

## ONE

# RELIGION OF NATURE AS A FORM OF RELIGIOUS NATURALISM

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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

are convinced that the natural world points ineluctably beyond itself to a transcendent ground that accounts finally and fully for its origin and continuing existence and that bestows upon it enduring significance and value. The task of human life is, then, to orient oneself, one's society, and all the aspects and enterprises of one's existence around this transcendent ground of meaning and value, and to seek in it definitive answers to life's deepest questionings and yearnings.

In the Western part of the world, the supernaturalist form of this persistent human search has led to belief in the existence of God, conceived as a distinct being who is the source and sustainer of the universe and everything within it. Consider, for example, Thomas Aquinas, the most prominent Roman Catholic theologian of the High Middle Ages. He reasoned that the natural world and everything in it is contingent upon or dependent for its existence upon something wholly other than itself, a single transcendent being that exists necessarily. While things of the world come into being and pass away, that upon which they depend has no beginning or end. This self-sufficient, self-explanatory, eternal, and therefore by definition supernatural being, he observed, "All men speak of as God" (*Summa Theologica* Q. 2, Art. 3, in Aquinas 1948: 26).

According to Aquinas, God commands our utmost reverence and obedience, and he<sup>1</sup> has given compelling evidence of his reality and saving purposes for us and all his creation in our experience and reason, as well as in gracious, more specific revelations of himself in scripture and tradition. This theistic, supernaturalistic answer to the central enigmas of human existence is echoed in the Protestant Christian tradition by the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, composed by Puritan divines in 1647. "What," queries the *Catechism*, "is the chief end of man?" Its confident answer is, "To glorify God and enjoy him forever." End of question, end of story. Muslim and Jewish thinkers have reasoned similarly.

Aquinas's picture of the universe and its utter dependence on God can be compared to a mobile.<sup>2</sup> A mobile, it will be recalled, is an ornament hanging from roof or ceiling by a cable, rope, or thread. It contains several arms or bars of different lengths, some of which are suspended from the central thread and others from subordinate threads. From these bars hang various kinds of objects. Everything is carefully calibrated and balanced, so that the mobile can gently rotate and sway in the wind. In doing so, it combines the dynamism of its motions with the artful order of its design. Crucial to the mobile's operation is the mounting point for its central thread. Let us suppose that the mobile is the type that can be bought in a store and that is contained in a small box. One unpacks the mobile, assembles it, and searches for a place to mount it. Suppose that one mounts it with a thumbtack in a plasterboard ceiling and steps back to admire its graceful undulations and circlings. All is well, but were the thumbtack to come loose, the mobile would tumble to the floor and lie there in discombobulated ruin.

The case is similar with Aquinas's conception of God. The whole universe hangs suspended from God, as it were. All of its inherent motions and changes, as well as its stability and order, are critically dependent upon him. Were God's support to be taken away even for a moment, the universe would collapse into a meaningless heap. It would be reduced to the kind of primeval chaos, "without form and void," talked about in the book of Genesis prior to the divine creation of the world. More pointedly, it could not exist at all.

Religious naturalism removes the supposed thumbtack from the ceiling. It makes no reference to a supernatural realm or to a God, gods, goddesses, or spirits thought to exist in such a realm. It sees no need for a supernatural ground or support for the world. For it, the world exists through its own immanent principles, resources, and powers. Without God, it does not collapse into ruin. For the religious naturalist, if anything exists necessarily, it is the natural world itself. It gives rise to, sustains, and explains all else that exists. No appeal need be made to anything beyond or above the inexhaustible, self-sufficient splendor and providingness of the world itself. Nature in some shape or form is all there is now, ever has been, or ever shall be. It spawns and supports all its living creatures, including human beings. For the religious naturalist, nature or some aspect of nature is also the ultimate source of value and meaning for human life. It or an aspect of it is therefore the appropriate focus of religious faith and dedication.

Since religious naturalism does not accept the idea of a supernatural realm standing over against nature, it also does not affirm or feel the need for any sort of revelation coming from such a realm. All religious knowledge and awareness are based on endeavors of humans to respond to religious meanings and values implicit in nature itself. Moreover, there is no supernatural source of forgiveness, empowerment, or salvation. These resources must be found in nature itself. Religious naturalists may speak of such things as transcendence, grace, and spirituality, but they regard them as operative entirely within the natural order—an order of which human beings are an inseparable part.

As we would expect in light of their focus on nature, religious naturalists take seriously the methods and findings of the natural sciences. They seek to develop religious outlooks upon and conceptions of nature consistent with those methods and findings. They are especially impressed with the sweeping scientific saga of the evolution of the universe, the earth, and life forms on earth. However, not all religious naturalists place sole reliance upon descriptions and explanations of natural phenomena provided by the natural sciences. Some of them insist upon supplementing these invaluable scientific perspectives on nature with insights and understandings derived from other fields of study such as the social sciences, arts, and humanities, and from the experiences of daily life. They argue that, since humans and their cultures and histories are integral parts of nature and expressions of

potentialities of nature, the full range of human experiences needs to be taken into consideration, and from as many angles as possible.

Finally, religious naturalists tend not to give credence to the traditional religious idea of the survival of humans in an afterlife, whether in some kind of heaven or hell or in a sequence of reincarnations. They take this idea to imply a kind of supernaturalism, which as naturalists they reject, and as lacking convincing empirical support. For them, while salvation may continue to be an important and meaningful religious concept, it can have nothing to do with a life beyond death. It relates exclusively but importantly to the quality and contribution of human lives here and now.

I have given the name “religion of nature” to the version of religious naturalism to be argued for in this book, partly to demarcate it from other types of religious naturalism, but also to label its distinction from the various and generally more familiar (at least in the West) supernaturalistic forms of religious faith. In the remainder of this chapter, I first indicate religion of nature’s principal themes. Then I describe some chief issues confronting this type of religious naturalism today. Finally, I comment more fully on the last of these issues, which brings into view the radical ambiguity of nature—especially as considered from a moral perspective—and questions on that basis nature’s fitness as the proposed focus of religious faith. This issue is the main topic and concern of this book. Subsequent chapters of the book will explore the issue in detail and seek to defend the appropriateness and adequacy of religion of nature as a religious response to the fundamental needs, cares, anxieties, hopes, aspirations, and responsibilities of human beings in the context of a bright and bountiful but also dark and threatening natural world. A significant part of the ominous, fearful character of life in this world is a proneness of human beings and their institutions to deliberate acts of brutality, hate, and destruction, on the one hand, and to callous indifference toward remediable suffering and pain, on the other—a tendency to which so much of human history bears sad and unimpeachable testimony.

#### PRINCIPAL THEMES OF RELIGION OF NATURE

In a previous book (D. A. Crosby 2002) I presented the outlook of religion of nature and laid out arguments for it as a profoundly inspiring and richly fulfilling religious stance. Some features of this stance will be developed further as the present book unfolds. But in this chapter I want briefly to indicate the principal themes of religion of nature as a type of religious naturalism so that these themes can be borne in mind as we consider and critically assess the adequacy of its approach to the troublesome and often menacing ambiguities of nature—a nature on which it nevertheless rests the whole weight of religious faith.

Religion of nature agrees with the general characteristics of religious naturalism outlined above. It has no recourse to supernaturalism in any of its forms. It finds the whole significance, point, and purpose of life in nature alone. It relies solely upon the resources of experience and reason in arriving at its religious vision. And it does not look beyond nature for religious inspiration, strength, or empowerment. It has deep respect for the natural sciences. It has no concept of continuing life beyond the grave but places all of its emphasis on enhancing the quality of the finite span of life for all natural beings, human and nonhuman, both in the present and on into the future.

For religion of nature, humans are not the crown or apex of nature but simply one of the products of its evolutionary processes. They are integral parts of nature and intimately connected with all other living beings in both time and space. Humans are not entitled to dominate nature but should seek to live in harmony and balance with the rest of nature. Earth is their capacious home, and for that they should be grateful. But they should also accept and act upon the responsibilities implicit in this fact, treating with grace, kindness, and consideration all of their fellow members of this diverse household.

Some more specific traits of religion of nature, however, are the following. In contrast with some forms of religious naturalism, it does not speak of God, gods, goddesses, or animating spirits of any sort, even if these terms are used metaphorically or symbolically, or are viewed as aspects, potencies, or processes of nature. It makes no attempt to align itself with such existing religious traditions as those of Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. Nor does it purport to be a revision of, or a more adequate, more current, or more relevant development of, any of these traditions. Its metaphysics of nature is derived, not merely from the findings of the natural sciences, as important as these are for it, but from other fields of thought and expression as well, and especially from the dynamics of lived experience in all of its forms.

Religion of nature rejects the kind of fact-value distinction that locates all the facts in the so-called objective world, especially as that is depicted by the natural sciences, and all of the values in human subjectivity. Nature, for it, is replete with values and disvalues as well as facts, and the values and disvalues are not confined to the human part of nature. Its concept of nature, moreover, does not rest solely on the evidence of the five senses but assumes the critical relevance of other types of experience as well, for instance, experiences of recollection, anticipation, consummation, continuity, change, emotion, imagination, valuation, judgment, intention, and choice. It contends that an adequate account of nature and its constituent beings must encompass all of these kinds of experience.

Religion of nature strives also to be constantly aware of how much there is about nature and about ourselves as natural beings that we do

not know and cannot know. Our perspective as human beings is but one perspective among those of innumerable other living beings on earth, to say nothing of the possibility of conscious beings elsewhere in an incredibly vast universe. It is limited by what our meager five senses can tell us, even when supplemented by instruments; by what we can infer from other aspects of our experience; by what we are able to imagine, conjecture, or surmise at any given time; and by what the capacities and limitations of our linguistic, logical, or mathematical systems permit us to reflect upon and express. For religion of nature, nature is not knowable through and through but is wreathed with clouds of impenetrable mystery. Even its most familiar and well known aspects can become inexhaustibly wondrous and miraculous when analyzed in depth or approached with an innocent eye undistracted by previous habits of thought.

Religion of nature's focus is on the whole of nature and not on some particular aspect of it, despite—and more pointedly because of—the admitted ambiguities of nature viewed in its entirety. Reasons in support of this seemingly counterintuitive statement will be presented later. Religion of nature also argues for a distinctively religious kind of value and resists the idea that there must be a smooth coincidence or consistency of religious and moral values. The two are related in various ways, but they are not the same. Religion of nature's concept of religious rightness or value, therefore, should not be taken to imply or to require the unqualified moral goodness of the object of religion. Such a firm distinction between religious and moral values goes against the grain of much religious thinking in the West today, including that of many professed religious naturalists. It is widely assumed that an essential quality of any religious object, whether it is thought to be God, a particular aspect of nature, or something else, is that it be unambiguously good in the moral sense of good. Taking issue with this assumption will be an important part of our continuing deliberations in this book.

Finally, in common with other religious naturalists and in strong contrast with thinkers such as Aquinas, I think of nature as existing necessarily, not contingently. That is, it is not dependent upon something beyond itself for its existence. It needs no transcendent ground but always has been and always will be, in some shape or form. However, the nature I conceive as existing necessarily is not simply the nature we experience at present but all of the different forms or faces of nature that ever have been or ever shall be. To use the language of Alfred North Whitehead, ours is but one "cosmic epoch" in a succession of such epochs throughout limitless time (Whitehead 1978: 91). Each epoch exhibits its own characteristic principles, laws, and constituents, but no one of them, including our own, exists necessarily. Each comes into being and passes away.

I draw an important distinction in this connection that W. L. Reese traces back at least as early as the Dominican encyclopedist Vicente de Bauvais (c.1190–c.1264) and that was later put to use by such eminent thinkers as

Giordano Bruno and Benedict Spinoza (see Reese 1980: 380, 611–12). The distinction is between nature natured (*natura naturata*) and nature naturing (*natura naturans*). Any given cosmic epoch, with its stable features stretching over eons of time (nature natured), is pervaded and underlain by a restless, unstable, stubbornly innovative process or power (nature naturing) that brought it into being as a radical transformation of a past epoch and that will eventually bring about its own dissolution and replacement with a new epoch, a new kind of nature natured. This succession of one epoch by another throughout endless time is made inevitable by the fact that nature exhibits not just causal continuity and regular causal laws but a relentless, ever-present discontinuity and novelty that will inevitably erode and override its existing structures. Thus, the nature that exists necessarily and throughout all time is nature naturing, something fully natural but not to be identified merely with the character of nature as we presently experience it. At its most fundamental level, nature is process, not pattern. This everlasting process works within the contexts of patterns that come into being and pass away. Nature naturing and nature natured are thus tied inextricably together. Process becomes pattern and pattern yields to process—within the turbulent origins and dominant patterns of our present world and through a trajectory of worlds without end.

The fact that nature is a coalescence and tension of nature natured and nature naturing draws attention to its inherent volatility and dynamism. Its creations and destructions go hand in hand and work unceasingly in all its epochs, including our own. There is a stable context within which these processes of creation and destruction go on, but even this overarching stability is relative and subject to eventual change. While it persists, many kinds of transformation and change are continually taking place, some of them sudden and unexpected. This restless tension, instability, and unpredictability of nature's processes account for its awesome fecundity and amazing evolutionary developments but also for much of its ambiguity.

This kind of ambiguity is rife with seeds of menace and danger to humans and to all living creatures. They can prepare themselves for nature's sometimes abrupt changes and succeed in avoiding harm from these changes in some ways, but not all. From their respective standpoints nature, so warm and welcoming at one time, can present at another time a countenance of horrendous destructiveness and evil. This type of ambiguity in nature is accompanied by other types we will discuss later. Together, the various manifestations of nature's ambiguity comprise a serious and daunting problem for religion of nature and other naturalistic religions—and, if the truth be told, for all types of religion and for all forms and conceptions of human life.

#### CHIEF ISSUES CONFRONTING RELIGION OF NATURE TODAY

Religion of nature, the religious outlook that lies at the heart of this book, runs counter to much conventional reasoning about the character of religion

and how it functions or ought to function. In so doing, it brings to light certain issues or problems that make it difficult in the climate of today's thinking even clearly to comprehend, much less seriously assess, religion of nature's own central claims. Reflection on these issues should help to clarify what these claims are and why religion of nature sees fit to make them. The last issue to be reflected upon is of particular importance for this book as a whole. Here is a list of what I consider to be the chief issues, along with a brief response to each one.

1. There is a deeply etched assumption, particularly in the Western mind, that religion must focus on some kind of personal God or gods, and an accompanying propensity to identify any sort of admitted nontheism with an outright rejection of the meaning, importance, or value of religion itself. Religion without belief in the existence of God or gods is therefore viewed either as a thinly veiled contradiction or as simply too dilute gruel to supply much needed religious nourishment. But in denying the existence of a personal God or gods claimed to exist in a supernatural realm, religion of nature does not thereby reject religion or dismiss the critical importance of religion for human thought and life. It finds profound religious meaning and value in nature itself.

Two examples of impressive and enduringly influential religious outlooks that do not conceive of the religious ultimate as personal are Theravada Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta Hinduism. Religions such as Taoism and Shintoism join forces with religion of nature and other kinds of religious naturalism in centering attention on the immanent powers and mysteries of nature rather than upon some kind of separate, nonnatural domain. And one of the West's most penetrating thinkers, Benedict Spinoza, was an intensely religious man who did not conceive of God in either personal or supernatural terms. In fact, he identified God with nature. So religion of nature's denial of a personal deity or deities and a realm of the supernatural should not deter us from acknowledging its seriousness as a form of religion or its feasibility as a candidate for religious faith. Defense of this seriousness and feasibility will occupy us throughout this book.

2. There is the prevalent 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. But these 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. So to deny the existence of God or the divine creation of the world is not to strip the world of purpose. While there is not, for religion of nature, a purpose or intentional design of the world as a whole, there are plenty of purposes to be discovered and acted on within the world. The second kinds of purpose do not require the first kind.



For example, all creatures, including humans, typically yearn to preserve themselves and to live and flourish. It is in their nature to do so, and there is no logical necessity for the yearning to be traced back to God. Whether or not God exists, people find purpose, value, and meaning in such commonplace, everyday things as their vocations, families, friends, deeds of service, love of country, intellectual endeavors, aesthetic experiences, outdoor adventures, hobbies, play, and so on. And religion of nature claims that ultimate fulfillment and value can be found independently of any divinely conferred purpose by learning to live gratefully and responsibly as a natural being.

This can be done by seeking continually to enliven one's awareness of the awesome significance of being an outcome of complex natural processes stretching back into the remote past and a conscious participant in and contributor to those processes; by exploring and learning to appreciate the wondrous intricacies and interdependencies of nature; by discovering how to actualize the gift of one's irreplaceable uniqueness as an individual; by putting this gift to use in serving one's society and working to protect and preserve the natural environment; by being open to transformative possibilities in events occurring beyond one's prediction or control; by being deeply sensitive to the suffering of one's fellow humans and of all the creatures of earth; by contributing as fully and effectively as one can to the alleviation of those sufferings; by finding ways to help increase satisfaction and joy in the world; by humbly acknowledging and accepting the limits of one's own finitude and the modest place of humans within the whole of nature; and by coming to terms with the precarious equipoise and changeableness of all things natural. Here are purpose, challenge, and meaning enough for many lifetimes.

3. In our culture, there is a widespread assumption that salvation means going to heaven when you die and that if there is no such thing as personal survival in an afterlife, this present life can have no meaning. Religion of nature's denial of an afterlife and its locating all religious meaning and value in this life might be regarded, therefore, as grossly inadequate and unfulfilling. A singular virtue of this denial, however, is that it places the emphasis of religious life upon something other than oneself. It is not one's survival after death that is of supreme importance but the contributions one can make before one dies to present and future generations of living beings, both human and nonhuman. Selflessness rather than the everlasting survival of one's particular self is therefore at the crux of religion of nature's conception of the religious life. This conception seems more genuinely altruistic and more likely to avoid the temptation to use one's religion simply as a means to gratify one's personal wishes and desires.

The notion, moreover, that life can have value only if it exists forever flies in the face of everyday experience and common sense. I value

my life, and my wife values my life as I value hers, even though neither of us believes that we will live forever. Are we deluded or being illogical? I think not, because it needs to be recognized that the value of a human life is enhanced rather than diminished by awareness of its not being immortal. It can be seen as something inestimably precious, something to be cherished by and for others and lived with special fervor and outgoing dedication by oneself—because it will not be here forever and because the significance of one's life has so much to do with how it is lived, with its relations to others, and with what it contributes to others in the limited span of its years.

4. An assumption closely related to the third one is also common in today's religious thinking. The assumption is that the ideal form of existence is disembodied and independent of the physical world. It amounts to a denial that we are creatures of the earth, that we belong here and can be at home here. Religion of nature's firm emphasis on our embodied existence and on our character as natural beings is opposed to this assumption, and it is susceptible to being dismissed out of hand because of the assumption.

The assumption is strengthened, I believe, by its association with the traditional Western conception of God. God is conceived as pure spirit. God has no body and is not dependent on anything bodily for his existence. This also means that God has no need of the world. He can exist, and once did exist, before the Creation, in complete independence of the world. Humans are said by traditional Western theism to be created in the image of God, which is often thought to mean that they too, in their essential nature, are pure spirits with no essential relation to anything natural or bodily. They can realize their true natures, then, only in a life beyond this world, a life of complete disembodiment and pure spirituality. An afterlife in a purely spiritual realm or form of being is assumed to be absolutely necessary for them to be fully and completely what they essentially are as creatures of God, made in his image.

The mind-body or spirit-nature dualism being assumed here can be called into question in a number of ways. We do not have space to go deeply into them, but four ways of doing so can be briefly mentioned. One is that earlier Jewish, Christian, and Islamic teachings, when they speak of an afterlife, tend to do so in terms of the resurrection of the body, not the survival of a disembodied spirit. They thus envision a greater degree of continuity between this life and the next than do later theologians of these traditions who are by then deeply influenced by the mind-body dualism of Platonic and Neoplatonic thought. The second way of questioning this dualism is recognizing that when God creates the heavens and the earth in the book of Genesis, he pronounces it good. He does not condemn it or reluctantly tolerate it because it is not purely spiritual. The first man and woman are placed in a garden replete with skies, land, trees, fruits, animals, and the like, not in a disembodied realm. And they themselves are embodied, created from the dust of the earth.

Thirdly, if God is totally distinct from the world which he has created, how could he relate to it? If there is nothing in common between himself and his physical creatures, how could he interact with them? This is a theological version of the familiar impasse Platonic and Cartesian dualisms encounter when they try to explain the interrelations of a purely spiritual mind with the wholly different body it is thought to occupy for a limited period of time or with the physical world in which it is believed temporarily to reside. Finally, the full weight of evolutionary and ecological thought in contemporary science favors the idea that we are emergent natural beings, not purely spiritual ones, and that we crucially depend upon the whole of the physical nature of which we are a part. We are embodied beings through and through, therefore, and not disembodied ones. We do not need an afterlife of purely spiritual existence to fulfill our true natures. This is religion of nature's view.

5. There is a deep-rooted tendency in our culture to draw a sharp line of separation between human beings and their cultures and histories, on the one hand, and nature on the other. We tend not to see all features and productions of human life as manifestations of nature but oppose them in our thinking to nature. Thus, we commonly talk about "going out into nature," not recognizing that we are always in nature wherever we are. We are in nature in our homes, on our streets, in our cars, in our offices, in stores, in schools, in libraries, in factories, etc. Or we think of nature exclusively as wilderness or of nonhuman animals as radically different in kind, not merely in degree, from us. We even tend to forget that we ourselves are animals. There is a difference, of course, between human artifacts and the productions of nonhuman nature, for example, rocks, mountains, rivers, and trees. But in creating artifacts we are actualizing potentialities planted in us by nature. We are doing our thing just as the beaver does its thing in chewing down aspen trees and using their trunks and branches to build a dam. We do our sorts of thing with more self-awareness, variety, and imagination than the beaver does; beavers do not compose symphonies or build space ships, for example. And they do not use language or write novels or scientific treatises. But our human cultures and histories in all their creativity, splendor, and complexity are manifestations of our capacities and gifts as natural beings.

When we take these ideas seriously, we realize that we are dependent upon nature for everything we are, have, or are capable of producing or doing. We are integral parts of nature, not beings set over against it or capable for a moment of living outside it. We cannot insulate ourselves from nature or safely ignore our responsibilities to it. In being responsible for it, we are responsible for ourselves. If we fail to live up to our responsibilities to the nonhuman aspects of nature, dire consequences for ourselves, our cultures, and our civilizations can ensue. There are evidences of such threatening consequences all around us in today's world.

Religion of nature does not enjoin us to run out and hug trees, but it does remind us that such things as trees, plants, bogs, algae, and phytoplankton supply the oxygen without which aerobic life—including our own life—would be impossible. The proper contrast, then, is not between nature and culture, because the latter is simply a subset or one kind of expression of the former. The proper contrast is between the human and the nonhuman aspects of nature. And these two are indissolubly linked. This fact shows how deeply immersed human beings and their creations are in the natural order. It is the source and sustainer of their life and capabilities; it bestows upon them all the individual, social, and cultural potentialities made manifest in the course of human history. And if nature is that which exists necessarily, as religion of nature contends, then it is not only metaphysically ultimate. Nature can be brought into the arena as a serious contender for religious ultimacy as well.

6. The final cultural assumption standing in the way of open-minded consideration of the claims of religion of nature is the idea that a fit object of religious faith must be unqualifiedly and unquestionably good in the moral sense of good. There must be no taint of ambiguity about its goodness. It must not only be the source of all things good in human life; it must be the absolute standard for human moral living. We must be able to look up to it as the paragon of moral righteousness and chief exemplar of moral law. For example, if we think, as did St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033?–1109), of the religious ultimate as “that being than which nothing greater can be conceived” (Anselm 1948: 7), then it would seem obvious that we must include in the meaning of the term *greater* the idea that the religious ultimate surpasses all else in its moral greatness or absolute moral goodness. A contemporary philosopher, William L. Power, does not hesitate to draw this conclusion (Power 1997: 135).

The problem with nature being considered as the object of religious devotion, then, is that nature does not exhibit unqualified moral goodness. For one thing, nature is not a conscious moral agent. For another, it has an aspect of restless volatility that can mean destruction as well as creation. And as we have already observed, its creations and destructions go together. It destroys in order to create, and its ensuing creations are subject to its later destructions. As a consequence, nature can sometimes present a face of menacing horror. The rains of its calamities fall upon the just as well as the unjust, the innocent as well as the guilty. Its evolutionary history is rampant with extinctions. It is a system of predations in which one form of life must kill and consume another in order to live. It is suffused with suffering, starvation, and disease. And all its living beings inevitably die. Finally, the history of its human life forms includes unspeakable acts of malice and hate, as well as much studied indifference to the sufferings and pains of humans and other creatures.

How, then, can nature be a fit object of religious faith? If we are to live with religious confidence, must we not place our faith in something above and beyond nature, something unquestionably secure, dependable, and good? What hope of salvation can a radically ambiguous nature ensure? If nature's ambiguity is the ultimate truth and all there is, how can we live in the face of that ambiguity? These are serious concerns, and they pose a fundamental challenge to religion of nature—a challenge that is the central issue to be discussed in this book. I will make a start on responding to this sixth assumption and dealing with the concerns it brings into view in the next section. The concerns will be addressed more fully in the chapters to follow.

### QUESTIONING THE SIXTH ASSUMPTION

One of the problems with the sixth assumption is that it posits a radical disconnection between the putative moral purity of the religious ultimate and the moral ambiguities of the world. But if a morally pure religious ultimate has given rise to and/or sustains the world, why should there be such ambiguities? And why should they continue to be tolerated? In the case of traditional monotheism, this is the theological problem of evil: if God is all good and all powerful, he is presumably opposed to all evil and fully capable of eliminating it altogether. Why, then, is there so much evil in the world? Does not the fact of this evil call into grave question the existence of such a God? There are two proposed solutions to this problem that I regard as inadequate. I shall briefly present them and explain why I think them to be deficient. If they are set aside, as I believe they should be, then the idea that a religious ultimate must be unambiguously good in the moral sense of good must continue to be questioned.

The first proposed solution is what has been called the free will defense. Presented by the philosopher John Hick, among others (see Hick 1966, 1990), it argues that the good of human freedom, which enables humans to attain personhood through their own choices and efforts, also necessarily allows for the evil of bad choices. God has created humans with freedom so that they can relate to him as persons, not as automata, but in so doing he risks and allows the misuses of their freedom and their falling into evil. Moreover, in order for them to be truly free, they must live in a world that permits the meaningful exercise of their freedom, with all its consequences. This must be a regular, orderly, predictable world. In such a world, however, they can be hurt. Fire, for example, not only warms; it harms if it is not used carefully. To be free to make use of fire is to be capable of hurting oneself or others with it. If it did not have predictable character and effects, humans could make no use of it. The case is similar with the gravity that mercifully binds us to the surface of the earth. If we stumble off a precipice into thin air, we are likely to be maimed or killed.

Or to cite a more commonplace example, if I can exercise my freedom to open a door, the door and its surroundings must have regular, predictable properties that can be affected by my choices.

In this way, the free will defense seeks to explain both moral and natural evils. Genuine freedom presupposes the possibility of evil choices, and to be capable of choice we must live in a predictable world by which, if we are not careful, we can be hurt. Furthermore, we will sometimes get in the way of the world's processes in situations that are not under our control, and these processes can do us harm. The final wrinkle in the free will defense is the idea that God graciously and freely limits his absolute power in order that we can be free and the world can function with some degree of autonomy or independence of his immediate control. In other words, he gives to us and the world slices of his power pie. At any time, however, he can, if he chooses, take back those slices and exercise his power to override human freedom and the autonomy of the world. His absolute power, therefore, is not compromised in any way.

But of course it is compromised to the extent that humans are able, by their bad choices, to thwart his purpose and will for them and other parts of his creation. As human history so clearly shows, that thwarting of moral goodness has taken place on a massive scale and continues to do so today. God is presumed to allow innocent beings, both human and nonhuman, to be hurt, punished, persecuted, and killed by evil doers and evil institutions, with no apparent recompense or recourse. Political persecutions, slavery, rampant economic injustice and exploitation, the firebombing of cities, concentration camps, genocides, humanly caused extinctions of species, and severe environmental despoliations are examples. And God continually allows terrible things to happen to human beings and other creatures of earth which they did not expect and which they had no ability to control: earthquakes, fires, famines, storms, floods, diseases, accidents, and the like. Is this the sort of world God intends? If so, it is a world plagued by ambiguity, an ambiguity that stands in stark contrast with the supposed absolute moral goodness of God. It gives little comfort to be assured that God can prevent these things when he so routinely refuses to do so.

Of course, the proposed answer is that it is all worth the price if the goods of human freedom and personhood are preserved. These goods are assumed to trump and redeem all the moral evils they allow and the natural evils they require. Humans can learn, if not immediately then over long periods of history, how to use their freedom responsibly and how to enter as fully developed persons into fellowship with a personal God. If they do not succeed in learning to do so in this life, then they can in a life to come. This answer might tempt us were it not for the fact of *so much* evil throughout the history of the world, for the fact of *how many* innocents—human and nonhuman—have already suffered and continue to suffer, and for the fact that all the previous failures to use freedom responsibly lie in an *irretrievable*

past, along with all the widespread and often excruciating suffering and pain they have produced. Even if there is progress among humans over historical time or in an afterlife toward responsible personhood, the past and its colossal sufferings and evils for humans and nonhumans alike must be seen, by this argument, as mere grist for the grinding of the historical or heavenly mills, an expendable means to the later achievements of human beings. Is the allowance of such expendability, and on such a sweeping scale, completely and unqualifiedly moral?

Do we begin to see the radical ambiguities in this picture and how fundamentally they call into question the existence and role of an assumedly unambiguous, unerringly moral creator and sustainer God? So long as God's supposed absolute power is held in abeyance, he must refrain from interfering with either the autonomy of human freedom or the autonomy of the world. Implicit in these two autonomies are radical ambiguities. God's allowance of them, even if for the sake of the undeniable goods of human freedom and personhood, imparts ambiguity to God's own acts and decisions. He must sacrifice one kind of good for the sake of another. He must allow rampant evils for the sake of important goods.

God's presumed unqualified, indisputable moral goodness is compromised or at least made seriously questionable by the stark evils he permits. His intentions may be said to be good, but the effects of his actions are interlaced with evils. A troublesome and often horrendous intermixture of evil with good is the best he can do, if the world is to have autonomy and humans are to be free. All of this adds up to an ironic kind of absolute goodness and absolute power. It tells us something about the world in which we live and the character of our lives in this world. Perhaps both kinds of ambiguity, natural and moral, are ineradicable in any imaginable world. It is difficult, at any rate, to conceive a clear relationship between the ambiguities and a morally unambiguous and absolutely powerful God or to understand how the conceptual conundrums they pose can be resolved or eliminated by belief in such a God. The theological problem of evil is not unhorsed; it sits securely in the saddle. An explicit statement of this fact, and therefore of the ineluctable moral ambiguity that attaches to the God of the Bible, is contained in the book of Isaiah. There God proclaims, "I form the light, and create darkness, I make peace, and create evil. I am the Lord, that doeth all these things."<sup>3</sup>

A second way of trying to retain the conception of God's absolute moral perfection in the face of the evils of the world is that of process theology. In this approach, exemplified by the depictions of God's nature and role in Alfred North Whitehead's *Process and Reality* and developed further by theologians and philosophers who think in this vein, God's complete goodness is insisted upon, but his absolute power is denied. God's power is limited, not by his free choice—as in the free will defense—but by necessity, because he has not created the world, and the world has its

own immanent principles and powers. In this vision, neither God nor the world is completely autonomous; each depends crucially upon the other. The inherent relative autonomy of the world means that it is not completely under God's control, either in principle or in fact.

God seeks to lure every aspect of the world toward its highest possible attainment in the way of value, but those aspects have the power to resist the divine lure and to go their own way, at least within limits. God's absolute moral goodness is claimed by process theists to be preserved by the character of his lure and by how he responds to what has already happened in the world. He always does the best he can with what the world makes available to him. He lures the world to its highest possible attainments of value, given the possibilities for value presented by the causal past. And he preserves forever in the immediacy of his everlasting experience all the value, however limited in particular cases that might be, that has been achieved in the past. His absolute goodness is unsullied and uncompromised, then, despite the recalcitrance of a world marred by imperfections and evils of its own autonomous doing.

The forfeiting of God's absolute power for the sake of his absolute goodness looks promising, at least from the standpoint of logical consistency. But does it really save God's intentions and actions from the taint of ambiguity? I do not think it can, and for two reasons: the fact that God's perspective is limited by the multiple perspectives of the world's entities, and the fact that the future is not completely predictable and becomes increasingly less so the more remote it is from any present standpoint. No matter how intelligent and wise God is considered to be, his perspective cannot wholly encompass and include all the other perspectives of the world. We will comment more fully on the perspectival character of reality later on, but we can note here that, in Whitehead's metaphysics, the world is made up of a multiplicity of perspectives he calls actual entities and of the perspectives of the larger systems comprised of those entities. Each entity and system is unique in character and occupies a unique standpoint in relation to the rest of the world. As such, its perspective contains some degree, however large or small, of incommensurability with other entities and systems.

This must be as true of God as it is of the things of the world, meaning that God's perspective cannot encompass or capture everything about those things. Each and all perspectives are privileged by virtue of having something in them distinctly their own. Therefore, God cannot know everything there is to know about each of them, much less comprehend them completely and fully all at once. Each perspective has its own claim upon the world, the insistent particularity of its autonomous standpoint and being. Since this statement also applies to God's perspective, his perspective—however perspicuous, comprehensive, or wide-ranging it might be deemed to be—must be acknowledged to be finite not infinite, limited not limitless.



This insistent particularity of perspectives becomes especially notable in the case of sentient beings such as animals and humans. Their autonomous self-expressions and demands upon the world are not completely compatible with one another. In order for the effects of some to be maximized without constraint, those of others would have to be minimized. Even seeking carefully to balance these particularities in relation to one another means sacrificing some aspects of one or more of them for the sake of aspects of others, assigning to the balance or harmonization of perspectives more value than the intrinsic value of any one perspective. Whitehead claims, of course, that God seeks a balance of perspectives that will keep them from being at cross purposes and allow each of them to have as much individual expression or significant role in a given circumstance as possible. But the point remains that the achievement of such a balance means giving up some potential values for the sake of others. The ambiguity of such a balance is built in. Whether we accept Whitehead's metaphysical account or not, the same problem pertains to any kind of world in which there are a plurality of entities, each with its own individuality and particularity of self-expression. As we shall see in a later chapter, plurality, perspectivity, and ambiguity go necessarily together.

The upshot is that God's perspective is partial and cannot do full justice to all other perspectives, and that in seeking to balance all the perspectives at a given time in relation to one another in order to achieve the maximal goods of such balancings, some potential goods—namely, the attainments of each individual entity or system of entities considered in isolation from all the others—must be sacrificed. Since God's perspective is necessarily partial because he is limited by a perspective unique to himself, God cannot know with absolute certainty what is best for any given entity or set of entities. And since he seeks a harmonization of the possibilities for value in a multiplicity of entities, possibilities bound to conflict with one another in various ways, that harmonization must be bought at the price of sacrificing some potential value or values. Which values should be sacrificed, and why? Given the partiality of the divine perspective, not even God can answer this question with absolute certainty. God's decisions about the matter have to be burdened with some degree of uncertainty. And the sacrificing of some goods for the sake of others, that is, allowing some evil of the privation of some potential goods for the sake of some other goods, is a necessity that not even God can avoid.

The problem is compounded when we consider the uncertainty of the future. In determining his lure for present entities, God has to consider the effects that lure is likely to have, if fully responded to, on the future. And in preserving the achieved goods of the past, God has to make some judgment about what the goods are. This judgment must include the effects of putative present goods upon the future. These considerations and judgments

are bound to be less certain the farther they are projected into the future. For Whitehead, the future is genuinely open, even for God. This means that his predictions of it can only be probabilistic at best. To put the point another way, God is capable of making mistakes in his moral judgments and other judgments about value, because he cannot be completely certain about the effects of present events on future ones.

Can Whitehead's God avoid being shackled with moral ambiguity, then? It would seem not. God's judgments may be thought to be far wiser and more inclusive than the judgments of any worldly being could be. But it is hard to see how they can be regarded as infallible or completely immune from the kinds of ambiguity that plague human moral judgments or permeate a world of multiple sentient beings, each with its own sorts of at least partially incommensurable needs, desires, deserts, and demands.

An example might help to make this point clear. In the last year of the World War II, the United States had the option of bombing two cities in Japan with a newly invented atomic weapon. By doing so, it was then believed, an end of the war could be achieved swiftly, and hundreds of thousands of lives could be saved. Those lives would include those of the allies forced otherwise to invade Japan and of all of the Japanese who would die trying to defend their soil. The leaders of the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union decided that the loss of lives brought about by the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, even with the deadly radiation fallout it would produce, could be justified by the saving of countless other lives it would make possible. They sent an ultimatum to the Japanese leaders urging them to surrender or suffer great destruction. The Japanese did not respond to the ultimatum, and the bombs were dropped on their two cities.

But neither the leaders of the allies nor anyone else could be absolutely sure that such a terrible price had to be paid. Perhaps other options would have been better, such as a demonstration of the atomic bomb's fearsome power in an open field away from the congestion of a city, or awaiting the Soviet Union's promised entry into the war in the Pacific, which might have accelerated the peace process. But would either option have brought about a quick Japanese surrender? No one could be sure at the time. Nor could the leaders of the United States weigh with absolute certainty the effects for the future of having their country be the first to use such a weapon in warfare. No matter what position we may take concerning the wisdom or folly of the decision that was made, we cannot deny its ineradicable uncertainty and ambiguity. There is still room for different interpretations of its morality by competent moral judges, showing that its deep moral ambiguity continues to this day.

The question for us, then, is what would God have decided, and why? Could God somehow have avoided being entangled in the ambiguity of the situation and choice? I cannot see how we could exempt him from that ambiguity. At the very least, he would have had to allow for the sacrifice

of some enormous goods in order to bring about the achievement of others. And he could not have known the future consequences of any of the available decisions with absolute certainty. This does not mean that God must now be regarded as immoral or unfeeling, but it does mean that it no longer makes sense to think of his decisions as absolutely, unqualifiedly, unambiguously moral or as providing for an unquestionably best moral outcome. The problem of the world's ambiguities remains whether one endorses the free will defense of God's absolute power and goodness or the process conception of God. As we have seen, this problem necessarily involves God as well, infecting his decisions and actions with ambiguity.

So long as God is said to have any relations to the world, including that of creating it in the first place, the problem of moral ambiguity in God remains. If we want to think seriously about a religious ultimate, we must take fully into consideration its relations to the world. Should we fail to do so, the assumed ultimate would cease to have relevance to our lives. Since neither theism nor religion of nature can escape the problem posed for their respective religious ultimates by the moral ambiguities of the world, the sixth cultural assumption, namely, that a fit object of religious faith must be free of all traces of moral ambiguity, is not decisive as an objection against religion of nature. The assumption is open to serious question, given the fact that neither of the two versions of theism we have discussed can satisfy what it requires. In the next chapter we shall probe more deeply into the moral ambiguities of nature, both human and nonhuman, showing in greater detail why these ambiguities are inevitable and ineradicable. In subsequent chapters we shall see why, despite and even because of these ambiguities, nature qualifies as a suitable, splendid, and saving focus of religious faith and commitment.<sup>4</sup>