

# Eupraxia as a Religion of Nature

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Published as: Steinhart, E. (2016) Eupraxia as a religion of nature. *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 37 (3), 227-45.

**ABSTRACT:** Religious naturalism has not yet produced any actively practiced nature-centered religions. But the work of Donald Crosby suggests that it might. When Crosby's "Religion of Nature" is developed and extended using the work of Karl Peters and others, the result can be called *eupraxia*. Eupraxia, meaning good practice, aims to be a new nature-centered religion. It adopts practices taken from the Catholic Green Sisters, the World Pantheist Movement, the Spiritual Naturalist Society, the Humanistic Pagans, and the spiritual atheists. But eupraxians naturalize all these practices. Since many people are already engaged in practices close to eupraxia, and since eupraxia is not dogmatic, something like eupraxia has a chance to flourish.

**KEYWORDS:** Crosby, religious naturalism, nature-centered religion, eupraxia, practice, ritual

## 1. Introduction

Many writers advocate the development of new and more naturalistic religions (see Sagan, 1997: 50; Raymo, 2008: 114; Taylor, 2010). Perhaps these new religions will emerge from religious naturalism. Peters believes that religious naturalism "could lead to a new significant form of organized religion with a structured community, ritual practices, and ways of moral living" (2010: 435). However, at the present time, religious naturalism is not a *nature-centered religion*. The features mentioned by Peters are mainly missing (see Crosby, 2002: 155-7; Hogue, 2010: ch. 3).

At the present time, the most significant effort to derive a nature-centered religion from religious naturalism is found in Crosby. Over the course of several books (2002, 2008, 2013), Crosby lays out his metaphysical theory of nature. He uses that theory to develop a collection of symbols and practices (2014). His theory, along with its symbols and practices, constitutes his *Religion of Nature*. Crosby's religious vision is both deep and extensive. Nevertheless, work by other religious naturalists shows that his Religion of Nature contains several opportunities for further development.

Since any further developments of his Religion of Nature are bound to change it, they will yield a *Reformed Religion of Nature*. But that very phrase marks an opportunity for change. Reformed or not, the name "Religion of Nature" has problems. On the one hand, it is too generic. Pantheists and some neopagans can plausibly claim to have religions of nature. On the other, sentences like "I'm a Religion of Naturist" hardly roll off the tongue. Rather than "Reformed Religion of Nature", the name used here is *eupraxia*, which just means good practice. By continuing to develop and reshape Crosby's work, eupraxians aim to create a detailed system of practices grounded in eupraxian metaphysics. Of course, eupraxians do not always agree with Crosby. And eupraxia will also be particularly inspired by Peters (2002).

On the one hand, eupraxia is prospective. It refers to one way to develop religious practices out of the work of Crosby and other religious naturalists. It does not refer to some established denomination or sect. On the other hand, eupraxia is not merely an intellectual exercise. Several groups are developing similar ideas and practices. These include the Spiritual Naturalist Society (2015), the Humanistic Pagans (2015), the Atheopagans (2015), and the World Pantheist Movement (2015). Many eupraxian ideas and practices are already being socially developed. Rituals similar to those described here are being performed by real people. Will eupraxia succeed? That question can only be answered by the future. At the very least, however, eupraxia can inspire religious naturalists to start working on naturalistic religious practices. Eupraxia, after all, is not the only way to develop a religion of nature.

## 2. The Ultimate Creative Power

At the root of all existence, Crosby posits an ultimate creative power. He refers to it as *natura naturans* (“nature naturing”). He says that *natura naturans* is an “unceasing creative energy” (2002: 114; 2008: 7, 47-8). It exists necessarily and eternally (2002: 155; 2008: 7). It brings our universe into existence. It creates and sustains each thing in our universe (2008: 51; 2013: 2). It transforms old things into new things. After our universe ends, it will bring others into existence. Its creativity ensures that nature contains an infinite series of distinct universes (2002: 35-44, 125, 154; 2008: 55). Since every physical thing is a manifestation of *natura naturans* (2008: 51), that power itself is not physical. Physical powers are *phenomenal*, and thereby open to empirical study. But *natura naturans* is deeper than any phenomenal power.

Eupraxians agree with Crosby that all physical things are generated by an ultimate creative power. Since this power is deeper than any phenomenal power, it is not open to empirical study. But not all sciences are empirical, and this ultimate power is open to mathematical and logical study. To gain greater clarity about this ultimate power, eupraxians follow a well-trodden Platonic path. This is the path of logical abstraction, which reveals the dynamic essences of things, nested like the layers of an onion. All trees share a common essence, *treeness*, which is the power of being a tree (Tillich, 1951: 178). Since all trees are living, *treeness* contains a deeper essence, which is the power of life. But life contains an even deeper essence, the power of physicality. And physicality contains a still deeper essence, the power of pure being.

The power of pure being, which is Being-Itself, is the deepest power of all. Being-Itself is the creative power of being (Tillich, 1951: 235-7). It is the *ground* of being. Here Wildman points out that “religious naturalism is compatible with ground-of-being views of ultimate reality” (2011: 248; see Gulick, 2013: 160; Cahoone, 2013: 224). As the ground of being, Being-Itself is the *root* power below all others. It is the source from which all other powers emerge, like a plurality of streams emerging from a single spring (Plotinus, *Enneads*, 3.3.7, 3.8.10). As the root power, Being-Itself is not transcendental. On the contrary, Being-Itself is an *immanent* power in every thing. It is the innermost power, the core power. It is the power of each thing *in itself*. As such, it is a *noumenal* power. Every other power is an expression of it.

For Crosby, the ultimate power is axiologically ambiguous (2009: 7). It both creates and destroys value, and it has no axiological direction. However, this ambiguity directly opposes the traditional ascription of *goodness* to the ultimate creative power. And it has long been thought that such goodness is religiously essential. The old Platonists and Neoplatonists affirmed the goodness of the ultimate power: Being-Itself is the Good. Likewise Tillich says the power of being is the power of goodness (1959: 14). Among religious naturalists, Rolston affirms the goodness of the ultimate creative power, which he refers to as God. He says God is the “autopoietic force energizing all the particulars”; God is a “countercurrent to entropy” which drives life upward; and God “elevates the creatures along their paths of cybernetic and storied achievement” (1999: 364). Here eupraxians agree that the ultimate creative power is good.

On the basis of these considerations, eupraxians believe it is compatible with religious naturalism to posit a power which is ultimate, immanent, creative, and good. But eupraxians agree with Crosby that this power is not God and it is not an object of worship (2002: 9, 12, 17, 122, 131, 153; 2008: 64). Eupraxia is nontheistic. To avoid the unwanted connotations of established terms (like *natura naturans*, the ground of being, or God), they refer to this power as the *drive*. The drive has no mental qualities and it is not a will to anything (Crosby, 2008: 94). The drive is *radically impersonal*. It cannot even be personified metaphorically. Although the drive is holy, it is not divine. Crosby offers *water* as a symbol for the ultimacy of nature (2014: 87-91). Following Crosby, and Plotinus, eupraxians use water to symbolize the drive.

Eupraxians agree with Rolston that “there is creativity by which more comes out of less”, so that “the stream steadily rises above its source” (2004: 293, 299). This uplifting creativity is the drive. Acting in the noumenal depths of each thing, the drive necessarily *strives* to change it into something else. Since the drive is good, it necessarily strives to change every thing into something better. Of course, if the drive in any thing strives to change that thing, then that thing strives to change itself. Animated by the goodness of the drive, every existing thing strives to increase its own goodness in every possible way. If anything increases its goodness, then it improves itself. So the drive is the power of self-improvement in every thing. It is the power of self-surpassing or self-transcendence. This is a relative and contextual transcendence (Stone, 1992). However, since every possible thing can surpass itself, the drive aims at no final goal.

Since the drive is the deepest and most general essence, its goodness does not favor any less general kind of thing. Things do not surpass themselves in order to benefit organisms, and they do not surpass themselves in order to benefit humans. On the contrary, the goodness of the drive strives to increase that value which every thing has solely by virtue of its existence. The goodness of the drive is a purely ontological benevolence. It strives to increase the value which each thing has *in itself*. This type of value is *intrinsic value* (Peters, 2002: 65-7). Thus each thing strives to increase its intrinsic value in every possible way. Eupraxians identify intrinsic value with complexity (Steinhart, 2014: 115-21). Animated by the drive, every existing thing necessarily strives to increase its complexity in every possible way. This complexity has been precisely mathematically defined (Bennett, 1988; Machta, 2011).

### 3. The Opening and Closing Powers

To further develop their concept of the drive, eupraxians turn to Peters (2002). He says that every creative process involves two distinct phases (*viii*, 1-2, 37, 81). The first phase produces new possibilities while the second selects some of them for continued existence. For eupraxians, this means that the drive manifests itself as two derivative powers. These can be referred to as the *opening power* and the *closing power*. The opening power reveals or opens up new possibilities (40, 44, 47). The closing power selects some of them for actualization (55, 57, 59).

The *opening power* moves from actuality to potentiality. Every thing has at least one potential, which is some other way it can be. The potentials of any thing are its abstract variations. They are abstract forms derived from the form of the thing. These potentials vary in their intrinsic values: some of these variants are worse than the original, others are equally good, while others are better. Since eupraxians affirm that the drive always strives to increase intrinsically valuable complexity, they also affirm that the opening power, acting within every thing, defines only its better potentials. More precisely, the opening power defines all and only the ways that every thing can be *improved*. After it reveals those ways, the *closing power* actualizes them. Hence the closing power moves from potentiality to actuality. It calls into being some concrete thing which instantiates that potential. For every thing, for every way to improve it, the closing power ensures that there exists some thing which is improved in that way.

Acting within the noumenal depths of every thing in every universe, the opening power defines the ways it *can* surpass itself, while the closing power ensures that it *does* surpass itself in all those ways. Since intrinsic value is complexity, a thing surpasses itself either by growing more complex or by creating new things which are more complex. The history of our universe as a whole (aka the *Epic of Evolution*) reveals that the strivings for greater complexity in our universe often succeed in our universe. Of course, while those strivings often succeed in our universe, they also often *fail* in our universe. If our universe were the only one, then failure *in our universe* would imply failure absolutely. However, since eupraxians follow Crosby in affirming at least one series of universes, they deny that failure in any universe implies failure absolutely.

Eupraxians affirm that the strivings which fail in earlier universes will succeed in later universes. Hence later universes derive their contents from earlier universes, somewhat like offspring organisms derive their genes from their parents. Eupraxians therefore affirm that every striving in every universe is always successful in some context, even if that context is some later universe. As they work together, the opening and closing powers ensure that every thing *inevitably* surpasses itself in every possible way. They ensure that the strivings of the drive *necessarily* succeed. Any series of universes grows endlessly in value while each universe remains axiologically ambiguous (Crosby, 2008: ch. 2). It is a mixture of opposites like creation and destruction, order and disorder, beauty and ugliness, moral good and moral evil, and so on. Furthermore, as Crosby says, the perfect universe does not exist (2008: 24-33). Every universe will be surpassed in many ways by universes with greater valuable complexity.

As universes and their parts become more complex, those parts begin to interact in many different ways. And, as they interact, sometimes their strivings *cooperate*. As strivings cooperate, they create wholes with greater internal organization. Populations of

lifeless molecules self-organize to become living organisms. Populations of thoughtless cells self-organize to become thinking brains. Populations of selfish animals self-organize to become harmonious and just societies. However, as the strivings of things become more diverse, they also become more *competitive*. As they compete, their opposed strivings create conflicts. They fight over resources which cannot be shared. They struggle for survival. Their strivings become destructive. The opening and closing powers work in both predator and prey, parasite and host, criminal and victim. A plurality of diverse strivings for the creation of greater value can thus lead to the violent destruction of value. Thus evil emerges from the destructive conflicts among competing goods. Ultimately, these conflicts occur because there is *too much* goodness for any single universe (or planet) to hold. Hence eupraxians, who are optimists, will argue that this excessive goodness must spill over into later universes.

And eupraxians do have an argument for their claims about goodness. This argument is naturalistic, but it is not based on empirical premises. Naturalists need not be positivists, and religious naturalism should not be reduced to scientism (Neville, 2013). Eupraxians believe that every thing surpasses itself in every possible way. The argument for this universal self-surpassing parallels recent valid versions of Anselm's ontological argument (Millican, 2004). It goes like this: (1) There are some propositions. (2) These propositions are ordered by value. More valuable propositions assert more self-surpassing. (3) There exists some unique best proposition. The best proposition asserts that every thing surpasses itself in every possible way. (4) Propositions are either true or false. (5) Some propositions are true. (6) A true proposition is better than any false proposition. (7) Assume for *reductio* that the best proposition is false. (8) If the best proposition is false, then any true proposition is better than it. (9) But then the best proposition is not the best proposition. (10) Since this is a contradiction, the best proposition must be true. (11) Therefore, every thing surpasses itself in every possible way. The strivings of the drive inevitably succeed. If something fails to surpass itself in some universe, then it surpasses itself in some later universe.

#### 4. The Dance of the Holy Powers

After describing the Taoist concept of *ch'i*, Crosby says "Every aspect of nature, including us, is a manifestation of *ch'i*, the 'vital force' of nature" (2008: 51). He then identifies this *ch'i* with *natura naturans*. Crosby further describes how the Tao divides into the interacting powers of *yin* and *yang*, which are also thought of respectively as female and male (2014: 47-8). This suggests that, just as *ch'i* self-manifests as female *yin* and male *yang*, so the drive manifests as male and female powers.

Similar ideas are found in Peters. His "ultimate source of existence" has affinities with the Tao (2002: 31, 34). And, much like the Taoist *ch'i* self-manifests as *yin* and *yang*, he says his ultimate source self-divides into two powers, which strive together to create valuable complexity. Peters often refers to the interaction of the two powers as a *dance* (45-51, 81). And he uses the dance to illustrate biological productivity and Darwinian evolution (46-7). But the image of the dance, when joined with biological productivity, suggests that his two powers are analogous to male and female partners. When they dance, their creative interaction produces all things. For eupraxians, these

two powers are the opening and closing powers. Following Crosby and Peters, eupraxians interpret these powers in terms of a *biological analogy*.

According to the biological analogy, the opening and closing powers stand to one another as the two biological sexes. Just as those sexes work together to produce living things, so the two powers of being work together to produce all natural things. A more detailed examination of reproductive biology motivates the identification of the opening power with the female sex and the closing power with the male sex: the potentials revealed by the opening power are analogous to ova which are fertilized by the closing power. And, if these two powers are sexualized, then they are the *passions* of lust. Hence the opening power is the *female passion* while the closing power is the *male passion*. These two passions are complementary but cooperative. At work in all things, they are perpetually coordinated and harmonized. Since these two passions spring from the self-division of the drive, the biological analogy entails that the drive is *love*. Since the drive is holy, these two passions are also holy. They form the *holy couple*.

The biological analogy entails metaphors: the opening power is metaphorically female while the closing power is metaphorically male. But these metaphors can also involve concrete attributions: the opening power metaphorically has a female body while the closing power metaphorically has a male body. Hence the pair of powers is metaphorically identified with a pair of loving bodies. The female body is animated by the opening power (the female passion) while the male body is animated by the closing power (the male passion). Consequently, the bodies of physical organisms can be used to represent the opening and closing powers. These bodies can be human or nonhuman. And, since plants are hermaphroditic organisms, they can represent the division of the drive into two unified reproductive powers. For example, a *flower* divides into pistil and stamen as the drive divides into the opening and closing powers.

Besides living bodies, statues and pictures can also be used to represent the two holy powers. Thus a statue shaped like a woman can metaphorically refer to the opening power, while a statue shaped like a man can metaphorically refer to the closing power. Ritual acts involving those statues can be used to express reverence to those powers. For example, during some ritual a eupraxian might offer flowers to a female statue. This act expresses reverence for the opening power. Eupraxians can use statuary such as the Sheela Na Gig or imagery associated with the Green Man. Gendered names and epithets can also be used to metaphorically refer to the opening and closing powers.

Peters notes that it is possible to metaphorically “describe a relationship to a nonperson in personal terms” and that insofar as these are “metaphors of relationship, they are not problematic” (2002: 32). Peters often uses maternal terms (22-3, 30-3, 67). Thus eupraxians can refer to the opening power using maternal terms and to the closing power using paternal terms. For example, they can refer to those powers as “the Great Mother” and “the Great Father”. Or they can use other descriptors which they associate with masculinity and femininity (such as a maiden or a warrior). They can refer to their interactions using the sexual metaphors of fertility, insemination, gestation, pregnancy, and birth. Offering flowers to a female statue, a eupraxian might say “I give these to the Great Mother”. Eupraxians can turn to traditional images, such as Mother Earth and Father Sky, to refer to the holy pair. Hence the opening power can be represented by the *earth* and the closing power by the *sun*. Just as the sun and earth are bound together by gravity, so the opening and closing powers are bound by love.

The use of concrete objects to represent the holy pair requires two important religious qualifications. The first qualification is that eupraxians do not take these metaphors literally (see Peters, 2002: 137). The opening and closing powers do not literally have genders, lusts, bodies, or reproductive organs. The use of bodies, statues, pictures or epithets to represent or refer to the opening and closing powers is merely figurative. When those figures are taken literally, the result is idolatry (see Peters, 2002: 33). But eupraxians reject idolatry. The use of concrete representations in eupraxia resembles the use of icons in Orthodox and Catholic Christianity. Thus reverence or veneration shown to the statues or pictures passes over to the holy powers which those things represent (and, ultimately, to the drive itself). While eupraxia welcomes acts of *reverence* and *veneration*, it explicitly rejects all acts of *worship*.

The second qualification is that eupraxians use only *natural* objects to represent the two holy powers. Eupraxians are naturalists. Consequently, they do not recognize any divine people. Eupraxians, like Crosby, are nontheistic. So, while eupraxians may refer to the opening power as a *mother* (since mothers naturally exist), they would never refer to her as a *goddess* (since goddesses do not naturally exist). Likewise, eupraxians might refer to the closing power as a father but never as a god. Just as eupraxians prefer to avoid the term “God”, so they prefer to avoid the names of old pagan deities. They avoid the names of old Greek, Norse, or Celtic gods or goddesses. They likewise avoid the names of gods or goddesses used in more recent paganisms.

## 5. The Eupraxian Cosmology

Eupraxian cosmology begins with a simple initial thing. Since it is simple, it is independent, and it exists necessarily. It instantiates Being-Itself. This simple thing is the nontheistic first cause of everything. Dawkins posits this simple first cause (2008: 184). He says that the first cause “must have been the simple basis for a self-bootstrapping crane which eventually raised the world as we know it into its present complex existence” (184-5; see 101). And, since this first cause is simple, Dawkins declares that it cannot be God (184). Of course, eupraxians agree. To justify this simple thing, eupraxians use a naturalized version of the Leibnizian cosmological argument (Leibniz, 1697). For eupraxians, the simple thing is just an initial universe. Since it is simple, it has no internal structure, no space, no time, no material things.

Since the initial universe is actual, eupraxians affirm that the drive works in it. If the drive works in any thing, then, using the biological analogy, the male and female passions work in it. The initial universe is hermaphroditic. Acting within its noumenal depths, the female passion produces its better potentials. But its better potentials are its more complex potentials – they are the abstract forms of more complex universes. They are like abstract ova, which lie within the depths of the initial universe as within a cosmic womb (Crosby, 2014: 91-6). After the female passion generates these more complex potentials, the male passion fertilizes them. They become actual. Hence the initial universe gives birth to a plurality of offspring universes. But the male and female passions are at work in them too. On this cosmology, every universe begets a plurality of offspring. The idea that universes beget universes is consistent with our best science. Many recent physical theories affirm cosmic reproduction (Smolin, 1992; Linde, 1994;

see Leslie, 1989: 4.15-27). As universes beget universes, they produce an endlessly branching *world tree*. Since each offspring in this world tree is more complex than its parent, the universes within any lineage grow ever more complex. One of these lineages includes our universe, which will beget its own cosmic offspring too.

As universes become more complex, they begin to contain physical things. Since the drive is active in the noumenal depths of any whole, it is also active in the depths of its parts. Hence the drive is active in every thing in every universe. Since the drive works in all things, the male and female passions also work in them. Hence each thing is analogous to a plant which has both male and female reproductive organs. Acting in the noumenal depths of each thing, the female passion defines all its better versions. Following the botanical analogy, these better versions are unfertilized *ova*. Just as botanical ova contain the genotypes for new plants, so these abstract ova contain the patterns for new things. But these new things will also be better. Acting in each thing, the male passion fertilizes its ova. It implants the spark of actuality in each ovum. Once they are fertilized, these ova become the better *seeds* of things. To see how things make their seeds, consider some old universe which contains the three things A, B, and C. Each produces three better seeds. So the better seeds of A are  $A_1$ ,  $A_2$ , and  $A_3$ ; the better seeds of B are  $B_1$ ,  $B_2$ , and  $B_3$ ; and those of C are  $C_1$ ,  $C_2$ , and  $C_3$ .

Once each thing has produced its seeds, it releases them to the wind. For eupraxians, the wind is just the energy of the drive. To take an image from Buddhism, these are the winds of karma, which blow over every universe, and which carry its seeds away. But as these seeds are lifted, they interact. On the one hand, if two seeds can fit together either as cooperators or competitors, then they attract each other. On the other hand, if two seeds cannot fit together, then they repel each other. As they are sorted by these attractive and repulsive forces, seeds become bound together into *clutches*. To see how seeds get sorted into clutches, consider the seeds of A, B, and C. If the seeds with the same numbers attract, while those with different numbers repel, then they become sorted into three clutches. These are the clutch  $A_1$ ,  $B_1$ , and  $C_1$ ; the clutch  $A_2$ ,  $B_2$ , and  $C_2$ ; and the clutch  $A_3$ ,  $B_3$ , and  $C_3$ . After being carried by the winds, each clutch eventually lands on some new ground. Its seeds now grow up to become new things in new universes. But each new thing is some better version of some old thing from some previous universe. These new things are *counterparts* of the old things (Lewis, 1968). The positivity of the drive ensures that, for every way any thing can be improved, there exists some future universe in which it has a counterpart which is improved in that way.

Our universe is caught up in this cosmology, as is your life. Eupraxians regard your life as a four-dimensional process extended from your birth to death. Acting in the noumenal depths of your life, the female passion produces its better versions. These are the abstract patterns of new lives. After the female passion defines those patterns, the male passion fertilizes them. They become the seeds of new lives. These seeds are sorted into clutches which grow up into better versions of our universe. The positivity of the drive ensures that every better version of your life exists in at least one of the better versions of our universe. It follows that your life is surpassed by every possible improved version of itself. These improved versions of your life are your better future lives (Steinhart, 2014: ch. 7). They are your future counterparts. They inhabit better future societies, in better future ecosystems, in better future universes. Of course, since these better futures are filled with more goodness, they are also filled both with more intense



cooperation and with more intense competition and conflict. And, since your better lives will be surpassed by their own better lives, your earthly life is the root of an endlessly branching tree of lives. This tree contains all your possible lives.

Eupraxia consequently involves something like a Theravadic Buddhist notion of rebirth (Rahula, 1974). On this point, eupraxia disagrees with Crosby, who rejects life after death (2002: 129; 2008: 4-5, 58-59, 99-100). Eupraxians find that rejection both unfortunate and unnecessary. Stone writes that “since patterns of information can outlast their original physical substratum, just as music can outlive its composer, immortality is not definitively foreclosed in a naturalistic framework” (2008: 228). Eupraxians affirm that every human person is strictly identical with his or her body, so that all human persons are material things. But material things have *forms*. Following Aristotle (*De Anima*, 412a5-414a33), the soul is the form of the body. Lives are patterns of information which are copied from universe to universe much like genetic codes are copied from organism to organism. But eupraxians argue that the positivity of the drive ensures that these life-patterns will always be steadily improved.

This eupraxian cosmology has religious benefits. Crosby endorses expressions of gratitude, including prayers of thanksgiving (2002: 153; 2014: 142). Following Bishop (2010), such expressions need not be directed to divine persons. Bishop argues that if the course of nature is ultimately optimistic, then such expressions can be directed to the impersonal powers which define and realize that course (533). The eupraxian cosmology does support an ultimately optimistic narrative. Eupraxians can give thanks to the drive and to the male and female passions. Through a process of naturalizing translation, they can adapt prayers taken from other traditions. For example, Colledge (2013: 41) derives a moving prayer of thanksgiving by naturalizing Job 1:21.

The eupraxian cosmology has empirical support. Physics shows that complex atoms come from simpler atoms; chemistry shows that complex molecules come from simpler molecules; biology reveals that complex organisms evolve from simpler organisms; and technology shows that complex artifacts evolve from simpler artifacts. There is considerable empirical support for the general principle that complex things evolve from simpler things (Dawkins, 1996; Dennett, 1995; Chaisson, 2001). There is also great mathematical support for this general principle (Bennett, 1988). Affirming this general principle, eupraxians conclude that complex universes evolve from simpler universes (Steinhart, 2013). Eupraxians thus extend the Epic of Evolution to universes.

## **6. The Eight Seasonal Holidays**

The male and female passions work together cyclically. Each cycle begins with some existing thing; each cycle involves the creative work of the male and female passions; each cycle ends with the production of some new things. Since their holy powers act cyclically, eupraxians regard the *circle* as a sacred symbol. And the cyclical activity of the holy powers manifests itself in all the local cycles of nature. It manifests itself in cycles which vary in size from the metabolic cycles of our cells to the rotations of the great arms of our galaxy. Among all these cycles, the seasonal cycle of the earth and the sun traditionally stands out for its religious significance. Life on earth (except for life at deep sea vents) depends on this cycle. Eight points have traditionally stood out in this

seasonal cycle. These are the eight seasonal holidays, which include the *solstices*, the *equinoxes*, and the four *cross-quarter days* between them.

As part of his Religion of Nature, Crosby encourages “rituals recognizing the equinoxes and solstices” (2014: 147). Perhaps he would also advocate rituals on the cross-quarter days. Pantheists also encourage rituals on the eight seasonal holidays (Toland, 1720; Harrison, 1999: 84). Referring to them as *Earth Holy Days*, the Catholic Green Sisters have celebrated the seasonal holidays (Taylor, 2007: 252-8). They are religiously celebrated by modern Pagans, such as the Druids (Greer, 2006: 74-82) and Wiccans (Sabin, 2011: ch. 9). Among modern Pagans, the cycle of the eight seasonal holidays is often known as the *Wheel of the Year*. For the sake of neutrality, eupraxians refer to the cycle of seasonal holidays as the *Circle of the Year*. Of course, eupraxians are free to adopt more specific names for the Circle, and for its individual holidays. Since the seasons are inverted between the northern and southern hemispheres, there are really two Circles, shifted by six months. The dates for the northern Circle are used here.

For eupraxians, the Circle begins with the *Winter Solstice*, which takes place around 21 December. The Winter Solstice is the minimum of light. On much of the earth, the minimum of light at the Winter Solstice produces a minimum of temperature about six weeks later. Hence the first cross-quarter day, which takes place during the first week of February, can be referred to as the *Winter Thermistice*. The *Spring Equinox*, when light and darkness are in balance, happens around 21 March. The second-cross quarter day occurs in the first week of May. Since temperatures come into balance around that time, it can be referred to as the *Spring Equitherm*. The *Summer Solstice* happens on 21 June, at which time the light reaches its maximum. The maximality of light soon produces maximal temperatures. Hence the third-cross quarter day, which occurs during the first week of August, can be referred to as the *Summer Thermistice*. The *Fall Equinox*, when light and darkness are again in balance, takes place about 21 September. The fourth cross-quarter day happens in the first week of November. Following the balance of light, it occurs near the balance of temperature. It is the *Fall Equitherm*.

The seasonal holidays mark significant events in the relation between the earth and the sun; consequently, they symbolize the relations between the male and female passions in any thing. At the Winter Solstice, the drive awakens in some seed in some cosmic garden. But this seed lies buried deep in the ground of that universe. Animated by the drive, the seed begins to grow, and, as it grows, it defines the career of some new thing in some new universe. At the Winter Thermistice, the female passion awakens in the seed. She begins to define the better potentials of the growing thing, gathering them into the noumenal ova of the thing. At the Spring Equinox, the sun rises above the threshold of light; the male passion awakens in the thing. At the Spring Equitherm, a flower opens in the noumenal depths of the thing. The male and female passions, awakened and united in this noumenal flower, begin to make love. At the Summer Solstice, they climax together. The ova defined by the female are fertilized by the male. These fertilized ova become the seeds for new plants. At the Summer Thermistice, the seeds mature. Actuality flows like sap from the old plant into these new seeds. At the Fall Equinox, they reach maturity. But now the sun falls below the threshold of darkness; the male passion dies and is resolved back into the drive. At the Fall Equitherm, the female passion dies and is resolved back into the drive. All that remains are the clutches of dormant seeds, buried in

the cold grounds of new cosmic gardens. These new gardens lie in darkness, waiting for the rising sun to awaken them into new universes.

Since the cosmological interpretation of the Circle is extremely abstract, eupraxians need to make it more concrete. Any process which waxes and wanes can be mapped on to the Circle of the Year. Since human lives wax and wane, they can be mapped on to the Circle. The Winter Solstice represents the abstract foundations of things. It represents new birth and hope for the future. It is a time for resolution and the cultivation of hope. The Winter Thermistice represents preparation and planning. The Spring Equinox signifies initiation. It is associated with courage. The Spring Equitherm represents work and growth, especially growth through incremental repetition. The Summer Solstice represents the climax of life and power. It signifies achievement, and the successful actualization of potentials. It is a time for joy, but also for an overflowing compassion for all things. The Summer Thermistice signifies power sustained. The Fall Equinox signifies both completion and exhaustion. It marks both perfection and senescence. It marks the loss of the energy required for the actualization of potentials. It marks the time for purification of the self before death. The Fall Equitherm signifies the loss of all opportunities for further development in this life. It marks death. It is a period of mourning and grief. But it also signifies the recognition that potentials unrealized here will be actualized in future lives. It is a time for faith in the self-surpassing powers of nature. It marks the patience that waits for renewal and rebirth.

## 7. The Circle and the Square

On each seasonal holiday, eupraxians perform rituals. Since the male and female passions work together cyclically, eupraxians gather in circles for their rituals. The *circumference* of this circle represents the cyclical interaction of the male and female passions. It signifies all natural cycles. Along this circumference, eupraxians may perform dances like the *hand-over-hand dance*. The *center* of this circle represents the focus of all the powers on the circumference. It holds the focus of the ritual activity. It may contain focal objects like a fire, a bowl of water, or statues. It might contain a rock representing the initial universe. Since that universe is the root of the world tree, the center of the circle might contain a model of that tree. Since a spiral unites the center with the circumference, eupraxians perform *spiral dances* in their circles.

When a circle is made on the ground (for example, by those gathered in ritual), it can be quartered by two lines. One line runs north-south through the center of the circle, while the other line runs east-west through that center. These lines define four points on the circle, which correspond to the four cardinal directions. Crosby encourages “rituals orienting to the four points of the compass, suggesting fealty to the whole of the earth and its creatures” (2014: 147). By associating the directions with their religious ultimates, eupraxians can use them in their rituals too. One association locates the abstract forms in the *north*, the drive in the *south*, the male passion in the *west*, and the female passion in the *east*. Since these associations are not strongly motivated, others are easily possible. Developed by the Catholic Green Sisters, the *Earth Body Prayer* is a sequence of ritual motions involving the four directions (Taylor, 2007: 231-5). Eupraxians can perform that

ritual alone or in groups. Wiccans also invoke the cardinal directions in their rituals (Sabin, 2011: ch. 6). Eupraxians can naturalize those invocations.

The four cardinal directions are often associated with the four elements. Crosby says that “water, fire, air and earth . . . can be put to use as religious symbols and, in particular, as symbols of nature as the religious ultimate” (2014: 90). Wiccans use the four elements in their rituals (Sabin, 2011: ch. 6). Eupraxians also use the four elements in their rituals. Since the abstract forms lack solid physical content, it seems appropriate to associate them with *air*. Since Crosby says that *water* is a master symbol of the religious ultimacy of nature (2014: 87-91), eupraxians associate water with the drive. Since the male passion is symbolized by the sun (he is Father Sky), his element is *fire*. Since the female passion is symbolized by the earth (she is Mother Earth), her element is *earth*. While these associations are well-motivated, others remain possible.

## 8. The Liturgy

Eupraxians gather together on or near the seasonal holidays to perform collective rituals. Although each seasonal holiday falls on a specific day, eupraxians may wish to celebrate it on some nearby date, such as a close weekend. The seasonal holidays are celebrated outdoors whenever possible. They may be celebrated in fields, forest clearings, gardens, or other places of natural beauty (Stone, 2008: 157).

The ritual celebrations of the seasonal holidays involve lots of activity. They do *not* involve people passively sitting and listening to sermons or long speeches. Any speaking aims to keep the ritual moving. Every celebration usually involves one or two leaders and some other participants. The rituals described here are for smaller groups (less than forty). The participants gather in a circle, which symbolizes the Circle of the Year, as well as all the many other cycles of nature. When gathered in the circle, the participants stand, while those who cannot stand sit on the outskirts. Of course, those who cannot stand in the circle can still participate in many of the ritual activities.

All celebrations open with the leaders calling everyone to form a sacred circle. A bell or gong may be struck. When the circle is formed, the leaders and participants may state in call and response “The circle is closed!”. *Closing the circle* symbolizes the closing power. After the circle is closed, four participants *call the directions* north, south, east, and west (up, down, and center may also be called). Each caller is positioned at the appropriate place in the circle (e.g. the one who calls the north occupies the northern point of the circle). When some direction is called, each participant faces that direction, with arms opened to welcome its associated powers and qualities. When the direction (and its element) are called, the caller reads a short text invoking the associated powers or qualities. This reading may be done as a call-and-response.

After the directions are called, the central part of the ritual begins. The central ritual typically begins with activities which increase arousal (such as dancing, drumming, chanting, singing, call and response). It typically involves the collective expression of religiously significant emotions (such as gratitude, compassion, and hope). The central ritual may involve visualization and meditation. It usually includes some activity which signifies the activities of the ultimate eupraxian powers (the drive, the forms, the male and female passions, the world tree). The central ritual will almost certainly make use of

words, images, tools, materials, statues, or other props designating those powers. For instance, it may make use of images of the sun and earth, statues representing the male and female passions, living flowers, or models of the world tree.

After the thematic celebration, the ritual winds down. This winding-down typically involves activities which decrease arousal (such as grounding). The ritual ends by *releasing the directions* and *opening the circle*. Opening the circle symbolizes the opening power, which reveals new possibilities for better life. Hence the participants leave the circle with hope for the future. The circle may be opened with singing.

## 9. The Central Ritual

A few ideas for central rituals are mentioned here. These ideas are adopted from various groups and traditions, such as the Catholic Green Sisters, Wiccans and Druids, the World Pantheist Movement, and other nature-centered movements. Websites like those of the Spiritual Naturalist Society and the Humanistic Pagans are filled with ideas. Many other practices, especially for children, have been developed by Connie Barlow. Many books have been written on rituals for the seasonal holidays (e.g. Meredith, 2013). The central rituals described here are merely suggestions. Many other central rituals are possible, and eupraxians are encouraged to be creative.

At the Winter Solstice, eupraxians might perform the HumanLight ceremony. Since the Winter Solstice indicates the awakening of the drive, it is a good time for rituals which aim to arouse that power in the self. Here eupraxians may develop naturalized versions of Matthew Fox's *Cosmic Mass* or perform religious raves (Sylvan, 2005). At the Winter Thermistice, eupraxians might build a model of the world tree, symbolizing the new potentials that emerge with the awakening of the opening power. They may visualize desired futures, and sing hymns or perform dances to arouse confidence. Since the Winter Thermistice is a time for planning, they might commit to the ten steps in Suzuki's *Nature Challenge* (2014: 430). At the Spring Equinox, they might perform rituals focused on hope. The Spring Equinox is a good time for planting rituals. Eupraxians might adopt Druidic tree-planting rituals (see Greer, 2006: 159-63). The Spring Equinox is a good time for writing wishes for the coming year on ribbons which are tied to a tree. They can be tied to a model of the world tree built at the Winter Thermistice or to some other model tree. At the Spring Equitherm, they might perform the Cosmic Walk to symbolize the progress of holy power through the system of forms (Taylor, 2007: 249-52; Crosby, 2014: 148). To indicate the self-surpassing outflow of the drive, they might perform a water communion, pouring water into the earth.

At the Summer Solstice, they might perform a flower communion to celebrate the climax of creative power. This is a good time for a naturalized Serenity Prayer or mindfulness meditation. It is a good time for rituals aimed at arousing compassion for all life, and for prayers of attunement (Crosby, 2008: 102, 2014: 141-5). To arouse greater ecological awareness, the Summer Solstice is a good time to collectively read the *Declaration of Interdependence* (Suzuki, 2014: 421-2). At the Summer Thermistice, which is the first harvest holiday, eupraxians focus on gratitude. They may have a food communion, involving prayers and songs of thanks. Food and drink may be offered in thanks to icons of the male or female passions. At the Fall Equinox, eupraxians may

perform *fire purification rituals*, which typically involve writing grievances and burdens onto paper or wood and then burning them. These rituals have been performed by many groups, including the Green Sisters (Taylor, 2007: 255). Eupraxians might burn the model world tree, symbolizing the harvest of all previously actualized potentialities. Eupraxians might emulate the fire rituals at Burning Man by holding regional burns (Gilmore, 2010). At the Fall Equitherm, they might perform silent suppers or other rituals to honor the dead (Sabin, 2011: 171). The Fall Equitherm is likewise an appropriate time for performing reflective rituals like the *Council of All Beings* (Seed, Macy, Fleming, 2007). At the climax of any the Fall Equitherm ritual, a single burning candle may be extinguished, indicating death. But this extinction needs to be accompanied by words or chants expressing faith in renewal and rebirth. If such a candle is extinguished at the Fall Equitherm, it should be relit at the Winter Solstice.

## 10. Conclusion

As an elaboration and reshaping of Crosby's "Religion of Nature", eupraxia aims to be a nature-centered religion. Eupraxia is a proposal rather than a finished product. It always remains open to further development. There are many ways to develop the central ideas and practices of eupraxia. Eupraxia aims to avoid dogmatism. It is eclectic and syncretic, and happily borrows from many traditions. Many practices from Green Christianity, as well as neopagan religions, can be translated into eupraxian idioms. Of course, whenever eupraxia translates, it naturalizes. Eupraxians do not believe in any literal gods or goddesses. They avoid the supernatural and the occult.

Many groups already have beliefs and practices similar to those in eupraxia. These include the Spiritual Naturalists, the Humanistic Pagans, the Atheopagans, and the World Pantheist Movement. Other groups, although differing in their beliefs, have similar practices. These include the Green Catholics, some Wiccans and Druids, and some spiritual atheists. Many Unitarian Universalist churches have practices resembling those in eupraxia. Since it values openness, eupraxia seeks to welcome members from all those groups. Of course, eupraxians do not expect that, for instance, atheists, Wiccans, and Green Catholics would all be fully comfortable with eupraxia. But perhaps they can be *comfortable enough* to join together in common practice. If all these groups can work together, then something like eupraxia has a chance to flourish.

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