

Exploring Resources of Naturalism

WHAT IS RELIGIOUS NATURALISM? A PRELIMINARY REPORT OF AN ONGOING CONVERSATION

by Michael Cavanaugh

Abstract. *Religious naturalism* is an emerging construct that relies greatly on science and yet affirms attitudes and practices that are distinctly religious in nature. This article explores the meaning of the term as it is used by various proponents, contrasts it to some similar constructs (especially *straight naturalism* and *natural religion*), and examines some objections and outstanding issues from within the science-religion community: (1) postmodernist objections; (2) whether religious naturalism is sufficiently respectful of traditional religious expression; and (3) whether religious naturalism seeks to be a descriptive or a prescriptive enterprise or both. Overall, religious naturalism is affirmed as a potentially productive new variant of natural theology, one that can preserve religious sensibilities without relying on supernatural constructs while maintaining a basic (though not uncritical) affirmation of other religious traditions.

Keywords: Christian naturalism; Willem B. Drees; epic of evolution naturalism; Ursula Goodenough; William Grassie; Philip Hefner; IRASnet; naturalism; postmodernism; religious naturalism; Loyal Rue; straight naturalism; supernaturalism.

Several influential writers in the science-religion arena have begun using the term *religious naturalism*. Because this construct has the potential for consolidating and extending the work of many other thinkers in the field, this article seeks to explore and tentatively define it. I refer to published writings of the persons who use the term whenever possible, but I consider the discussion a *preliminary* report because it also draws upon a source that

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has not yet been refined by the processes of traditional scholarly practice, namely, an IRASnet conversation that took place during early October 1997. IRASnet is an on-line discussion forum for members of IRAS (Institute on Religion in an Age of Science), many of whom have published articles in *Zygon* and most of whom have attended several of the annual Star Island conferences sponsored by IRAS each summer for the last forty-five years. The quality of discussions on the IRASnet is always high, and I think you will find that the quality of this particular conversation justifies my use of it, at least in a preliminary report about such a potentially important development in the field.

The main two participants in the discussion were Ursula Goodenough and Willem Drees. Goodenough was president of IRAS from 1992 to 1996 and also a recent president of the American Society of Cell Biologists, and her new book *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (1998) is based largely on her understanding of religious naturalism. Drees is a physicist and theologian, holds appointments at both the University of Twente and Vrije Universiteit in the Netherlands, and wrote *Religion, Science and Naturalism* (1996), along with two recent *Zygon* articles that treat these same issues (Drees 1997; 1998). Other persons were also parties to the conversation, and other writings are relevant to the basic questions presented; these will be introduced as we go along.

WHAT IS RELIGIOUS NATURALISM?

In this section I give only a brief definition of religious naturalism in order to orient readers who may not have heard of it before.¹ Then I go to some length to describe what religious naturalism is *not*, and finally I spell out some unresolved issues, with a summary of what I take to be the likely position of the proponents of religious naturalism, along with a summary of the most salient objections to their positions.

Religious naturalism is a belief in the natural order as understood by ongoing scientific investigation, supported by a strong and positive emotional feeling about the wonder and efficacy of that natural order.² Religious naturalism is philosophically materialistic but affirms the sense of mystery that accompanies our contemplation of the emergence of matter (and especially of life) from the Big Bang forward. Though largely informed by science for its cognitive understanding, it draws on traditional religious feeling for its artistic and emotional inspiration.

The motive for trying to create a new construct was expressed in the IRASnet conversation by Goodenough in these words: "Those of us who are working under the umbrella term Religious Naturalism are simply taking a different approach, one that seeks to float around and within existing traditions, while in essence starting over, starting from the Evolutionary Story and seeing what we can do with it." She went on to explain that as

she shares the concepts of religious naturalism in adult education groups and the like in churches (none so far Unitarian, she hastens to say), a fair number of people come up and say that the kinds of things she is saying resonate with them in a deep way. It is obvious that Goodenough and other proponents of religious naturalism want to address a perceived hunger in such people by helping them find a worldview that is both scientifically credible and emotionally satisfying.

WHAT RELIGIOUS NATURALISM IS NOT

There are at least three things that religious naturalism is not. It is not just another name for naturalism, it is not synonymous with natural religion, and it is not directly associated with anything supernatural. Nonetheless it has certain affinities with the first two of these terms and perhaps even the third, and thus an exploration of both the differences and the affinities will help clarify what religious naturalism is.

Religious Naturalism Is Not the Same as Ordinary or Straight Naturalism. One can affirm naturalism without affirming *religious* naturalism, and it would thus be a mistake to telescope naturalism and religious naturalism. In popular parlance *naturalism* has become virtually synonymous with *atheistic materialism* and its connotations of cold, heartless reductionism. A naturalist is often perceived as someone who considers evolution “red in tooth and claw” without considering its subtleties, especially in human social life. Drees opened the IRASnet conversation by saying, “I have some puzzles with the phrase ‘religious naturalism,’ which I use as a label to describe a kind of naturalism, in contrast with atheistic naturalism. The claim is that naturalism, properly understood, allows for religiously significant language, questions, answers, ways of life, et cetera.”

While it may be argued that viewing naturalism as heartless creates a crass caricature, it is now widely realized that social Darwinism, at least, cruelly missed the subtleties of social evolution. And even today, the idea that might makes right still has a huge following, not often acknowledged, in the guise of resurgent strong forms of free-market capitalism.³ And of course Drees is quite correct in identifying Richard Dawkins and Peter Atkins as proponents of an atheistic naturalism, though they certainly do not adhere to a social Darwinist agenda. (Drees’s dissatisfaction with them is rather because they assume reality to be self-explanatory, whereas he adds the word *religious* to naturalism to show that, for him, natural explanations within the framework of science are not decisive with respect to the explanation of that framework.)

In any case, religious naturalism seeks to make it clear that it does not partake of any such heartlessness. From a scientific perspective, it concludes that our evolution fitted us for cooperation, not for cold-blooded competition (though there is room for some degree of competition). From

its religious perspective it concludes that the traditional emphasis on community and spiritual rapport is valid. Indeed, Loyal Rue, one of the proponents of religious naturalism, has said, "Religion, then, is that which binds together, that which ties a community into a coherent bundle or unity" (Rue 1994, 316). Thus, one should not be surprised to find a religious naturalist in church, joining in the rituals and zestful songs that cement community. Never mind that the religious naturalist might have to silently retranslate some of the cognitive content of those rituals and songs; the emphasis is on participation and involvement. (Please note that I have made a slight semantic shift in this paragraph by calling adherents to religious naturalism "religious naturalists." I trust that the reader is now sufficiently oriented and will not confuse such an adherent with other potential candidates for the new label, for example a beekeeper who also goes to church. Not that the two are mutually exclusive, of course, but they are conceptually distinguishable.)

Neither is religious naturalism reductionistic, though it affirms science's need to use reduction as a tool for analysis. In other words, while it might be useful to reduce each discipline or investigation into its parts, that does not imply that the universe or life or human culture is in any sense determined by that investigative process. On the contrary, religious naturalism deems it more accurate to see the various stages of the unfolding of the universe as exactly the opposite of reductionistic, by emphasizing the way each *emerged* from what was there before. Hydrogen and other gases emerged from the Big Bang, the other elements slowly emerged from the gaseous background, stars and planets formed, life emerged, humans eventually evolved, and culture and religion emerged as natural products of the wonderful and quite natural human brain. Although this may sound like simple naturalism, it is the emphasis on the wonder and joy of our history and potential that distinguishes religious naturalism from straight naturalism. One of the participants in the IRASnet discussion, Edwin C. Laursen—a securities lawyer in New York City, a member of the IRAS council, and co-chair of the 1999 Star Island Conference—said it well when he said, "I believe a great many of the traditional religious virtues can be derived from sheer openness and apprehension of the glory, wonder, mystery, and horror of the world, from contemplation of our fate of being alive and having to die."

Religious Naturalism Is Not the Same as Natural Religion. As *natural religion* is usually understood, it is a species of apologetics that seeks to use science and natural investigations to *support* religion or traditional theology. Although it may seem that religious naturalism is doing the same thing, there is a critical difference. To put it bluntly, religious naturalism cares not a whit to prove the existence of God, the subservience of humankind, or any of the other traditional doctrines that natural religion tries to

prove. It seeks rather to *discover* the truth embedded in nature, whether that truth is old truth or new truth. That it is willing to use or modify existing ways of expressing that truth, either in cognitive or especially in emotional formats, is a measure of its openness and should not be taken as an attempt to either subvert traditional forms or bow to them.

This may be the place to distinguish religious naturalism not only from natural religion but from some other related disciplines. Drees contrasts it not only with straight or atheistic naturalism but with a more abstract or “richer” naturalism such as that found in process thought. Religious naturalism as Drees uses the concept is right between those two and is very open to traditional religion. Drees’s objection to process thought (1997, 536) is that it sees value and choice as inherent in the structure of the universe instead of as something very important that emerged in the course of evolution.

Notwithstanding these several distinctions, it should be noted that any discipline goes through modifications over time, and it is thus reasonable to suggest that religious naturalism is actually quite compatible with natural religion and that it could one day become the predominant form of natural religion, displacing the apologetic form. To speak for a moment of natural *theology* instead of natural religion, I would argue that natural theology itself turned a new page in 1953, when Charles Raven used his Gifford Lectures to steer natural theology away from its apologetic roots, which try to *prove* traditional doctrines, and toward an attempt to *derive* theology from the study of nature, regardless of how the doctrines sort out.⁴ Raven’s natural theology has been supported and extended by later theologians such as Loyal Rue and Gordon Kaufman, and if I am correct in thinking that natural theology has made this shift away from apologetics, one could easily imagine some version of religious naturalism becoming the practical “down in the pew” expression of a revised natural theology.⁵ The new religion would work hand in glove with the new theology.

Religious Naturalism Is Not Supernaturalistic. Whatever synergy religious naturalism shares with other forms of religion—especially in terms of the feelings evoked by ritual and art—and however much a sense of awe and mystery is evoked in both supernatural traditions and religious naturalism, religious naturalism refuses to ground either its practice or its theory in supernatural concepts. Thus, if it uses god-concepts at all, they must be redefined to somehow refer to natural phenomena or process. If religious naturalism urges human beings to make moral choices (and it clearly does⁶), that morality must be grounded in a natural understanding of human nature and epistemology. If it believes in immortality at all, that immortality is dependent on the ongoing influence of human achievement and interaction during the one life we know we have.

However, there was some sentiment in the IRASnet discussion that

religious naturalism ought to find a way to affirm some version of supernatural thought. One of the participants was William Grassie, moderator of the widely followed science-religion listserv sponsored by the Templeton Foundation. Grassie is also on the IRAS council, and he teaches humanities at Temple University. He argued that religious naturalism partakes of the general inadequacy of natural theology and must be supplemented by revealed theology. The subsequent exchange probably shows that Grassie cannot be counted among the proponents of religious naturalism, though he could be supportive if its concepts were modified significantly. In response to Grassie, Drees said that “the word ‘revelation’ is a claim to authority which I would avoid” [in defining religious naturalism]. Goodenough and Rue also make it clear that religious naturalism does not depend on any direct revelation or supernatural input. In fact Rue clearly says, in a continuation of the quote cited above, “. . . and it [religion] certainly does not have to involve the supernatural” (1994, 316).

Yet there are at least two ways in which religious naturalism remains open, at least to a small extent, to traditional supernatural concepts. Drees leaves a window open in terms of the ground of existence, saying, “If a religious believer accepts naturalism as integrity, it is still possible to see God as the creator of this framework” (1997, 534). He also wants to use the god-concept as an indication that “there is an open place in any natural understanding of reality.” Nonetheless, he implies that when speaking as a proponent of religious naturalism one should not rely on supernatural constructs, “not even in the mental life of humans” (1997, 531), and he quotes Karl Peters to say, “Human fulfillment and the ultimate source of fulfillment are to be found not beyond the spatiotemporal world but within it. If there are realms of being other than space-time nature and history (as in supernaturalism), they are beyond our ken and have no relevance to life today” (Drees 1997, 534, quoting Peters 1992, 63).

Neither are Rue⁷ and Goodenough very open to supernatural constructs, except insofar as Goodenough’s concept of mystery might also be interpreted as leaving a second window open. In the first chapter of her new book, she says, “Mystery generates wonder, and wonder generates awe. The gasp can terrify or the gasp can emancipate. As I allow myself to experience cosmic and quantum Mystery, I join the saints and the visionaries in their experience of what they called the Divine, and I pulse with the spirit, if not the words, of my favorite hymn” (1998, 13).

OUTSTANDING ISSUES IN RELIGIOUS NATURALISM

So far the discussion has implied a fairly unified understanding of religious naturalism, but of course that would be far too simplistic a presentation. The various proponents emphasize slightly different things, and sometimes they disagree entirely. Of the proponents mentioned so far, Drees seems

most uncomfortable with the label and would really prefer a “richer” version of religious naturalism than he sees in either Goodenough or Rue. Such differences are neither surprising nor disastrous, especially for a potential new discipline, and indeed it is part of the legitimate process of a new discipline finding its voice. If religious naturalism is to find its voice, however, it is important that its proponents get a clear understanding of some outstanding issues, the resolution of which will ultimately define the new paradigm that religious naturalism promises to become. In particular, the following three issues need to be addressed by religious naturalists in the coming years.

1. How Does Religious Naturalism Respond to Postmodern Concepts of Pluralism? In the IRASnet discussion Grassie was even more concerned about the potential lack of pluralism in religious naturalism than about its failure to give credence to revealed religion. He worried that religious naturalism might seek to create a kind of hegemony in science-religion circles and, because hegemony always tends toward totalitarianism, that religious naturalism could lead to a regrettable condemnation of diversity. Speaking as an eloquent representative of postmodernism (see also Grassie 1997), he criticized the effort to find a single unifying truth and ended by saying, “I prefer confusing variety over absolute certainty.”

On this issue all the proponents of religious naturalism mentioned here are actually on Grassie’s side, more or less. In fact Drees had begun the discussion in an effort to ascertain that religious naturalism, as articulated by both Goodenough and Rue, was broad enough to incorporate a “plurality of religions” view. In his relevant *Zygon* paper (1997), Drees underscores this point, and in the IRASnet conversation he demonstrated his agreement with Goodenough by quoting the penultimate paragraph of her book, which says, “Once we have our feelings about Nature in place, then I believe that we can also find important ways to call ourselves Jews, or Muslims, or Taoists, or Hopi, or Hindus, or Christians, or Buddhists” (Goodenough 1998, 173). Rue is also keen on affirming diversity, though we will see in a moment that his ideas on the subject cause Drees a certain amount of discomfort.

Moreover, there are limits to how far Goodenough will go in affirming postmodern ideas of pluralism. From the quote above you can see that she affirms religious variety “once we have our feelings about Nature in place.” Moreover, she thinks that the affirmation of variety (for example, in the ongoing effort to formulate a widely accepted Earth Charter) must be better informed by science, and that any useful *mechanisms* for dealing with world problems require a fuller grasp of the underlying “natural” issues (Who *are* human beings anyway? Why do we kill one another? Why are we so greedy? How can some countries claim that they “own” natural resources? and so on). She comments in the IRASnet exchange that “at

least some of the core values of existing traditions are fully inherent in the evolutionary epic, and a few oughts are inherent in the ises, the ecological impulse being the most obvious.”

Laurenson may have made the comment that best captures religious naturalism’s approach to postmodern notions of pluralism: “I think that how we proceed must be based on what we know scientifically *not* to be true [emphasis mine] and, contingent though it is, on what we know scientifically to be true. The ‘real world’ truth claims of a number of the world’s religious traditions/approaches cannot survive scientific examination, and to the extent that those truth claims clash with what we know is and is not true scientifically, we must not be leery of undermining that which is wrong. . . .” This leads Laurenson to argue that pluralism is both a virtue and a necessity in most contexts, but he insists that there is a limit to pluralism, and he acknowledges that others might consider him a nonpluralist although he clearly sees himself as a pluralist.

To me there seems to be a real issue here, one that religious naturalism will have to address. Are there limits to its affirmation of philosophical and religious diversity? If so, what are they? More pointedly, to what extent will religious naturalism choose an evangelical strategy of sharing its concepts?

2. *Are There Any Significant Differences between Epic of Evolution Naturalism and Religious Naturalism?* The issue of pluralism takes another turn, which should be separated out for further examination, in Drees’s concerns about Rue’s version of religious naturalism, which Drees denominates “epic of evolution naturalism.” In Drees’s mind, Rue’s conception, while superficially similar to his and Goodenough’s, is potentially hostile to diversity. Drees had attended a book seminar (organized by the present author) at IRAS’s 1997 Star Island Conference that discussed the manuscript of Rue’s new book, *Everybody’s Story* (2000), and he realized that Rue wants to use the epic of evolution as the basis for a new myth that could be affirmed by all the peoples of the world. Drees wonders whether that version of religious naturalism is really open to traditional religion, and although he does consider epic of evolution naturalism a legitimate variant of religious naturalism, he is very concerned that epic of evolution naturalism not become a kind of “naturalist religion”—a label he uses to identify a religion that tries to base itself on science while failing to take advantage of the richness of tradition. In another context he quotes Philip Hefner, who distinguishes his own ideas from Rue’s by saying that Rue is trying to change our understanding from the “top down” whereas Hefner wants to change them from the “bottom up” lest we abandon 40 thousand years of traditional wisdom (Drees 1998, quoting Hefner 1993, 214).⁸

In my mind there is no serious conflict between Rue’s explication of religious naturalism and Goodenough’s, and Rue seems at least as willing

as Goodenough (and almost as willing as Drees or Hefner, for that matter) to affirm a diversity of religious traditions. There are some differences, which, as I suggest in the next section, arise from whether one emphasizes the descriptive or the prescriptive aspects of religious naturalism (which I identify respectively as its theological and religious aspects), but those differences in no way render Rue's conception hostile to diversity or to tradition, except insofar as defining any philosophy necessarily excludes elements of other philosophies that are clearly inconsistent with it.

Before turning to a discussion of religious naturalism as theology or religion, however, I want to point out an interesting irony that is relevant to both this section and the next one. William Grassie would presumably be even more opposed to the epic of evolution version of religious naturalism than he is to Goodenough's or Drees's version, yet he and Rue agree on a very important methodological point. That is the primacy of *story*. I doubt that Rue would go quite as far as Grassie does when Grassie says, "One of the profound insights of religion is that moral education and cultural formation occur through narratives first and principles (if at all) second," but Rue could probably affirm the statement if the parenthetical *if*-clause were omitted.⁹ That is because Rue himself has often reflected on the need for narrative in religious and even scientific explanation. He and Goodenough were co-chairs of the 1996 Star Island Conference entitled "The Epic of Evolution," and his manuscript mentioned above adopts the overt strategy of presenting Rue's ideas as a story.

3. *Is Religious Naturalism Motivational or Explanatory or Both?* As usual Drees does an excellent job of clarifying categories. He concluded his IRASnet remarks by saying, "I see two discussions. . . . One is the impact of the sciences on our view of reality. . . . The other is the quest for a religious view, that is, for a narrative which motivates, which supports certain values, et cetera." I would recast his observation in the form of a question, by asking whether religious naturalism seeks to be motivational or explanatory, prescriptive or descriptive, experiential or interpretive. In short, does it seek to be *religion* (motivational, prescriptive, experiential) or *theology* (explanatory, descriptive, interpretive)?

If we ask the question like that, several answers start to become clear. One is that some religious naturalists are more interested in one side of this dichotomy, and others are more interested in the other side. Goodenough is deeply interested in the religious side and thus shares many perspectives with another religious naturalist who has not been quoted here, but who is widely known and followed, Brian Swimme—who served as chaplain at the 1996 Star Island conference co-chaired by Goodenough and Rue on the epic of evolution. Drees, on the other hand, seems much more interested in using religious naturalism as a foundation for philosophical or theological understanding, leaving him free to affirm a great

variety of purely religious expression. Rue is in between, because his earlier writings seemed more in the theological or explanatory mode, whereas his latest work struggles to bridge the gap between cosmology and morality, between an acceptable worldview and an acceptable practice.

Seeing both the theological and religious sides of religious naturalism not only brings in popularizers like Swimme, and clarifies supposed conflicts between Rue and Goodenough, but also shows how at least two other well-known theologians fit. Neither Philip Hefner nor Gordon Kaufman might be comfortable calling themselves religious naturalists, but I suggest that this is because they are more interested in theology than religion. Thus, when Hefner distinguishes himself from Rue in the quotation used by Drees (about top-down vs. bottom-up approaches), he is really noting a methodological and not a substantive difference between them. It is true that Hefner very clearly believes in the need for affirming diversity, but, except for the questions I have raised above, so do Rue and Goodenough. It may be argued that Hefner is no religious naturalist because of his openness to supernatural constructs, but we have seen that even Drees is open to them in certain contexts, and that way of saying it applies to Hefner, too.

This mention of Hefner requires the addition of another concept, and that is *Christian naturalism*. In my view, Hefner is a religious naturalist who cannot be tarred with the brush of apologetics, but his version of religious naturalism is distinctively Christian in nature. He is fully respectful of science, but he also sees great advantage in affirming tradition, and more precisely one's own particular tradition, which in his case is a Christian one. This means he insists on *beginning* with a Christian understanding of nature, and especially human nature, as opposed to blithely (and naively) accepting whatever novel scientific concepts anyone may suggest. Ultimately it is clear that he would and does accept both legitimate science and legitimate religion and simply does not see them as in any way inconsistent (Hefner 1993, 77).

Kaufman, too, may stand under the umbrella of religious naturalism, and indeed he may have constructed the firmest theological foundation for religious naturalism of anyone, even though he does not use the phrase. In some of his writing he does seem to leave the door open for a version of supernatural intervention, but his ideas do not require that interpretation, and his article entitled "The Epic of Evolution as a Framework for Human Orientation in Life" (1997) is certainly compatible with Goodenough, Rue, Hefner, Drees, Peters, and even Swimme.

So the challenge here, as I see it, is for religious naturalism to clarify the differences between its theology and its religious nature. Is it explaining something to us, urging us to behave in a certain way,¹⁰ or both? A related question, which Drees is concerned about, is whether it can do both in one move, or if two moves are required.

CONCLUSION

A report on an ongoing conversation does not call for a precise conclusion, but I will end by hazarding a prediction as to how all these outstanding issues will sort out. I think Rue's insistence on using a scientific evolutionary foundation for religious naturalism will be further validated and reaffirmed by other religious naturalists. This will inevitably raise accusations of hegemony and even hubris from postmodernists and others, but religious naturalists will go as far as they possibly can in affirming a plurality of ways that religious naturalism can be expressed, preferably in ways that will satisfy many postmodernists. Specifically, they will affirm all existing religious traditions, rejecting their precepts only where science can clearly and decisively show the error of their ways, just as Laurenson says. "Let a thousand flowers bloom," says Goodenough.

Moreover, I predict that religious naturalism will do a better job of distinguishing between its theological and religious concepts and will articulate a clear connection between them. I would look primarily to Goodenough and Swimme for the articulation of religious expressions of the discipline, and to Drees and Kaufman (and to others not mentioned here) for the theological expression. It will be most interesting to see what paths Rue and Hefner take, because their interests plainly run in both theological and religious directions.

NOTES

Though they may still disagree with some of my conclusions here, I am grateful to Willem B. Drees for extensive comments on an earlier draft of this article and to Ursula Goodenough for brief comments. Drees also supplied the information in note 1.

1. I have made no effort to trace the earliest use of the phrase. The earliest I know of is in Cohen 1958, but because some of the first Gifford Lectures were on naturalism (sometimes in contrast to idealism), there may well be instances of the usage there.

2. In terms of the eight ways of interrelating science and theology listed by Arthur Peacocke in *The Sciences and Theology in the Twentieth Century* (1981, xiii–xv), I take it that religious naturalism would fit in Peacocke's Category 8: "Science generates a metaphysics in terms of which theology is then formulated."

3. See Greider 1997. It is also interesting to note, though I will not pursue it here, that the resurgence finds resonance especially with right-wing Christians, who consider themselves far removed from atheistic materialism.

4. Despite my attribution of this new beginning to Raven, he himself generously attributed it to others. For his view of the recent history of the science-religion interaction, see his "The New Situation" (1953a, chap. 10). But the following quotation captures the spirit of his lectures and gives a hint of why I think they were such a turning point: "For the situation plainly called for radical remedy, not only in regard to the specific problems, practical and doctrinal, already mentioned, but because behind them lay the basic issue of the relation of the world of nature to the world of religion, or more specifically of the principles and discipline of the sciences to the study and formulation of theology" (1953b, 3).

5. Using the phrase "down in the pew" gives me an opportunity to express something I consider important, though tangential to the main discussion. Years ago, in 1963, John Robinson, Bishop of Woolwich, wrote a widely controversial book entitled *Honest to God*. Later Robinson met the sociologist Robert Towler and gave him permission to analyze the 4,000 letters Robinson got in response to his book. The result was Towler's book, *The Need for Certainty: A Sociological Study of Conventional Religion* (1984), which I recommend highly to *Zygon* readers because it

establishes that in almost any pew, in almost any church, sit people with at least five radically different perspectives on the preacher's sermon, ranging from the most traditional to the most progressive.

6. For example in Rue's book, *Amythia* (1989), in Philip Hefner's *The Human Factor* (1993), and in Gordon Kaufman's *In Face of Mystery* (1997). This assumes, of course, that Hefner and Kaufman are correctly labeled as religious naturalists, a question I will return to later.

7. Perhaps this is the place to acknowledge that I consider myself a proponent of religious naturalism too, and a close intellectual colleague of Rue's. There are differences, of course—for example, I am not nearly so worried that people cannot follow a good philosophical argument without its being clothed in a story—but on the question of supernatural agency I am in complete agreement. See Cavanaugh 1996, 133.

8. Note that Rue is following a suggestion made by E. O. Wilson to the effect that the epic of evolution is likely the only myth that could possibly unify all people, and note also that when Hefner distinguishes his "bottom-up" method from Rue's "top-down" method, he identifies Rue and Wilson as cohorts in the objectionable methodology.

9. The reader might wonder with me whether Grassie's comment here constitutes a principle, and whether such a principle might at least cause him to remove the parenthetical addition. But that question is beyond the scope of the present discussion.

10. Connie Barlow is another religious naturalist, one who is clearly urging us to action, to ecological sanity. See her *Green Space, Green Time: The Way of Science* (1997).

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