

ON THE HAZARDS OF TURNING FROM THE CREATOR TO THE CREATION



Andrew Grosso

Keywords: Donald Crosby, Walter Gulick, religion of nature, naturalism

ABSTRACT

I respond to Gulick's review of Crosby's work and raise questions having to do with (1) the merits of abstract accounts of religious observance, (2) the viability of nature as an object of religious devotion, and (3) the correspondence between religious truth and moral truth. I also critically examine Gulick's efforts to supplement Crosby's work and suggest Gulick's appropriation of Christian concepts and imagery may require reconsideration.

Walter Gulick's survey of the work of Donald Crosby not only serves as a useful introduction to Crosby's thought but also raises a number of broader issues associated with contemporary accounts of the nature of religious observance. In what follows I identify some general questions about the possibility of articulating the kind of account of religion Crosby proffers, raise several more focused questions about particular aspects of Crosby's work (as Gulick presents it), and ask a few concluding questions about Gulick's proposals for supplementing Crosby's efforts. In the interests of full disclosure, I should clarify I have not read any of the books Gulick employs in his survey, and so am dependent entirely on Gulick for my understanding of Crosby.

Perhaps the most overarching question I have has to do with what exactly we mean when we talk about "religion." There has for some time now been a fairly robust scholarly conversation going on about the adequacy of modern accounts of religion, including the relationships between (on the one hand) religion and secularism and (on the other) different traditions we might identify as "religious." There is, too, always a

question about the correspondence between whatever generalized definition of religion we find acceptable and the content of particular traditions our definition may incline us to recognize as religious. I have doubts about our ability to define religion in a way that accommodates all those traditions we typically think of as religious, let alone efforts like Crosby's that seek to redefine what it means to be religious.

Crosby, though, seems to depend on just such a definition: religion involves "existential faith" (9), or the "search for values and modes of awareness that can provide basis, orientation, and direction for the whole course of our lives" (12). The key word here seems to be "whole." Absent this term, it's hard to see how Crosby's efforts might not just as easily be described as philosophical, or psychological, or aesthetic, or perhaps even socio-political. What Crosby is after is a vision capable of integrating disparate perspectives; his efforts thereby testify indirectly to the manifest fragmentation of contemporary life. Whether he has successfully articulated such a vision, let alone one that is truly "religious" in nature, is something even Gulick doubts (19, 21).

I raise these more general questions as a way of suggesting Crosby's decision to turn aside from Christianity was perhaps a bit over-hasty. More specifically, I wonder if what he has rejected is a deracinated form of Christianity, one made to conform to an abstract account of religious experience that nobody really observes. Likewise, I think he might make too much of (first) the consequences of the historical-critical study of the Bible and (second) the presumed conflict between "religious sensibility" and "scientific discernment" (9). The historical-critical study of the Bible may pose a threat to certain fundamentalist readings of the scriptures, but it has by no means ruled out other possible readings that are entirely consonant with the witness of traditional Christian faith and practice. Modern science may pose a threat to naïve or simplistic accounts of divine being and action, but it has by no means displaced the more sophisticated versions readily available in the Christian theological tradition.

I turn now to questions I have about Crosby's description of nature (*natura naturans*) as a legitimate and even ultimate object of religious devotion. First, I believe we should give further attention to the question of how we recognize nature as such, that is, as something more like a cosmos and less like chaos. The order or scheme or pattern we recognize in the world is by no means self-evident, and the articulation of any such order is itself an act of intellectual achievement (scientific, religious, or otherwise). Crosby seems to suggest we can indeed apprehend just such an order but also insists this order has no real conceptual content (15). Despite this, however, he believes this account of nature fulfills the "role-functional categories that determine whether a putative religious object is authentically religious" (23, n. 7). This seems to me to involve making the same kind of mistake Polanyi identified in the efforts of those who presume to analyze language all the while insisting their efforts do not entail a concomitant metaphysics (see *PK* 114; cf. 15-16, 145-150).

Second, it seems to me the identification of nature as an object of religious devotion is even more susceptible to the charge of anthropomorphic projection than are some monotheistic accounts of God. Christian theology has several well-developed strategies for self-critique explicitly designed to guard against anthropomorphism and projection, perhaps the chief of which is the articulation of a theology of perfect being. This kind of analysis provides philosophical ballast to dogmatic accounts of divine being and action. However, there is, as Crosby himself recognizes, no way of articulating what we might call a philosophy of perfect nature: owing to its contingency, nature is inherently and unavoidably ambiguous (conceptually, morally, and otherwise). Crosby seems to adopt (and thereby to adapt) Leibniz's dictum that "no more perfect world can be realistically imagined than the one we inhabit" (12). A religion of nature thus leaves us with the unattractive prospect of having to acknowledge what we think of as our highest and noblest religious ideals actually conceal our unspoken ambitions, fears, and even resentments.

The inherent ambiguity of nature makes it difficult to see why our experience of nature and apprehension of it as an object of religious devotion should necessarily incline us towards reverence, gratitude, and responsibility. Why might a religion of nature not just as readily (and with equal religious justification) incline us towards apathy, acquisitiveness, and violence? This question becomes even more pressing in light of Crosby's insistence that our experience of love, "compassion, and justice" require we also be subject to "selfishness, bigotry, [and] hate" (13). It seems Crosby's account of the "'demand' side of the Religion of Nature" (17) owes more to distinctly human ways of knowing and being than to *natura naturans*. I believe, too, we need to distinguish between contingency and evil more carefully than it seems Crosby allows: we most certainly do not need a lie in order to recognize truth, brutality to appreciate beauty, or death to recognize life, but rather vice versa.

The inherent ambiguity of nature is the major reason Crosby is ultimately unable to reconcile "religious rightness" with "moral rightness" (11). It seems a rather strange form of thought that can provide a "context and support" for reflection even though it supplies no "specific precepts" (12). Indeed, the ambiguity of nature and consequent acknowledgement that the "creation of new species requires the extinction of old species" (13) seems to carry us rather close to the possibility of having to legitimate atrocities like genocide, eugenics, and the like. Gulick seems cognizant of the potential problems that arise from espousing a form of religious observance that is suitable for "healthy-minded persons" (16) but may appear rather more sinister to those we might deem less than "healthy-minded."

I will conclude with a few cursory observations about Gulick's proposals for supplementing Crosby's work and thereby moving it closer to something approximating a distinctly "Christian" religion of nature. He suggests we must be able to coordinate

moral truth and religious truth in a way that enables us to flourish in spite of injustice, suffering, and death (21). This may be philosophically adequate, but does not go far enough as a *religious* vision: a viable religious vision must not only enable us to bear up in the face of injustice, suffering, and death, it must demonstrate the means whereby injustice, suffering, and death are decisively overcome.

Gulick also proposes employing Christian trinitarian theology as a “template” (22) for reconfiguring our understanding of the correspondence between nature, moral truth, and spirituality. I see two problems here. First, characterizing the correspondence between religious truth (i.e., the ambiguous reality of *natura naturans*) and moral truth (exemplified by the teachings of Jesus) as comparable to the distinctly personal, perichoretic relationship between the Father and the Son involves making a rather precipitous move; we must first establish how and why a religion of nature yields the kind of moral vision both Crosby and Gulick want to affirm. Second, Gulick’s appropriation of the moral teachings of Jesus does not take adequate account of the historical and cultural context of the biblical witness and seems to owe more to Thomas Jefferson than to recent historical-critical scholarship. As C.S. Lewis once noted (in *Mere Christianity*), the one option we do not have is to see Jesus as a great moral teacher.

I appreciate Crosby’s and Gulick’s efforts to articulate a form of religious faith capable of addressing the challenges of contemporary life. I must, however, part company with them regarding the merits of a religion of nature and opt instead for the confession found in the 19th-century spiritual, “Give me that old-time religion, it’s good enough for me.”