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From God to Nature: A Personal Odyssey

I enter a swamp as a sacred place—a sanctum sanctorum. There is the strength, the marrow of Nature.

—Henry David Thoreau, “Walking”

I grew up in Bible-Belt northwest Florida (culturally indistinguishable from southern Alabama). Religion there was pervasive, dogmatic, and real. My early religious convictions were formed by the preaching of a large-hearted Scottish minister with a musical brogue, a youth group skillfully orchestrated by a former missionary couple with exotic tokens of world travel in their home, and summer church camps that continually urged us to make or reaffirm a Christian commitment. Often a new friendship with a special girl would grow up in the near eternity of a week of church camp away from home, and this friendship’s strange warmth would blend confusingly with emotions stirred by the “friend we have in Jesus.”

In my high school years I had a male best friend who, like myself, became increasingly absorbed in a religious quest. We took long walks along Bayou Texar and the deserted beaches of Escambia Bay, pondered books on developing our spiritual lives, attended services of worship three times a week, assumed leadership roles in the youth group at church, and spent many evenings at his house sipping coffee, lost in thought before a fire, and earnestly probing the mysteries of religion. It did not occur to us to doubt that God exists or that the Bible contains his definitive revelation, but there also was much that we did not understand about God and the Bible and yearned to know. I remember being

in a car with my friend during one of our endless discussions and reaching into the glove compartment for a Bible to support a point I had just made. He remarked, “That’s an interesting theological idea.” I had never before heard the word *theological*! It sounded enigmatic and profound, whetting my appetite for more talk about the nature of God, his creation and governance of the world, and his purpose for human life—especially for my life.

My hometown, Pensacola, is a Navy town with an aviation training base the locals proudly call “The Annapolis of the Air.” I was thirteen years old when World War II ended, and most of my late childhood games had related to war. Since my natural father had risen through the ranks to become a naval officer and had served with distinction on aircraft carriers in the pivotal battles of Midway and the Coral Sea, I thought that his record could help me wrangle an appointment to the Naval Academy, to prepare for a naval career. However, as my religious sensibilities deepened, I came to realize that I was more interested in studying for the ministry. Having finally made the decision to become a minister, after my high school graduation I traveled by Greyhound bus to Davidson College in North Carolina—a staunch, all-male Presbyterian liberal arts school—to prepare myself for what I now fervently believed to be my calling.

College opened up a vast new world. I began to grasp the multi-textured complexity of Western culture and to have the first glimmerings of cultures radically different from my own. I now sensed that my particular intellectual upbringing and outlook constituted just one sliver of a plenitude of possibilities. This upbringing and outlook were Protestant rather than Catholic or Eastern Orthodox, for example, and Christian rather than Buddhist or secular. They were not only American but reflected the rather provincial Americanism of the southeastern United States in the second quarter of the twentieth century. Also, I happened to have been born and reared white rather than black, a difference whose significance in the Deep South of that time was impressed upon me anew every summer when I came home from college to resume work with Arthur, “Junior,” and “Bubba,” the black men with whom I had labored since age twelve in my uncles’ wholesale plumbing store. It had been unquestioningly assumed that I would go to college and that their children would not. Although I regarded these men as old friends, they lived in a world I had made little attempt to understand, and I was now being inducted into a world of rapidly expanding horizons I found increasingly impossible to explain to them.

All of this dawned on me rather slowly, however. I remember how startling it was, early in my college career, to come across an announcement in the student newspaper that someone was coming to the campus to argue for *atheism*! My shock was not much less than if the newspaper had announced the

visit of an alien from a remote galaxy. A universe without God was inconceivable to me at that time. I dismissed the impending lecture from my mind and did not bother to attend; I wonder now what the effect on me would have been had I gone.

My junior year in college brought the first courses in philosophy. As I recall, that year we used textbooks and anthologies rather than reading major primary texts or exploring the intricacies of whole theories. The material was vaguely interesting but also elusively abstract—more informative than intellectually stimulating. In my senior year we read the philosophers themselves, and in some detail. I became aware for the first time of the astounding range and originality of philosophical positions and of the powerful arguments deployed in each position's defense. The fact that some of the greatest minds of Western history could come to such different conclusions on the many common problems they addressed—and that no closure had been reached on these problems, despite the concentrated efforts of these geniuses throughout their lifetimes—struck me with overwhelming force. I now recognized that no fundamental intellectual or spiritual outlook could be taken for granted; each had to be opened to critical scrutiny in the context of opposing points of view. This applied as much to my own outlook as to any other. Years later, I came across a statement that expressed exactly what I realized at this time: faith cannot simply be taken on faith; it has to be critically assessed if it is to give adequate support to a whole way of life. My days of unreflective credulity were coming to an end.

Once I had enrolled for ministerial studies at Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey, my attitudes toward Christianity became progressively more critical and informed. While my Christian faith remained strong, it was no longer unquestioned. I saw that there were few, if any, patent meanings of the scriptural texts that lay on their surfaces. What I had formerly thought to be the obvious meanings of these texts were debatable interpretations, filtered down to me through history. I learned to read the books of the Bible in their historical settings, in light of the latest theories of their historical development, and in their original languages. I came up against the fact of variant readings and different manuscripts. Even the oldest of the manuscripts dated from times much later than those of their original authorship. My reading of Albert Schweitzer's monumental study, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*,¹ as well as other books on the New Testament showed how extremely difficult, if not impossible, it is to separate a Jesus of history from overlays of kerygmatic faith in the Gospels and the other New Testament writings.

As for the great creeds of the Church, I saw how these had been hammered out amidst raging controversy, that political as well as religious factors

were involved, that the creeds were in some sense the outcomes of compromise, that a case could be made for each of the so-called heresies on the basis of vague or ambiguous biblical passages, and that the creeds were couched in the metaphysical categories of a period later than that of the New Testament and considerably different from the conceptualities of our own time. So once again there were no self-evident facts of the matter; it was interpretation all the way down. No external authority could settle the question of which of many possible construals was the best. I had to think for myself.

Up to now, my faith had developed in the isolation and introspective privacy of seven years as a student, first in college and then in seminary, but upon graduation from the seminary, I became the pastor of a small church in Delaware. I was twenty-four years old when I began my ministry, and I was now expected to be the spiritual advisor for my congregation, most of whom were much older than I. In planning worship services, preaching, pastoral visits, personal consultations, weddings, funerals, meetings, and other settings, I strove to articulate and exemplify a faith that not only made sense to me but could also do so for the persons who looked to me for spiritual guidance. My faith, formerly brooded upon in private, now had to be tested in this public arena.

I could try to impress these people with my learning, but I found that some of their queries and responses struck to the heart of my own emerging doubts about Christian theism, exposing a continuing ferment in my thought processes I could not ignore. To pose as the confident exponent of views I myself had begun to call into question became increasingly difficult. I felt that I needed a context where I could devote time to critical reflection and openly acknowledge and address my questions rather than try to be a specialist in answers. All of my role models of Christian ministers until that time had been eloquent proclaimers of a warm, utterly confident faith, strong shepherds of their flocks who spoke with authority and were readily able to counsel and discipline those who showed tendencies to stray from the fold. A different conception of the role of the minister would perhaps have enabled me to regard a more questioning, reflective, honest approach as appropriate where I was and even decidedly helpful to my congregation, but I did not have such a conception of the ministry at that time.

During my three-year period at the Delaware church, I decided to further my education by working on a master's degree in American church history at Princeton Seminary. I completed the degree in two years by attending classes each Monday, the minister's typical day off. This experience stimulated my appetite for further study and precipitated a change in my career goal. Instead of being a minister, I now concluded that I could make the best use of my academic interests and inquiring traits of mind as a teacher of religion in a college

or university. Thus I enrolled in the joint Ph.D. program in religion of Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University in New York City.

Christian conviction was assumed in this seminary as it had been at Princeton, and I felt at home there, but the university was something else. Here for the first time I was thrown into the framework of a modern secular university, and one located in the heart of a huge city, itself a bastion of secular culture. Whereas before I had instinctively used the term *theology* as being synonymous with Protestant, Christian, and Trinitarian thought, my professors at Columbia now reminded me to employ the appropriate qualifying terms to set off this one form of theology from many others: Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Unitarian, Jewish, Islamic, Aristotelian, Neoplatonic, Stoic, Deistic, Monistic, Polytheistic, and so on.

I also was made strongly aware of the fact that there is such a thing as a dynamic secular culture, and that a religious approach to the problems of the modern world cannot simply be assumed. Some of my favorite teachers at the university were of Jewish, humanist, or other persuasions quite different from my own, in contrast with *all* of the teachers I had had in higher education until that time, including two graduate degree programs. In addition, I studied two fields in some depth in the program in which I finally enrolled: world religions and the history of Western philosophy. Both alerted me to layers of provincialism in my assumptions I had not realized were there.

Philosophy soon became my first love; I had originally enrolled in church history but changed my focus to philosophy at the beginning of my second year of doctoral studies. Moreover, I became increasingly fascinated with the teachings of the major religions of the world, and they continue to challenge and instruct me to this day. The study of Western philosophy and world religions opened up numerous fresh options for reflection, impelling me first to reassess my belief in the Incarnation and Trinity and later my belief in God. These investigations also helped lure me away from the exclusivistic religious absolutism, to which I had been unconsciously committed before, and in the direction of the position I now call *pluralism* or *convictional openness*.

Since the intended focus of this chapter is on my conversion from theism to a religion of nature, I will not discuss my struggles with the Incarnation, the Trinity, and other aspects of my former Christian commitment but will describe instead some of the thought processes that eventuated in the collapse of my faith in God.

Constantly drummed into us by the Barthian–Brunnerian² brand of Reformed theology that was normative at Princeton Theological Seminary when I was enrolled there was the necessity of being on guard against the snare of idolatry and the conviction that this snare was most closely associated with

anthropomorphic conceptions of deity. While true that there was one sense in which God was “closer than hands or feet,” there was another even more fundamental sense in which God was “totally other,” radically distinct from his creation and his creatures, including human beings. Our professors taught us that the essence of paganism from Old Testament times to the present was identification of God with any of the things of this world. God was sovereign Lord of the universe; his providential rule over nature and events of human history was absolute and could in no way be questioned. He had created the world not out of some preexisting raw material or from his own substance but out of nothing.

After I received my degree from Columbia and began my teaching career, first at Centre College in Kentucky and then at Colorado State University, I began to realize that, for me at least, this doctrine of God was untenable. After being introduced to the writings of Alfred North Whitehead by Daniel Day Williams at Union Theological Seminary, I continued to study Whitehead and other process philosophers, especially William James. Whitehead’s metaphysics emphasizes God’s immanence rather than transcendence and denies that God can or does exercise complete control over evil. It holds that God needs the world as much as the world needs God, and that God and the world are everlasting and develop together.³ James insists that even God must have an environment and be limited by that environment, and that God is in time and “works out a history just like ourselves.”⁴ This radical finitizing of God was convincing to me, but I now see it as one important step toward my eventual rejection of all forms of theism.

My reading of Jewish theologian Richard Rubenstein’s *After Auschwitz*⁵ when it was first published in the mid-1960s, persuaded me that the conception of a God behind the stage of history, calmly and sovereignly directing its events for his own purposes—including the unimaginable horrors of the recent Nazi Holocaust—is indeed, as Rubenstein put it, too “obscene” to contemplate. I reread the Book of Job and was dissatisfied with the answer (or lack of answer) I found there to the theological (and existential) problem of evil. I could no longer be content with an appeal to God’s transcendent majesty or with the soothing message that God knows what he is doing, however mysterious or even *criminal* his sovereign actions may often seem to us.

I also began to wonder what it could mean to have a nonanthropomorphic conception of God. I pored over the writings of Paul Tillich, who speaks of God not as a particular being among other beings but as “being-itself” or “the ground of being.”⁶ Tillich intends that these terms be understood existentially, as pointing to the power of being in human life that gives us courage to cope with nonbeing, that is, with such threats to self-affirmation as fate, death, guilt, and meaninglessness. But his conception of God is, in the last analysis, an

impersonal one, however pervasively present and empowering being-itself might be thought to be. His “God above God”⁷ avoids anthropomorphism but also skirts the borders of atheism, so far does it veer from traditional, personalistic theism. Given Tillich’s rejection of a God “out there” in favor of something experienced in the depths of existence, I was later to wonder why the finite *had* to be viewed as pointing beyond itself toward an infinite in which it participates, as Tillich argues,⁸ or why the power of being could not reside in nature itself rather than constitute some kind of “ground” behind or beyond nature.

On the other hand, to continue with traditional notions of God was to persist in thinking of God as “the Man upstairs” (the familiar terminology of common folk, encountered frequently in one’s daily newspaper, usually after some disaster has been attributed to God’s incomprehensible will) or as dictating “laws like a prince”⁹ from a heavenly throne. The finite God of process theism was philosophically satisfying to me in many ways, and I saw it as a decided improvement over traditional theism, but I also found it even more anthropomorphic than the traditional conception of God and, most importantly, without religious power in my life.

Hence, I gradually began to suspect that Ludwig Feuerbach was right after all, and that the idea of God is the projection onto the heavens of the image of humanity¹⁰ (and of the male portion of humanity at that, as feminist critiques of traditional theism have now made painfully apparent). One could with Tillich try to reconceive God in radically immanent, impersonal terms as the power of being-itself, or one could abandon the idea of God altogether as probably hopelessly anthropomorphic, a notion too limited in scope or persuasiveness to function effectively as the ground of a vast universe or as the focus of religious life. As much as I admired Tillich, the second of these alternatives came to be more and more persuasive for me. The writings of the “Death of God” theologians of the mid-1960s, such as Richard Rubenstein, made this alternative seem even more compelling.

My faith in God had begun to founder on two shoals: the theological problem of evil—made starkly evident by the Nazi atrocities against millions of Jews and other innocent human beings in the middle of the twentieth century and in the early years of my own life—and what now appeared to be an ineradicable and implausible anthropomorphism in both traditional and process conceptions of God. My resolve to reflect critically on these two issues, however unsettling that might prove to be, was undergirded by the educational experiences recounted above, by the probing questions of my honest parishoners in the Delaware church, and by the demanding give-and-take of daily classroom teaching in philosophy and religious studies at the secular state university where I have spent most of my teaching career.

In addition to my musings on the problem of evil and the seemingly incurable anthropomorphism of theism, two other factors crept to the forefront of my consciousness. With them, I experienced the final shipwreck of my theistic faith, but these four factors also have brought me to the unexpected landfall of a religion of nature whose character and significance I seek to clarify in this book.

The first of the latter two factors was my reading and rereading of the famous British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) debate on the existence of God in the late 1940s between Bertrand Russell and Frederick Copleston. I have frequently assigned the published version of this debate¹¹ to my students, and while I first tended to side with Copleston's defense of theism, I was slowly won over by the force of Russell's arguments. Russell contends that it is unnecessary to ask for an explanation of the universe itself (he also asserts that it *makes no sense* to ask for such an explanation; I would not go so far). We can and do explain one thing in the universe in terms of another, but there is no compelling reason to believe that the concept of an explanatory cause must be applicable to the universe as a whole. Something has to be given, even for theists, so why can we not just say that the universe is given? In response to the classical question, posed again by Copleston, "Why something rather than nothing?" Russell suggests that there is no "Why"; things simply are what they are. In other words, the universe is its own ground; nothing beyond it need be posited.

I think that Russell is right in drawing this conclusion, but I take his reasoning in a different direction than he does. For me now, nature is that in which we "live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28, Revised Standard Version; Paul quotes here from one of the ancient Greek theological poets, perhaps Epimenides). Or, to use Rudolf Otto's terminology, nature is an "aweful and fascinating mystery" (*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*) in its own right—fraught with the wonder, dread, overpoweringness, vitality, and blissfulness of which Otto speaks in his 1917 masterpiece, *The Idea of the Holy*.¹² We need not go any further than nature to probe the depths of our existence and the powers that sustain our being. Nature, then, is a fit object of religious concern. It is holy. Formerly, with thinkers such as Copleston, I assumed nature to be derivative, to require a support or an explanation beyond itself. Now I was learning to see nature and the associated powers of creation and destruction manifested in its ongoing transformations as ultimate.

The final principal factor bringing me to this faith in the ultimacy of nature, and thus to the present stage of my spiritual odyssey, was my reflections on the Darwinian theory of evolution and the closely related science of ecology. These two aspects of modern biology portray life as the historical outcome

of processes ceaselessly working within nature, and they stress the entwined dependencies binding all forms of life together. It is a vision that includes human life as well.

Human beings, therefore, do not transcend nature in their essential being, as had traditionally been thought, and as I myself had long believed, but are the product and expression of its immanent powers. For a time I had been attracted to religious humanism as an alternative to theism, but now I began to realize that human beings, as one spin-off of the irrepressibly creative workings of nature, should not be regarded as religiously ultimate themselves but rather as evidencing, along with other forms of emergent life, the ultimacy of nature.

Furthermore, who is to say what other forms of life or intelligence, perhaps ranging far beyond the present capacities of human beings and human cultures, might evolve in the future? Or who can ignore the distinct possibility that such forms may already have emerged elsewhere in this universe of countless galactic systems? For me, then, an extension of the ideas of evolutionary origin and ecological order to human beings has come to mean that we neither stand at the apex of nature, as its obvious end point or goal, nor do we exist over against it as a separate order of being. Instead, we are just one of nature's multifarious creations, each special and wonderful in its own way, none merely subordinate to the other, and all finally subject to the ubiquitous natural powers that first gave them birth and now sustain them in complex patterns of mutual dependence.

I have made little attempt thus far to argue the case for a religion of nature or to consider objections to my present position or present ways of thinking. These tasks will be undertaken in the chapters to follow. Instead, I have provided a descriptive sketch of reflections that gradually brought me to a religion of nature, and I have related these reflections to some of the events of my life.

I also have not said much about the affective side of my odyssey, about what it *felt* like to experience these profound changes of religious outlook. What I have described is more of an intellectual map of the journey. Feelings of anxiety and misgiving, as well as of loss and regret, have occurred. One cannot set out in a new direction without leaving behind some (although not necessarily all) of what the old direction promised or provided. For example, I regret no longer being able to believe in a God who exercises providential care over the world, who has the power to transform our lives, and who communes with us in prayer—a God that Whitehead characterizes as the “fellow sufferer who understands.”¹³ Also, death for me has now a disturbing finality that contrasts with my former confidence that dying was like changing trains. I miss being part of a community of tradition and ritual whose faith is similar to my own: there is no First Church of Nature in my neighborhood.

However, there also have been feelings of liberation and relief, of finding an integrity and wholeness in my life that it seemed to lack before. Above all, the journey has brought a sense of rightness, of having come to terms with the being that I have perhaps always suspected myself to be, a being fully immersed in the natural world and sharing in the dependencies, limitations, and contingencies of its other creatures. My hope is in some ways more limited than before, but I see it as more realistic and firmly grounded.

The principal purpose of the remaining chapters of this book is to make a case for a religion of nature, filling in its details and dealing as forthrightly as I can with some of the philosophical and religious problems it poses. No faith's stance is immune to such problems; each must search continually for greater subtlety, adequacy, and depth.

Since a significant part of the task of making this case is clarifying the concept of nature upon which my religious outlook rests, part 2 addresses the topic of "the nature of nature." I conceive of this topic as metaphysical in character, as belonging to that part of philosophy that inquires into the most salient and general features of the experienced world and seeks a systematic understanding of how those features relate to one another. While I do not attempt to offer a full-blown metaphysics here, I devote a chapter each to subtopics relating to the nature of nature. Each chapter is intended to present an essential part of the philosophy of nature that informs my religious vision and to support the conclusion that nature thus conceived is *metaphysically* ultimate, meaning (1) that it is self-subsistent, requiring no explanation beyond its immanent powers for its sustenance or creativity, and (2) that it is all-encompassing, including within itself all that is or ever will be.

Hence, in my view, no separate realm of mind or spirit is set over against nature, nor does a transcendent supernatural being exist, such as that assumed by monotheists. Furthermore, this version of religious naturalism¹⁴ makes no reference to any type of nature-pervading, nature-enveloping, or nature-personifying spirit or spirits, in contrast to pantheistic, panentheistic, mystical, polytheistic, or animistic traditions.

My outlook is, then, atheistic, but I remind the reader that the various forms of theism are all "anaturalistic" with respect to the type of religious naturalism that is the subject of this book. As logicians point out, the complement of any set is everything *not* contained in that set. While this is obviously the case, I see no need to refer to theistic traditions by focusing on what they are not, and I hope that a similar courtesy will be accorded to the religion of nature to be presented here. It is better to refrain from tocsin-sounding negative epithets and to concentrate, at least initially, on the *positive* content of each perspective.

Aspects of the philosophy of nature developed in part 2 are of critical importance in understanding how nature can be regarded as an appropriate object of religious concern. Once the metaphysical task is accomplished, I turn in part 3 to a defense of the *religious* ultimacy of nature. There I deal with religious themes and problems relating to a religion of nature, complementing the metaphysical discussions of part 2.¹⁵