

TAKING THE *SUPER* OUT OF THE SUPERNATURAL

by Leslie Marsh

Abstract. Metaphysical dualities divorce humankind from its natural environment, dualities that can precipitate environmental disaster. Loyal Rue in *Religion Is Not About God* (2005) seeks to resolve the abstract modalities of religion and naturalism in a unified monistic ecocentric metaphysic characterized as religious naturalism. Rue puts forward proposals for a general naturalistic theory of religion, a theory that lays bare the structural and functional features of religious phenomena as the critical first step on the road to badly needed religion-science realignment. Only then will humanity be equipped to address the environmental imperative.

Keywords: cognition; consciousness; environmentalism; evolutionary psychology; naturalism; pantheism

There's something horribly plausible about Ralph's arguments, religion arising out of man's unique awareness of his own mortality. . . . In fact—when you think about it in this light—the story of Original Sin in Genesis could easily be a myth about the advent of self-consciousness in evolutionary history. *Homo sapiens*, by virtue of his sudden surge in brain-power, apprehends his own mortality, and is so appalled by the discovery that he makes up a story. . . . a story about having offended some power greater than himself, who punished him with death for his transgression—and in later elaborations of the story, offered him a second chance of immortality. . . . In the myth, the forbidden tree is the tree of knowledge. . . . But perhaps in reality the knowledge was *of* death, and all the existential angst it brought in its train. The fall of man was a fall into self-consciousness, and God a compensatory fiction. (Lodge 2001, 107–8)

The existential angst that is a by-product of consciousness is as good a characterization of the human condition as one will find. Consciousness, one might say, is an encounter with eternity. With this angst comes epistemological and metaphysical musings about humankind's place in the

Leslie Marsh is a researcher at the Centre for Research in Cognitive Science, Department of Informatics, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton BN1 9QH, United Kingdom; e-mail l.marsh@sussex.ac.uk.

[*Zygon*, vol. 42, no. 2 (June 2007)]

© 2007 by the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*. ISSN 0591-2385

larger scheme of things. Epistemologically, humans as naturally disposed cause-seeking creatures hypostasize all manner of beliefs where explanation of a phenomenon is not forthcoming. The religious imagination is preeminent in its ability to consider things not immediately present to the senses and things that do not have a correlate in reality. Metaphysically speaking, philosophical, religious, and scientific thinking has sought to understand the relationship between the material and the nonmaterial (mind or soul). The philosophical, religious, and scientific are all in some sense refracted through the Gordian knot that is consciousness. For some this puzzle, pregnant with meaning, informs a religious or transcendentalist sensibility in that our senses of self and value are intimately tied up with consciousness. For others, a naturalized study of religious phenomena is a study of some important aspect of cognition and is derivative of the larger project of explaining consciousness. For both groups, the final frontier is not deep space but the perplexing universe bounded by our cranium.

Given that evolutionary accounts of consciousness are now legion and that notions such as the “God gene” have of late entered popular discourse, what is distinctive about Loyal Rue’s *Religion Is Not About God* (2005)? Rue offers a discussion that is as much a sociopolitical diagnostic as it is a scientific explanation; indeed, these are inextricably linked. It is a diagnostic in the sense that humanity is living under an ecological sword of Damocles. The prospect of global environmental catastrophe is tied to an unrelenting *danse macabre* of wants and satisfactions characteristic of the prevailing consumerist culture. Because environmental problems are for the most part self-inflicted, it stands to reason that the resources to address the problem lie with us as well. Any solution that forestalls or ameliorates global warming and related environmental problems lies with humanity, and this requires a life-affirming religious sensibility to be in tune with scientific insight. Rue’s recommendation therefore requires that the diverse mythic traditions converge on one, if not new, perhaps dormant, myth—a myth that is ecocentric and consonant with natural reality, a pantheistic religious naturalism that has nature as the sacred object of humanity’s ultimate concern (Rue 2005, 366).

To achieve this goal one has to appreciate the evolutionary development of religion. This explanatory dimension to Rue’s discussion is embodied in his proposals for a general naturalistic theory of religion, which lays bare the structural and functional features of religious phenomena as the critical first step on the road to a badly needed intellectual realignment. Such a realignment would facilitate a global response to a global problem—the environmental imperative. For Rue, the intellectual reconciliation between science and religion turns on the perceived plausibility of a given myth’s root metaphor. Science is in the business of plausibility; the seeds of this plausibility may already have been assimilated, to a greater or lesser extent, by some societies (p. 318). Religious traditions maintain plausibility so

long as they enhance survival: “Religious traditions work like the bow of a violin, playing upon the strings of human nature to produce harmonious relations between individuals and their social and physical environments” (p. 1). Put another way, “religious traditions are primarily about manipulating aspects of our universal human nature for the sake of achieving the twin teloi of personal wholeness and social coherence, thereby to maximize the odds favoring human reproductive fitness” (p. 122). Hence, for Rue there is unquestionably an evolutionary story to be told about religion. Religion as an essentially adaptive cognitive phenomenon functional to the evolutionary impulse, is the presupposition that underwrites the explanatory dimension to Rue’s project. In this sense, Rue takes the *super* out of the supernatural and is what he means when he declares religion to be not about God but about us.

Rue writes that “there is much to be said for the thesis that all theological formulations are dubious for the simple reason that God is inscrutable” (p. 3). Epistemologically speaking, the concept of God does not achieve enough clarity and distinctness to be discussable. When we cite the divine attributes—omniscience, omnipotence, and so on—I do not think we have the least purchase on these ideas, which generate antinomies almost immediately. Such antinomies might well be what feed our conceptual alienation from the natural world, of which we are a part.

A standard objection to scientific inquiry into religion is that whatever scientific benefits accrue, humankind’s imaginative or religious sensibility will be correspondingly impoverished. Rue argues that notions of humility, awe, and delight are not necessarily alien to a scientific sensibility. Indeed, a naturalized religion will generate a new sense of mystery and awe, the object being Mother Nature (p. 17). I thus take Rue to be offering a deflationist metaphysic—that is, he considers the postulation of God to be redundant. Identification of the natural world and scientific method with a unity that may or may not be divine brings into focus some of the issues in the relationship between religion and science, which is known for generating more heat than light. It was with some apprehension, therefore, that I approached the so-called religion-science literature. It became apparent to me that this literature marks a deep philosophical question that in essence revolves around whether or not science is explanatorily closed. This question has a great deal of resonance within the philosophy of mind, my primary area of research. How are epiphenomenal phenomena—mental causation, intentionality, or consciousness—to be reconciled with physicalism? In philosophy of mind parlance, this debate is termed the “explanatory gap.”

Rue’s Feuerbachian slogan that religion is not about God but about us will no doubt alienate many who would be conceptually and perhaps emotionally bereft of the notion of the supernatural. So, before we examine

Rue's positive proposals, it will be useful to say what Rue is *not* doing. (Rue terms them *disclaimers*.)

1. Rue is not in the business of proving or disproving the epistemological and ontological claims of the various religious traditions. As a theorist guided by a strict scientific sensibility he can address only that which is open to falsification (pp. 316–18).
2. Rue has no axe to grind with a religious sensibility, the corollary in light of (1) being that neither is Rue an apologist for religion.
3. Rue's environmentalism cuts across the Left-Right ideological spectrum (p. 355). Environmentalism certainly can be classed as a political ideology. Indeed, it offers no less than a substantive theory of the human good (p. 363).

The ground for any intellectual reconciliation between science and religion is the acknowledgment that there is an evolutionary story to be told about the rise of religion, a story that congeals around three inextricably linked theses:

- A. There is such a thing as human nature, a nature whose outline sharpens through the lens of evolutionary theory.
- B. Religious traditions are best understood as nurturing cognitive and emotional systems, conduits to personal and social well-being (hence the book's subtitle "How spiritual traditions nurture our biological nature and what to expect when they fail").
- C. Because religion has lost the intellectual credibility and moral relevance that it once commanded, it is no longer able to attend to B, with the consequence that humanity, behaviorally adrift, has set the conditions for global environmental catastrophe.

Items A and B constitute Rue's naturalistic explanation. Item C, as already indicated, constitutes Rue's diagnosis. A diagnosis presupposes a remedy, but for some reason Rue defers an extended discussion to the end of his book.

What does Rue's conciliatory overture mean? Where on the religion-science axis can we locate him? To answer this question is to work through the details of his position. His conciliatory steps take place against a background that typically has considered religion and science as incongruent, a fault line that gets definition partly through an ahistorical approach to the study of science and philosophy. I offer a brief and highly selective historical outline. We have the Romantics' rejection of the notions of progress and rationality embodied in the universalizing tendencies of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment. With the rise of postmodernism in the twentieth century, the leitmotif was again the rejection of objective truth and scientific rationality. Mid-century saw the two-cultures debate and

the mid-1990s the debate ignited by the Sokal hoax. Currently, there is a debate between Intelligent Design theorists and the scientific establishment. Against this broad background, Ian Barbour's fourfold religion-science categorization structures Rue's discussion (Rue 2005, 319–24). Barbour's classification, which I reconstruct via Rue, is as follows:

1. Conflict—profoundly different evidential requirements
2. Independence—modal incompatibility
3. Dialogue—there are metaphysical touchstones of shared interest
4. Integration
 - i. scientific order is evidence of a creator
 - ii. science offers resources to reconstruct extant myths
 - iii. science and value achieve a synthesis in a metaphysic

Barbour's classification is, I believe, pretty exhaustive, but I want to supplement it by emphasizing the morphological possibilities more, a conceptual leakage that would inform the unity Rue is positing: (a) religion as a "form of life" has *prioricity*; (b) scientific success underwrites its epistemological *monopoly*; (c) religion is *sui generis*; (d) science is *sui generis*; (e) religion and science are *conversable*.

Note that (b), (c) and (d) are not necessarily conceptually hostile to the religious viewpoint, and (a) is not necessarily conceptually hostile to the scientific viewpoint. For Rue, mythic traditions can foster attitudes toward the natural world in ways that are beneficial to the advancement of science (p. 322) and the corollary "science qua science presents no obstacle to theistic belief" (pp. 316–17). If by *scientism* we mean a dilettantish engagement with science, an uncritical ebullience, for Rue scientism is inherently imperialistic—this would constitute a vulgar reading of (b). The conversability of (e) only acknowledges the *de facto* existence of different idioms of apprehending truth claims, idioms that may or may not agree. It certainly is not being suggested that they *should* agree given that each idiom has the inherent tendency toward superbia.

However one carves up the religion-science possibilities, many theorists have carelessly generated epistemological infelicities—disjunctions of irrelevance that cannot and should not be resolved within the sociopolitical sphere. This position is not to be taken as approximating Stephen Jay Gould's widely cited modal view of science and religion as "non-overlapping *magisteria*" (Rue 2005, 320–21).

Because of Rue's naturalistic credentials, he has to reject the hermeneutic contention that religious phenomena are culturally specific (p. 5). A diversity of myths may have democratic appeal, but religious pluralism is socially destabilizing (p. 325). No doubt many will take this as a provocation, but Rue is just making the sociological point that the preconditions to social peace tend to be conceptually tied to a culturally homogenized

society. Whatever diverse “adaptive meanings” there are have been underwritten by natural selection. Rue subscribes to a brand of materialism that accepts the notion of the unity of science, even if the relevant bridging laws are currently unknown. The unity of science that he is proposing is not the ebullient positivistic version of seventy years ago in which reduction entailed reduction to physics. For Rue, the absence of such laws does not undermine the generality of scientific materialism; the various domains of science (physics, biophysics, psychology, sociology) offer fully valid levels of description, each running on different methodologies (p. 39). Whatever behavior might be, it is ontologically dependent on some biological materiality (p. 29). Taking inspiration from E. O. Wilson’s *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (1998), Rue terms this brand of materialism *consilient scientific materialism* (2005, 14). Because all epistemological and ontological domains jointly and severally constitute an all-encompassing domain, call it Mother Nature, they are in principle part of a metaphysical unity. Rue’s monistic (materialist) or scientific pantheism is the conceptual solvent to the religion-science polarity. Clearly he does not subscribe to a reductive physicalism, a materialism that eliminates or discounts emergent nonphysical properties found at a high levels of description. Insofar as psychological phenomena are concerned, it would seem that Rue’s materialism would have to be a claim for supervenience—the idea, roughly speaking, that causal efficacy and explanatory relevance of mental phenomena are transmitted across levels of description, the mental being supervenient upon the physical.

Any story that can be told of human nature is at best caricatural (p. 19). This said, there is *an* evolutionary story to be told that has to account for emotional behaviors, such as affection and sympathy. In shorthand, how does one account for the altruistic gene (p. 45)? Rue claims that “religious traditions may be viewed as schools for educating the emotions” (p. 79). He characterizes an emotion as “a temporary feeling state that acquires narrative content and leads to a predisposition to act” (p. 82). An emotional reaction is the process by which we determine the narrative meaning of the happening (p. 86) which may or may not ameliorate goal-incongruent encounters or may or may not enhance goal-congruent encounters (p. 107). Altruism is a puzzling phenomenon. Surely, such behavior puts one at a fitness disadvantage? The answer, on Rue’s account, is to be found in his intragroup-cooperation thesis, or reciprocal altruism—the idea that intragroup cooperation is a localized survival strategy necessarily underwritten by universal genetic traits. Thus there is both an innate and a social aspect. The Lockean notion of the mind as a *tabula rasa* is nonsense (p. 40), and the nature-versus-nurture slogan poses a false dichotomy (p. 31). Such polarities give the impression of paradox. What we have are natural homeostatic mechanisms cybernetically adapting to local conditions (pp. 63, 73).

Rue posits three mental operators that inform human interaction with an environment, valence and reality operators that can and do override reality (p. 61). *Reality operators* are innate mechanisms that track salient (not necessarily relevant) features of the external world (pp. 54–56). *Valence operators*, rules and mechanisms that guide neural systems, attribute shades of relevance and value to the objects of the reality operators. *Executive operators* are rules and mechanisms for generating and assessing the options for behavior in light of reality and valence operators. However appealing a God’s-eye view might seem, Rue makes the insightful comment that “having *all* the information about the world is worse than having a small amount of the *right* information—that is, information relevant to an organism’s interests” (p. 34).

An individual’s narrative meanings are constructed as the brain negotiates mergers between facts and values, between reality operators and valence operators (p. 126). Rue accepts the model of the brain as a serially and parallel distributed system (p. 31) with inherent plasticity. He is mindful of a Rylean regress argument (p. 59)—that is, the ever decreasing circles generated by the positing of an executive control. Working memory is a star example of the hereditary and the learned seamlessly at work, a goal-directed behavior that has an inherent impulse to achieve coherence (p. 57). Working memory is a virtual workspace, an operational *mélange* of various cognitive processes. It is a workspace that satisfies “a multitude of special interests with efficiency and fairness, and for the common good” (p. 60), a conception fully in tune with Daniel Dennett’s “political power” metaphor of consciousness (Why do relatively few contents hog time in the limelight?) and Bernard Baars’s Global Workspace Theory in which consciousness resembles the bright spot on a stage of fleeting memory, distributing information to the rest of the darkened theater.

Critical to this adaptive behavior is the ability to communicate, an ability that inheres in the ambient social soup or culture that offers a sense of intersubjectivity preserved and transmitted as memes. I think that Rue puts too much store in the notion of memes (pp. 71–73). While certainly a highly suggestive notion, there do not appear to be any promising candidates to populate an ontology of cultural replication in a way analogous to that in biology. Intersubjectivity entails accepting Wittgenstein’s classic argument against the notion of a private language. Rue’s conception of communication as extracranial or extracorporeal (p. 70), with language as the ultimate social artifact, has some resonance to the extended mind strand of non-Cartesian philosophy of mind.

So far I have provided a very cursory explanation of the role of consciousness in an evolutionary story. We now need to get some purchase on what religion or religious consciousness is, as opposed to its functionality.

The root metaphor of a given religious tradition links cosmology to morality (Rue 2005, 128), each tradition deploying intellectual resources to clarify, interpret, reinterpret, and defend its core narrative (p. 130). Rue gives useful sketches of the five main religious traditions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism—each account structured by an historical context, an explication of a central myth, its emotional appeal, inculcation and maintenance strategies, and its ability to promote personal wholeness and social coherence (chaps. 5–9). Rue is absolutely correct that any attempt to define religion is a problematic enterprise (pp. 125, 143). For a start, Judaism, strictly speaking, is not a religion in the same sense that Christianity is. Christianity historically turns on belief as the criterion of identity. To be a Jew is to belong to a group; beliefs are secondary. A. J. Toynbee’s search for a common essence, a statement of necessary and sufficient conditions across all religions, was doomed to failure. We are dealing with (and this is Rue’s view) a Wittgensteinian family resemblance concept, the idea that there are overlapping similarities, typical features, between a variety of things by virtue of which we bring them under the heading “religion.” Religion is a blending of the intellectual, the experiential, the ritualistic, the aesthetic, and the institutional (p. 144). Of course, for many the defining mark of religion is that there is some altered state of consciousness that is often attributed to supernatural agency (pp. 132, 134). I think that Rue and I are in accord: If someone has a religion, we typically expect to find

1. an acceptance of a set of propositions, a set of beliefs, about the nature of ultimate reality
2. a certain specific emotion of awe and reverence
3. a desire and yearning for a different condition of oneself in the light of (1)
4. a commitment to a way of life

Two immediate comments. First, the set of beliefs in (1) would normally be thought to include a belief in God. It may appear the height of paradox to say that there can be a godless religion, but adherents of Buddhism, often accounted a religion, do not believe in this kind of God. Second, the way of life mentioned in (4) may include (a) ritual, ceremonial prayer, and worship and (b) an ethical code. Matthew Arnold’s definition of religion as “morality touched by emotion” (1873, 47) is generally regarded as inadequate. I, however, consider it a good reading of (2) and (4).

That religion is essentially a practice is noted by many. Indeed, on this view there cannot be any such thing as religious actions in the sense of actions embodying religious beliefs, because what we refer to as religious beliefs are not really such. Put another way, if, for example, *sin* is a concept without an objective correlate—if the concept and “beliefs” involving it do

not correspond to anything in the natural or supernatural world—there can be no sinful actions. No ontological inventory will include sin or actions embodying it. However, a person plainly can act sinfully and be judged by others to be doing so, relative to practical commitments and attitudes. Some religions, for instance, stress conformity with the regulations of religious law in (4) rather more than others.

Note that the ethical element is far from trouble-free. For example, are certain kinds of action good because God wills and commands them, as Duns Scotus and William of Ockham held, or does God will and command them because they are good, as Aquinas held?

We now have two of Rue's components in place: a scientific explanation of the rise of religion as a general phenomenon, and an examination of the structural elements that cut across particular religions. As I mentioned at the outset, the explanatory force of Rue's discussion is intimately bound up with his diagnosis—and in his case a diagnosis that presupposes an explicitly programmatic dimension.

If one accepts the thesis that the major religious traditions have (in complicity with what Rue terms "The Myth of Market Providence") undervalued, sidelined, or even alienated humanity from the natural world (pp. 354, 357), a morally relevant response calls for a new mythic vision that is coextensive with naturalism. In effect, a religious naturalism can be the only response. Rue is profoundly critical of the prevailing consumerism, which is corrosive in its promoting the shallowest of theories of the human good *and* corrosive of our physical environment. Of course, many Christians themselves are well aware that some forms of religious practice have questionable authenticity in that they are perfectly functional in, and perhaps even embrace, consumerist culture. What is to be done?

Rue's recommendation is unequivocally and unapologetically environmentalist. Environmentalism provides Rue with a very useful conceptual hanger on which to hang his (a) metaphysical monism/unity and (b) naturalism, from which we can informally derive his (c) naturalistic pantheism.

Environmentalism supports (as do all ideologies) a system of political and social beliefs embodying a set of values or ideals and consequently some (highly general) principles of action, along with theoretical beliefs about human beings, society, and the state that confer on those values their justification. It seems fair to infer that Rue's ecologism would be classed as a "deep" ecologism. A "shallow" variant would still function in a consumerist culture, which as we know is unacceptable to Rue. The problem is that while green political theory, deep or shallow, is unique in putting environmental considerations at center stage, there is virtually no originality in the forms of social and political organization that it recommends. In nearly all cases, the solution is derivatively socialist, anarchist, or liberal. We thus have a multilayered problem of implementation here.

First, how for example would a practicing Christian's beliefs converge on Rue's religious naturalism? There is a real difficulty in drawing out any systematic connections between Christian epistemology and politics generally conceived. The central text of Christianity, the New Testament, and the time-hallowed creeds and confessions contain hardly any political references. From only a scattering of New Testament passages can political implications be drawn, and the import of these passages often is ambiguous. Nothing like a definite and comprehensive view of political life can be extracted straightforwardly from the prime traditional sources. This means that for the Christian there is a tension. On the one hand, the Christian life is integral and demanding to the ultimate degree. No God-free conduct is permissible or even coherently imaginable to the Christian in any area of life, and that includes politics. On the other hand, the basic sources give only the barest, flickering indication of how this can be done. Of course, there are those who would make invalid inferences along the following lines: (1) Love your neighbor as yourself (religious premise); therefore (2) Support democracy (political prescription). Such moves reveal a tension between the guardians of religion positioning themselves at the front lines of social change (Rue 2005, 130) and the notion that religion is what the authorities say it is (p. 144).

Second, a not uncommon view of political philosophy is that it is simply the application of moral philosophy to public affairs. On this approach, the test for political theory is whether it squares with the deliverances of the best available moral theory. There is of course the problem that moral philosophy is in no position to adjudicate the various competing theories. This said, I do think that a naturalized ethics is staring Rue right in the face—it is called sociobiology—Wilson, of course, being its preeminent proponent. To my mind sociobiology is in many respects a striking vindication of David Hume's naturalism: Hume's "natural" and "artificial" virtues maps very easily onto Wilson's distinction between two types of altruistic behavior, hard-core and soft-core altruism. In the former, relatives are helped noninstrumentally to our own self-interest. In the latter, nonrelatives are helped nonaccidentally to self-interest. The basic objection that the biological underpinning of morality faces is that it undermines our notion of free will. One cannot a priori rule out that moral responsibility and determinism are incompatible. When Wilson talks of genes holding culture on a leash, we need to heed the *length* of the leash!

Although it is a plausible hypothesis that any postapocalyptic human life form will naturally give rise to a new nondualistic mythic vision (Rue 2005, 363), this is not the current state of affairs, and indeed the purpose of Rue's discussion is to thwart this unpleasant possibility. As he readily admits, there is the problem of what metaphoric device would bridge evolutionary cosmology and an ecocentric morality (p. 364). He downplays this missing component, but I think that the missing metaphor is critical.

How else are the naturalization of God and the divinization of Nature to be effected (p. 366)?

Rue's language of "personal wholeness and social coherence" (pp. 75, 161, 163, 338–40) is strikingly reminiscent of British Idealism. Moreover, his metaphysical emphasis on a unity overlaps some with Idealism's non-divinized notion of the Absolute. The irony of this should not be lost. There is the view that British Idealism developed as a philosophical response to the religious crisis precipitated by naturalism, specifically Darwinism. Because Idealists of the Bradleian kind see everything not as interdependent but as internally related, the world of distinct agents is a picture that refuses to form. (If x and y are interdependent, at some level they are distinct. If they are internally related, they are not ultimately separable enough to be interdependent.) This is why Idealists' social philosophy sees an organized whole such as society as a metaphysically truer, if imperfect, image of an "individual" than so-called individual persons. At least if we regard human beings as adjectival to social life we are not falsely reifying human beings, attributing to them an independence that metaphysics denies. Notions of self-realization and social holism have been used in some variants of deep ecology. When it comes to metaphysical notions of the Absolute, it has to be admitted that the Idealists are purloining "religion" here, giving the term a different slant from its normal meaning. But they have some biblical sanction in such images as Jesus' saying that he is the vine and his disciples are the branches (John 15:5) and Paul's idea that Christians are members one of another (1 Corinthians 12:12–14).

This aside, I would have thought that the philosopher most immediately relevant to Rue would have been Spinoza, who refers in the *Ethics* to "*Deus sive natura*"—"God or nature." As far as I can tell, Rue does not explicitly draw upon Spinoza. God or nature for Spinoza is literally the same thing viewed conceptually from different angles. This is rather like mind/brain identity theory, to which Spinoza also holds, and would also be congenial to Rue's materialism. For Spinoza there is a single substance with infinite attributes of which we know only two, extension and thought, and the attributes themselves are identical with one another and are just different ways of regarding the same thing. I see no contradiction in Rue's saying "I'm an environmentalist but not a pantheist (since I don't believe in any form of God)." But what about the other way round—"I'm a pantheist but not an environmentalist"? This depends very much on what one means by environmentalist. If an environmentalist is coextensive with someone who attributes intrinsic value to nature, a pantheist ought to be an environmentalist. If God equals nature, nature has intrinsic value because God has such value. The pantheist syllogism would run something like: God is identical with nature; God has intrinsic value; therefore Nature has intrinsic value.

This thought brings us to an interesting spin on the environmentalism/religion identification. Michael Crichton presents a view that on the one hand is in full accord with Rue's evolutionary story but on the other hand offers a rather jaundiced view of environmentalism.

Today, one of the most powerful religions in the Western World is environmentalism. Environmentalism seems to be the religion of choice for urban atheists. Why do I say it's a religion? Well, just look at the beliefs. If you look carefully, you see that environmentalism is in fact a perfect 21st century remapping of traditional Judeo-Christian beliefs and myths.

There's an initial Eden, a paradise, a state of grace and unity with nature, there's a fall from grace into a state of pollution as a result of eating from the tree of knowledge, and as a result of our actions there is a judgment day coming for us all. We are all energy sinners, doomed to die, unless we seek salvation, which is now called sustainability. Sustainability is salvation in the church of the environment. Just as organic food is its communion, that pesticide-free wafer that the right people with the right beliefs, imbibe.

Eden, the fall of man, the loss of grace, the coming doomsday—these are deeply held mythic structures. They are profoundly conservative beliefs. They may even be hard-wired in the brain, for all I know. I certainly don't want to talk anybody out of them, as I don't want to talk anybody out of a belief that Jesus Christ is the son of God who rose from the dead. But the reason I don't want to talk anybody out of these beliefs is that I know that I can't talk anybody out of them. These are not facts that can be argued. These are issues of faith.

And so it is, sadly, with environmentalism. Increasingly it seems facts aren't necessary, because the tenets of environmentalism are all about belief. It's about whether you are going to be a sinner, or saved. Whether you are going to be one of the people on the side of salvation, or on the side of doom. Whether you are going to be one of us, or one of them. (Crichton 2003)

Let us be clear what Crichton is and is not saying. He is not saying that there are no consequences of our actions for the environment. At the outset of this speech he explicitly says that we should live in "sympathy" with the environment. Crichton, Rue, and experimental psychologist Bruce Hood (2006) are in accord that the religious sensibility is an ineliminable part of the human psyche. Rue's proposal for a new mythic vision necessarily runs on this notion. Embodied in Crichton's libertarian polemics is a valid general point about the inherent complexity of the social dimension to knowledge. We live in a society with a plethora of causes, issues, and ideas jostling for sociopolitical acceptance, and it is difficult to determine the validity of truth claims in the ambient fog of disinformation. This is in tune with my aforementioned admonition against taking the political sphere as the ultimate court of arbitration on substantive issues in science *or* religion.

The more interesting but still related point Crichton makes concerns the atheist sophisticate who, having jettisoned God, is still left with having to satisfy the religious impulse. The rationalist's barren cast of mind, indifferent to the historicity of human experience (including scientific knowledge), means that the postulates of environmentalism neatly fill the vacuum

and are uncritically assimilated as an all-encompassing article of faith. This is, as Crichton points out, the cast of mind characteristic of the worst kind of “religious” and political ideologue. I am not at all suggesting that Rue is of this stripe. But one has to entertain the deeply ironic possibility that maybe the theist and not the atheist is best suited to enacting Rue’s new mythic vision since the *concept* of God somehow moderates the cold immodesty and tunnel vision of the rationalistic mind. Crichton himself does not draw this inference; his point is that environmentalism as practiced is a species of pseudoscience that has no more claim to the truth than religion does. Rue’s naturalistic refrain resonates in Crichton’s question, “How will we manage to get environmentalism out of the clutches of religion, and back to a scientific discipline?” (Crichton 2003)

Rue’s discussion is laudable for several reasons. It is refreshingly devoid of a monomaniacal table-thumping invective characteristic of recent contributions by Dennett and Richard Dawkins. Indeed, as my discussion reveals, I often found myself playing devil’s advocate to my own cherished beliefs (or, more accurately, my nonbelief manifest in a religious and political skepticism). This reflects well on Rue’s discussion.

It would be a mistake to construe Rue’s consiliationist stance to be a bland exercise in magnanimity. He does not pander to political correctness, postmodern constructivism and its associated relativism, or theology. Rue is a rare bird in academic philosophy, someone who is interested in the big questions without resorting to philosophical or religious obscurity. He takes an enormously broad range of disciplines and brilliantly distills a kernel of profound importance. Getting bogged down in the details of his account of evolutionary psychology would be to miss the point of the book.

Who can deny that our social destiny and physical (environmental) and, if you like, experiential and spiritual destiny are inextricably entwined? Whatever my doubts about the programmatic aspect implicit in Rue’s vision, his diagnosis is profound. His originality injects a great deal of philosophical depth into environmentalism as an ideology and goes some way toward making environmentalism more palatable to the skeptical mind.

NOTE

I am grateful to the editor and several contributors to the McNamara 2006 three-volume set and to the editors and several contributors to Clayton and Simpson 2006 for giving me galleys or advance drafts of their articles. Thanks also to Bruce Hood for his draft.

REFERENCES

- Arnold, Matthew. 1873. *Literature and Dogma: An Essay Towards a Better Apprehension of the Bible*. London, Edinburgh, Dublin, and New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons.
- Clayton, Philip, and Zachary Simpson, eds. 2006. *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Crichton, Michael. 2003. "Environmentalism as Religion." http://www.michaelcrichton.net/speeches/speeches_quote05.html.
- Hood, Bruce. 2006. "The Intuitive Magician: Why Belief in the Supernatural Persists." *Cerebrum* (1–12 July).
- Lodge, David. 2001. *Thinks . . .* London: Penguin.
- McNamara, Patrick, ed. 2006. *Where God and Science Meet* (3 vols.). *How Brain and Evolutionary Studies Alter Our Understanding of Religion*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger.
- Rue, Loyal. 2005. *Religion is Not About God: How Spiritual Traditions Nurture our Biological Nature and What to Expect When They Fail*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press.
- Wilson, E. O. 1998. *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. New York: Vintage Books.