

Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture

Volume 1.4 2007

Contents

411-412

Editor Introduction

413-430

Is Zoroastrianism an Ecological Religion?
Richard Foltz and Manya Saadl-nejad

431-449

Managing Spirituality:
Public Religion and National Parks
Kerry Mitchell

450-467

Vegetarian or Franciscan?
Flexible Dietary Choices Past and Present
David Gurnett

468-488

Zen and the Art of Environmental Education
in the Japanese Animated Film *Tonari no Totoro*
Arran Stibbe

Perspectives—On Religious Naturalism

489-502

A Case for Religion of Nature
Donald A. Crosby

503-507

Deep Pantheism
Robert S. Corrington

508-509

Further Contributions to the Dialogue
Donald A. Crosby

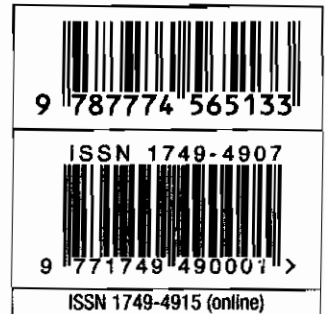
Perspectives—On Painting the World

510-521

Across a Great Distance:
A Painter on his Work, the Mojave Desert,
and What the World Looks Like
Jeff Lipschutz

Plus Book Reviews

equinox
www.equinoxjournal.com



[JSRNC 1.4 (2007) 503-507]
doi:10.1558/jsrnc.v1i4.503

JSRNC (print) ISSN 1363-7320
JSRNC (online) ISSN 1743-1689

Deep Pantheism

Robert S. Corrington

Drew University, Madison, NJ 07940
corrington@optonline.net

It is with great pleasure that I add my thoughts and reflections to Donald A. Crosby's evocative and challenging essay. He is one of the most important theorists of the emergent religions of nature that may soon take their place on the other side of the Western monotheisms. More importantly, his religion of nature provides an entirely new way of being religious that avoids supernaturalism on the one side and the anti-natural text-centered world of postmodernism on the other. Nature becomes the encompassing category, or precategory, that locates such subaltern categories as god or human textuality. Everything that traditional religions speak of is now seen either as *in* the one nature that there is or as ruled out on the grounds that it doubles up the world into the natural and the supernatural. Put differently, if we still speak of god we must affirm that god is a complex within nature and can no longer be seen as an extra-natural creator.

First I want to speak to the ways in which Crosby and I agree. We both believe that nature is all that there is and that there is no realm or domain beyond or somehow outside of it. If nature is all that there is, it has no outer boundary or contour that might serve as a container. After all, containers are themselves located in something that surrounds them and there can be nothing that surrounds nature. Further, nature does not contain some one trait that is manifest in all orders without remainder. Crosby and I are anti-foundationalists on this issue and affirm that nature embodies innumerable 'whats', rather than some originary or universal trait such as matter or Aristotelian substance. Unlike more traditional onto-theologies, which posit a foundational trait and a highest being, Religion of Nature lets nature display all of its multiple traits while rejecting patriarchal or hierarchical deities.

If nature has no one universal trait then it becomes almost impossible to talk *about* nature. We do not have a privileged perspective from which to survey the 'whole'. Indeed, we cannot even speak of the 'whole' of nature as if it has some universal principle of organization. From this it follows that any talk of what 'nature' might want or what 'nature' might do is impossible. This applies most dramatically to the age-old concept of purpose. Crosby and I are in agreement here. It makes no sense to say that nature has a purpose, either for 'itself' or for us. Purposes, deeply finite, are in and of certain highly specific orders and not others. So far as we know, humans are unique in having purposes that arch out over the antecedent chain of efficient causality. I like Peirce's concept of developmental teleology here where the stress is on how human purposes must adjust to evolutionary pressures and continually readjust themselves. There are no guarantees that nature will honor this or that human purpose.

We also agree that nature has neither a personality nor consciousness. Boston Personalists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries affirmed the former, while process pantheists in our time affirm at least a weakened form of the latter. Religion of Nature is far more radical with its rejection of anthropomorphic traits as applied to nature. If anything, nature prevails as prior to the distinction between consciousness and the unconscious, although there are good reasons for speaking of the unconscious of nature.

Now I want to move toward some systematic reflections that will enable me to advance a conception of Deep Pantheism as a model for a slightly different conception of nature and its religious dimensions. Crosby states that Religion of Nature is neither pantheist nor panentheist. I want to agree with the latter claim, which does indeed affirm a form of deity, but disagree with the former claim. I will show that my Deep Pantheism entails nothing about a traditional deity while the pantheism of Whitehead and Hartshorne remains embedded in the very kind of onto-theology that Religion of Nature so decisively overcomes.

Panentheism can be seen as the final historical chapter in the history of liberal Protestantism as it struggles with modernity and the claims of modern science. Its notions of nature are foundationalist and totalizing, all tied together with a bifurcated deity who resides both within and outside of nature. The foundationalism is manifest in its positing of what are called 'actual occasions' as the fundamental constituents of nature. These infinitesimal drops of experience are held to be tied to all other (past) occasions in 'the' universe, a 'universe' that is a bound totality floating on the network of the extensive continuum and creativity. Hence we not only have the kind of foundationism (one universal trait)



decisively ruled out by Religion of Nature but we have, more damningly, the outmoded notion of nature as *an* order held together by a network of internal relations (what are called 'prehensions' or feelings). In the end, panentheism, with its notion that god is both in and beyond nature, fails to survive the post-monotheist categorial innovations of Religion of Nature.

But in showing the conceptual bankruptcy of panentheism we have not necessarily shown a similar problem with pantheism. The initial historical difficulty with the concept of pantheism is that this perspective has, more often than not, been either demonized or driven to the very margins of thought. The name of Spinoza, for example, was often invoked as a warning against going too far in one's conceptual structures. Simply put, pantheism was seen as a form of atheism pure and simple. To equate god with the world was to deny god any difference that made a difference.

There is another way of going about this. Crosby rightly invokes the absolutely central distinction between *natura naturans* (nature naturing) and *natura naturata* (nature natured). This distinction predates Spinoza, going back at least to the twelfth century, but is most often attributed to him as it appears several times in his *Ethics*. It is a distinction that is fundamental to my Deep Pantheism and recasts the religious problematic in ways that brook comparisons with Crosby. It is important to stress at the outset that nature naturing and nature natured are both dimensions *of* and *in* nature, not separate orders one in and one out of nature.

Nature naturing is obviously the more difficult dimension to articulate as it lies on the nether side of the orders we encounter in the world. The definition I like best is that it is 'nature creating itself out of itself alone'. Like Crosby, I deny that there is an extra-natural creator and I also affirm with him that there is no time when nature was not nor will there be a time when nature will no longer be. One implication of this is that the monotheistic addiction to eschatology (the doctrine of the end of the world and nature) is ruled out in principle. Nature is eternal and is continually self-renewing. Nature naturing is the dimension of nature churning with potencies, potencies that spawn the innumerable orders of the world.

Nature natured can be defined as the orders of the world—as the dimension of what Christians call 'creation'. But, as noted, nature natured has no ultimate shape or contour, no order of orders (as posited by panentheism). Nature natured is best seen as simply innumerable orders, nothing more, and nothing less. But here things get interesting. I would argue that there are powerful sacred orders within nature natured and that these numinous orders are central to human religious

experience. Ultimately these 'sacred folds' have their origin, however ambiguous, in nature naturing—the dimension of the potencies. Like Schelling, from whom the concept of 'potencies' comes, I believe that nature contains deep unconscious depths from which sacred powers emerge. But these sacred folds, semiotically dense, have neither internal consciousness nor intentionality. They simply are, there to be encountered and, in some sense, endured.

But is nature 'itself' sacred? Here I remain reticent. I am not sure what sense it makes to call 'all' of nature natured and nature naturing sacred. I prefer to save the prefix 'sacred' for numinous orders within nature natured—orders, I should add, that are funded by the archetypes. Deep Pantheism is religious at its heart and goes back to Rudolf Otto (as also invoked by Crosby) and his notion of the *mysterium tremendum*. The human encounter with a sacred fold shakes the self to the core of its being and conveys something of the power of nature.

Deep Pantheism is a form of pantheism in that it affirms that nature is all that there is and that there is no divine agency located somehow outside of nature. It is 'deep' in the sense that it recognizes a churning unconscious depth of nature from whence all orders, sacred or otherwise, come. The gods and goddesses we encounter in sacred folds are all ejects from the primal potencies of nature naturing. They combine power and meaning, as Tillich would say, but in ambiguous ways that do not have a teleological or cumulative force. So I would say that the sacred is in and of nature and that nature per se is neither sacred nor non-sacred.

Finally, I would like to add another wrinkle to the plot. Crosby asserts that Religion of Nature entails a rejection of immortality. The human process is closed at both ends and has no prospects of surviving bodily death. I do not see how this necessarily follows from a capacious religious naturalism. My own view is that human beings are eternal at both ends, that is, that our soul was neither created nor will it be destroyed. But I also want to stress that the soul is fully an order *within* nature and that it will always be so. It is simply an order with specific non-temporal features that renders it different in kind from all those orders subject to entropy and the time process.

Like Crosby, I reject concepts of hell or heaven if they entail a supernatural locus. But I have my own take on the problem of justice or retribution. Since I maintain that the soul is eternal, while being an order within nature, it follows, for me at least, that the South Asian concept of reincarnation is the one that best delivers an answer to the problem of evil. Again, like Crosby, I appeal to Advaita Vedanta with its non-dual reading of the great *Upanishads*. In these great texts the individual soul (*jiva*) is bound to the universal soul (*atman*). The individual soul carries

with it its own karmic force field that shapes its prospects within the world of embodiment. This forcefield evolves and changes as the embodied self negotiates its way among the often recalcitrant orders of the world. As Emerson argued, there is compensation built in to the process. In this ancient model, which predates the conceptual elaborations of monotheism, there is no permanent hell but rather a karmic training ground between incarnations in which the soul can confront the evil it has done to others and slowly purge the evil done to it.

The differences between our perspectives should not overshadow the deep agreements. We both believe that something absolutely fundamental is happening, however slowly, that will radically alter how we envision nature and its religious powers. Religion of Nature and Deep Pantheism are both responses to a new dispensation that is emerging from the heart of nature. In the decades ahead there will be further conceptual refinements, further elaborations, which will finally let nature be what it has always been—the eternally self-creating potency that stands forth in its innumerable uncountable orders.