Living with Ambiguity

Religious Naturalism and the Menace of Evil

DONALD A. CROSBY

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for all my students

Through the years you have inspired, challenged, and often confounded me with your written and oral questions, observations, and arguments, giving me the privilege of working with you as your teacher and fellow learner.

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PREFACE

I'm sitting on my back porch enjoying the wonders and beauties of nature. Birds are singing in the trees, squirrels are scampering about, the camellias are in bloom, the sky is a brilliant blue, and the grass is moist and glistening after a recent rain. All seems peaceful and at rest. But in the pond below my back yard a blue heron has just caught a frog in its menacingly sharp beak, and somewhere nearby a red-tailed hawk is eagerly tearing and consuming the flesh of a small bird it has captured and killed. The faint wail of sirens can be heard in the distance. Is there a fire? Has there been an automobile accident? Has someone just suffered a stroke or been shot? Are fire trucks, ambulances, and/or police cruisers speeding to the rescue or, in the case of the police cars, to apprehend a criminal?

While I enjoy the serenity of nature in my back yard, a frog and a small bird have met violent deaths in order that the heron and hawk can have their dinners, and a person or persons have been injured—perhaps severely—or someone is in imminent danger of dying from a clot in his or her bloodstream, or someone will be arrested for a crime.

Here we have the ambiguity of the whole of nature in miniature. Tranquility and suffering are there. Beauty and horror are there. Life and death are there. People living in harmony with one another are there, as well as people committing crimes, some of them grievous and horrible, against one another. The world, both human and nonhuman, is a relentless, inexorable blend of goods and evils.

How can we expect to find solace and strength in such a world, especially if it is itself viewed as the object of religious faith? Is it possible to live an active, fulfilling, and deeply meaningful religious life without a belief in God or a religious faith that centers on God? How and to what extent can such an outlook and way of life cope with the disruptions and threats of evil in the world? How can we live with any amount of confidence and hope in the face of such a world? Answers to these questions are offered in this book, which outlines a version of religious naturalism that focuses entirely on nature and does not incorporate or require any conception of God.

Religious naturalism in general is the view that nature is metaphysically ultimate and that nature or some aspect of nature is religiously ultimate. There is nothing beyond, behind, above, or below nature. Nature requires

no explanation beyond itself. It always has existed and always will exist in some shape or form. Its constituents, principles, laws, and relations are the sole reality. This reality takes on new traits and possibilities as it evolves inexorably through time. Human beings are integral parts of nature, and they are natural beings through and through. They, like all living beings, are outcomes of biological evolution. They are embodied beings whose mental or spiritual aspect is not something separate from their bodies but a function of their bodily nature. There is no realm of the supernatural and no supernatural being or beings residing in such a realm.

I describe, develop, and discuss here implications of the version of religious naturalism I term "religion of nature." In an earlier book entitled *A Religion of Nature* I depicted and defended a vision of the metaphysical ultimacy of nature and went on to show how the whole of nature so understood could be regarded as the appropriate focus of resolute religious commitment and thus qualify as religiously ultimate as well. In that book, as well as in this one, I argue that a thoroughly demanding, richly fulfilling, and wholly adequate religious life can center on the complexity, depth, and mystery of the natural world, with no need for appeal to a supernatural world or to beings, presences, or powers supposed to belong to such a world.

The present book is a sequel to the earlier volume. It is primarily concerned with the problem of how religion of nature conceives of and enables us to cope with two fundamental types of evil in the world. The very word *evil* evokes a shudder, the chilling breath of something dark, inexplicable, and deeply threatening. Our structures of meaning are in constant danger of being shaken and shattered by our confrontations with evil in its two primary forms. The first is what I call "systemic natural evils," that is, those destructive forces of nature that are not direct outcomes of human decisions or actions but that may cause extreme suffering for sentient beings—including human beings—and that can devastate regions of the natural environment. Examples are predations, diseases, accidents, floods, storms, earthquakes, and fires. The second type of evil is moral evils, the evils—some of them hideous in their characters and effects—that human beings bring about through their choices and actions (or deliberate inactions and neglects) and inflict upon one another, upon other creatures of nature, or upon aspects of the nonliving environment.

How does religion of nature interpret and understand the sources and characters of these two types of evil? How does its interpretation compare and contrast with the responses to evil in other religious traditions? Most importantly, what resources does religion of nature provide for coping with the menace of these evils in our lives? And how adequate are these resources? These questions are especially pressing and urgent in view of the fact that religion of nature as I conceive it is a form of religious faith without a God or gods; without the idea that the world as whole has an overarching purpose or design; without any supernatural source of revelation, guidance,

forgiveness, or strength; and without hope of an afterlife of everlasting bliss that is alleged in some religions, particularly the theistic ones, to compensate humans for the sufferings, sorrows, and injustices of this life.

I do not sentimentalize, minimize, or underestimate the dire threats of evil in this book. In fact, I include graphic, shocking, sad examples of both systematic natural evils and moral evils in order to show how utterly serious is the problem of finding and affirming meaning in the face of evil. *This is a profound and vexing problem for all religious traditions and for human life in general.* In my view, the menace of evil is a central, if not *the* central problem with which all religions must wrestle. This problem goes a long way toward explaining why there is the need for such a thing as religion in the first place.

I affirm the religious ultimacy and rightness of nature despite nature's rampant ambiguities of good and evil. I contend that it is a mistake to confuse religious goodness with moral goodness. There is, alongside the moral and aesthetic species of value, a distinctively religious species of value which I go to some lengths to characterize and defend. Moral values and religious values have important interrelations which I discuss, but they are not the same. The religious rightness of nature is for me unequivocal. But nature exhibits a radical ambiguity of systemic and moral goods and evils. I argue that this ambiguity is not avoidable. It cannot be eliminated in any conceivable universe. Nor would we *want* it to be when we properly understand its true character. The inevitable price of the systemic natural and moral goods of the world is its systemic natural evils and the potentiality of its moral evils. Neither can be had without the other or the possibility of the other.

In an extended discussion I invite the reader to try to imagine a world without these two forms of evil, and I argue that it is not only difficult in the extreme to imagine what such a world would be like but that, even if it could be conceived, it is not a world in which we would want to live. Most of the goods that we now instinctively cherish and take for granted would be absent in such a world. Ambiguity is built into any robust and genuinely desirable world, then, and our natural world—despite and even *because of* its ambiguities—is worthy of our utmost religious trust, devotion, and commitment.

The evils remain evils and stubbornly persist as such in this analysis. They are not swallowed up into a supposed good of the whole or made negligible or dismissable in comparison with that whole. Their character and menace as evils is starkly clear. But this book's thesis is that *we need look no further than nature itself* to find in the splendor, dynamism, and rejuvenating powers of the natural world—and within ourselves as remarkable creatures of nature—reliable sources of both sustaining and demanding hope, purpose, and value for the living of our lives. This can be so even as we acknowledge

and prepare ourselves to confront the deeply threatening and irreducibly real manifestations of evil in the world.

With gratitude I acknowledge my considerable indebtedness to the insightful suggestions, questions, and criticisms communicated to me in writing concerning an early draft of this book by J. Thomas Howe, Tyron L. Inbody, and Jerome A. Stone. Each of these perceptive scholars has stimulated me to think more deeply and I hope more adequately about issues raised and discussed throughout the book. I am also grateful for the support given to the book by two anonymous readers for the State University of New York Press. My wife Pamela Crosby has encouraged and supported me through all the stages of the book's development. She has raised numerous pertinent questions about its arguments and claims and made many helpful suggestions about ways to improve its content. She has also assisted me with the proofreading and preparation of the Index. Her presence in my life is a cherished example of the workings of natural grace I describe herein.

ONE

RELIGION OF NATURE AS A FORM OF RELIGIOUS NATURALISM

> Ah, nature! subtle beyond all human subtlety, enigmatic, profound, life-giver and life destroyer, nourishing mother and assassin, inspirer of all that is best and most beautiful, of all that is most hideous and forbidding!
>
> —W. MacNeile Dixon, *The Human Situation*

We humans are persistent questioners. We like to get to the bottom of things. We are not simply creatures of instinct, responding automatically to circumstances of the natural environment in our urge to survive. Instead, we possess consciousness, reason, and freedom to a degree that no other creatures of earth apparently do. These qualities enable us to stand out from the natural environment in our conscious minds rather than being immersed in it. They confer upon us a capacity and need to reflect upon both the environment and ourselves in a critical, searching, detached fashion. As a result, the more inquiring ones among us tend to speculate intensely about our world, seeking to understand its character, the how and why of its existence, and our proper role as humans within it. We crave intelligibility, purpose, and meaning in our outlooks and lives. We are not satisfied with mere survival. The history of cultures and civilizations is suffused with evidences of this relentless human quest for comprehension and meaning. Down through the ages, in story, myth, and rite, in philosophy, science, and art, the search goes on.

Two major styles and outcomes of this search are religious supernaturalism and religious naturalism. The "religion of nature" of this book's initial chapter title is a particular version of religious naturalism, as we shall presently see. Supernaturalists seek resolution of the most perplexing and pressing questions of existence in a realm above or beyond nature. They