion of Nature depend upon its relative metaphysical richness. Without metaphysics, Crosby could not provide narrative context or Nature as the ultimate and transcendent other. So far as the Religion of Nature is concerned, some of its greatest soteriological benefits require metaphysics.

Because of metaphysics, the Religion of Nature is enabled to go beyond the real-world resources, values, and ideals of Stone's Minimalist Vision. It includes the soteriological functions of the Minimalist Vision's real and ideal, but it also includes three ontologically contingent supplements: metaphysical narrative context that helps people make sense of suffering, metaphysical narrative context that helps people identify and understand themselves in relation to the sacred whole, and Nature as a ultimate whole in which people participate, which facilitates feelings of harmony and rightness. Each of these functions enhances the Religion of Nature's soteriological potential over and above what it might have otherwise as a metaphysically minimal worldview such as the Minimalist Vision.

#### ELEVATED QUESTIONS AND THE RELEVANCE OF METAPHYSICS TO PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION

Having demarcated functional from other approaches to religion, I conclude this study not with a victory for metaphysics, but rather with a gentle elevation of metaphysics as a topic of relevance for further study in the philosophy of religion. I have demonstrated that Geertz was on to something: metaphysics does play a role in determining religious function, at least as we saw here in this case study. Without metaphysics, Crosby would not be able to offer narrative context or sacred Nature as a transcendent other with which to harmonize. The Religion of Nature's salvation would look much like Stone's Minimalist Salvation: it might be efficacious and phenomenologically religious, but it would be limited to real resources, ideals, and value, without an interpretive gloss. Religious function beyond soteriology and beyond these two varieties of religious naturalism may therefore also be contingent upon metaphysics—a topic worthy of further investigation.

Having demarcated functional from other approaches to religion, however, I have implicitly elevated the question of how religion might be conditioned by metaphysics in addition to function. According to Geertz,

both the phenomenology of religious experience as well as the religious quality of a worldview are contingent upon its metaphysics. This is because religion for him is defined by marrying metaphysics to practical life; religion brings the cosmic element of the world down to Earth and imbues it with a sacred and world-ordering overlay. On the matter, Geertz asserts, “if sacred symbols did not at one and the same time induce dispositions in human beings and formulate, however obliquely, inarticulately, or unsystematically, general ideas of order, then the empirical differentia of religious activity or religious experience would not exist” (1973, 98). Accordingly, on Geertz’s account Crosby’s articulation of cosmic depth and sacred ground provides a religious experience of salvation whereas Stone’s Minimalist Vision simply cannot.

There are nearly infinite perspectives on what makes something religious, however. Importantly, both Stone’s and Crosby find their own views sufficiently religious. Moreover, Michael Hogue extensively describes “what is religious” about Stone’s and Crosby’s work in his 2010 book *The Promise of Religious Naturalism*. Hogue explicitly lets each of these worldviews speak for itself and attempts to act more as a descriptor than as an evaluator. In doing so, Hogue describes Stone’s entire project as phenomenological, an attempt to capture a phenomenology of the religious experience in a naturalistic and secular way. I agree. Does Stone succeed? Does his—or any—phenomenology of religious experience obviate Geertz’s (and Crosby’s; see Crosby 1981) argument for metaphysics as religious criterion? Quite possibly, though questions of religious experience and quality are far too complex to address here. They certainly merit further discussion, however: at stake in their conclusions are issues as diverse as how important belief is to the quality of religious experience, when metaphysics might be important and what hinges on it, and what constitutes the religious quality of religious experience. Recent psychological literature has begun to unearth significant data on the relevance of religious belief to functional benefit,<sup>17</sup> though untangling the relationship of metaphysics to religious experience and quality promises to be a rich field of research for philosophers, theologians, and psychologists alike for many years to come.

Finally, metaphysics is a concern for theologians, philosophers, and religious communities interested in religious naturalism as a viable religious alternative. In *The Promise of Religious Naturalism*, Hogue explicates the ways in which religious naturalism provides a reasonable, salvific, ethical, scientifically minded, and potentially universal variety of religion that can significantly benefit individuals and communities around the world. Proponents of religious naturalism are interested in religious naturalism’s potential to be appealing, satisfying, effective, and long-lasting. Insofar as metaphysics may play a role in the appeal, satisfaction, effectiveness, and duration of religious naturalism, therefore, it merits attention. Ethnographic data such as Kleinman’s suggests that my assertion of the relevance

of metaphysics is not merely armchair philosophy, but actually documented and at play in the real events of people's lives. To that end, metaphysics as interpretive gloss is an important issue not just for the philosophy of religion but also for the evolving shape of religious naturalism today.

## NOTES

1. One of Stone's preferred descriptors for his project.
2. Since his work in the middle decades of the twentieth century, Geertz has been criticized on many fronts, each with varying legitimacy. For a discussion of pertinent criticisms see Schilbrack (2005).
3. Geertz's work is anthropological and highly sociological. Nevertheless, his discussion of the benefits of religion is in large part cognitive and individualistic. The role of metaphysics as functional cornerstone of both these aspects of religion is clear in his definition of religion as "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (Geertz 1973, 90). For a recent sociological discussion of soteriology, see Riesebrodt (2010).
4. For more on scheme-content dualism, see Davidson (1984).
5. For more discussion of the Framework model, see Godlove (1997).
6. See Geertz (1973, 112).
7. Geertz wrote his theories before Donald Davidson developed his ideas about scheme-content dualism, so the problem with organizational "framework" language was not yet disseminated through the field.
8. "Ontological reticence" in Stone's words means "there may be unity, ultimacy and intelligent purposiveness. However, there is not enough support for these affirmations for us to make them as publicly responsible assertions nor to take them as the basis for personal faith" (1992, 13). Ontological reticence entails a "third alternative between theism and secular humanism . . . a philosophy of religious naturalism with a minimal model of the immanent divine" (1992, 9).
9. Stone does not assert the absolute truth of this framework. Rather, he believes it is a relatively universal "map" of the territory of religions that works as well as many other maps. See Stone (1992, 26).
10. Other scholars Stone cites as proposing similar frameworks are Rudolf Otto, H.H. Farmer, and H. Richard Niebuhr.
11. Other words he uses are support, succor, demand, and obligation. See Stone (1992, 23).
12. For more on the nature of novelty and process in Crosby's thought, see Crosby (2005).
13. Nature is transcendent according to Crosby not only in that it continually transcends itself but that it is so vast and unique in scope as to be transcendent to particular beings such as human beings. See Crosby (2003).
14. My word, not Crosby's.
15. Paul Ricoeur is an obvious thinker to which we could turn for a discussion of the relevance of narrative. Ricoeur's emphasis on the centrality of narrative to human cognition and society, however, falls somewhat outside the scope of this analysis, which focuses on the benefits derived from interpretive metaphysics as a religious exercise. For more on Ricoeur's theories of narrative, see Ricoeur (1983).
16. Some other ethnographic works that demonstrate the relationship between self, cosmos, and healing are Frank (1995), Charon (2006), and Roseman (1993).
17. See, for example, Silbey and Bulbulia's analysis of belief and health in their 2012 article "Faith after an Earthquake: A Longitudinal Study of Perceived Health before and after the 2011 Earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand."

## REFERENCES

- Berger, Peter. 1969. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Charon, Rita. 2006. *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Crosby, Donald. 1981. *Interpretive Theories of Religion*. New York: Moulton.
- . 2002. *A Religion of Nature*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- . 2003. "Transcendence and Immanence in a Religion of Nature." *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 24:245–59.
- . 2005. *Novelty*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- . 2008. *Living with Ambiguity: Religious Naturalism and the Menace of Evil*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Davidson, Donald. 1984. "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme." In *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 183–98. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Durkheim, Emile. 1912. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. New York: Free Press.
- Faber, Mel D. 2004. *The Psychological Roots of Religious Belief: Searching for Angels and the Parent-God*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Frank, Arthur W. 1995. *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Frankenberry, Nancy, and Hans Penner. 1999. "Geertz's Long-Lasting Moods, Motivations, and Metaphysical Conceptions." *Journal of Religion* 79:617–40.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Godlove, Jr., Terry F. 1997. *Religion, Interpretation, and Diversity of Belief: The Framework Model from Kant to Durkheim to Davidson*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press.
- Hogue, Michael. 2010. *The Promise of Religious Naturalism*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kleinman, Arthur. 1988. *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and The Human Condition*. New York: Basic Books.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1983. *Temps et Recit (Vol 1: L'intrigue et le Recit Historique)*. Paris: Seuil.
- Riesebrodt, Martin. 2010. *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Roseman, Marina. 1993. *Healing Sounds from the Malaysian Rainforest: Temiar Music and Medicine*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Schilbrack, Kevin. 2005. "Religion, Models of, and Reality: Are We Through with Geertz?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73:429–52.
- Silbey, Chris G., and Joseph Bulbulia. 2012. "Faith after an Earthquake: A Longitudinal Study of Religion and Perceived Health before and after the 2011 Christchurch New Zealand Earthquake." *PLoS ONE* 7:e49648.
- Smith, John E. 1970. *Themes in American Philosophy: Purpose, Experience, and Community*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Stone, Jerome Arthur. 1992. *The Minimalist Vision of Transcendence: A Naturalist Philosophy of Religion*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- . 2008. *Religious Naturalism Today: The Rebirth of a Forgotten Alternative*. Albany: State University of New York Press.