RELIGIOUS NATURALISM OR THEOLOGICAL HUMANISM?

by David E. Klemm

Abstract. Loyal Rue's book *Religion Is Not About God* (2005) is a polemic for religious naturalism. In it Rue sets up a general model of religion based on principles of scientific materialism, tests his model against five historical religions, and speculates on the future of religion. He claims that in the West, modern science and pluralism threaten the moral authority of Christianity in facing the environmental crisis, which is fueled by a rival metareligion, consumerism. He concludes that an ecological Doomsday is likely, following which a new religion will arise: religious naturalism. I challenge Rue's account at three levels, from the standpoint of theological humanism. First, as a philosopher of religion, Rue cannot carry through his scientific materialist explanation of religion. The first-person experience of consciousness escapes such an account. Second, as a myth maker, Rue unifies the evolutionary epic retrospectively, where the evidence is thin, and projects the future overconfidently. Third, as a theologian, Rue is wrong to equate God and Nature.

Keywords: religious naturalism; Loyal Rue; scientific materialism; theological humanism

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Religion Is Not About God (Rue 2005) is a truly remarkable book that should have significant impact on current debates, not only within the interdisciplinary field of religion and science but more broadly as well. In it, Loyal Rue presents a powerful, comprehensive vision of the meaning of life by constructing an evolutionary narrative that runs from the alpha of the origin of the universe to the omega of Doomsday on Earth and beyond. The narrative is well-informed, theoretically sophisticated, and compactly argued across three broad steps, any one of which includes ample material

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for a book of its own. The subtitle gives some indication of the nature of the argument: "How spiritual traditions nurture our biological nature and what to expect when they fail"—or, how evolutionary biology gives rise to religious traditions as fundamental adaptive mechanisms for human survival and how we should now think and act, given the crisis that is upon us. By the end it is clear that the book is a strong polemic for Rue's "religious naturalism." In this commentary, I give some indication of the scope of Rue's accomplishment by briefly summarizing his arguments. I then raise some questions concerning his religious naturalism and propose "theological humanism" as an alternative.

In the first step, Rue presents a general theory of religion based on principles of "consilient scientific materialism" (2005, 14). His intention is to show that "the experiences and expressions constituting the religious life can be seen to result exclusively from natural causes" (p. 12). Rue's provocative, although admittedly not new, claim is that "religion is not about God"; it is about us in our task of survival. Human beings share with all life forms the ultimate goal of maximizing reproductive fitness. The meaning of humanity as a unique species appears in our general strategy to this end of achieving personal wholeness and social coherence. These two elements are deemed crucial for the success of the species in adapting to challenging life situations.

Humans implement this general strategy by constructing and maintaining shared worldviews that join cosmological and moral dimensions. For this task, religious traditions play a vital role. According to Rue, religions are fundamentally mythic realities in that they constitute themselves around a narrative core with a root metaphor at the center. The root metaphor (such as God-as-person in the Abrahamic traditions or Dharma in Hinduism) is the point at which fact and value connect. The religious root metaphor provides both the ultimate explanation for the organization of all natural facts and the ultimate justification for the order of moral values. In this way, religions emerge out of the adaptive necessities of human life.

In Rue's analysis, religions are complicated structures made up of dynamically overlapping elements fashioned to promote their mythic worldview. He isolates five kinds of regulative strategies that together make up the structure of religion: (1) intellectual strategies of theology (metaphysics) and ethics, (2) experiential strategies of bringing participants into contact with ultimate reality, (3) ritual strategies of transmitting and reinforcing mythic meanings through dramatic devices, (4) aesthetic strategies of evoking an emotional bounty through a sensuous form, and (5) institutional strategies of determining leadership roles and authoritative voices.

Rue makes the presuppositions of his naturalistic model of religion explicitly clear by setting the model within a detailed account of human nature, viewed as the outcome of the comprehensive epic of evolution. He begins his explanatory story with the Big Bang and the creation of stars;

moves through the formation of planet Earth and the emergence of living creatures; and finally focuses on the evolution of human beings with the appearance of complex neural, reflex, perceptual, learning/memory, emotional, cognitive, and symbolic (cultural) systems. Viewing emotion and cognition as "partners in the mind" (p. 80), Rue places special analytical emphasis on the emotions because religion plays a crucial role in shaping and directing them. Emotions, Rue says, are temporary feeling states that acquire narrative content when we make cognitive appraisals of possible goals in life, the meaning of self-involvement in different experiences, the scope of guilt and responsibility, the potential for coping with difficult experiences, and the projecting of future possibilities. As such, emotions are predispositions to act: links between subjective feelings and objective behaviors. Once cultural systems are in place, organized into symbols and preserved in memes—"the unit of symbolic variation, transmission, and selection" within a culture (p. 71)—differentiations in emotional responses appear as a result. The individualizing force of culture works in tandem with the universal structures of human nature to produce the manifold of human cultures, each of which strives to achieve personal wholeness and social coherence for the sake of survival. Religious traditions cap off this entire process and exert a decisive influence on human behavior by educating the emotions and unifying the worldview.

In the second step, the book tests its general, naturalistic model of religion against five major world traditions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. The aim is to show how these historical traditions in their different ways instantiate the elements Rue includes in the structural model and achieve the aims of religion to fuse cosmology and morality within a mythic system governed by a root metaphor. I do not see how he could do this work any better than he has, and he deserves enormous credit for undertaking this difficult task.

In the third step, Rue raises the argument to a new level in discussing the future of religion. His authorial voice expands from that of materialist philosopher of religion to that of prophet, myth maker, and theologian. This third part mounts in intensity to become a manifesto of religious naturalism, as Rue makes an impassioned theological response to the global environmental crisis. I say theological because Rue speaks explicitly of "Nature" as "the sacred object of humanity's ultimate concern," and he embraces recent theological efforts that divinize Nature and naturalize God (pp. 365–66).

What is the opening for religious naturalism? Rue argues that religious root metaphors are in fact images/concepts that are constructed by human beings as adaptive strategies for survival. Nonetheless, religious root metaphors display intentionality—they are *about* something, and they purport to be true. When a religious root metaphor loses its apparent truth value, a crisis befalls the religion. For a religious tradition to function properly in

producing social coherence and personal wholeness, people must be convinced of the realism of a religion's root metaphor. In the West, both the rise of modern science and the fact of pluralism seriously threaten this sense of realism, which increasingly renders Christianity impotent. Meanwhile, the rise of capitalism has brought with it the metamyth of consumerism, which has largely replaced the influence of the Judeo-Christian myth in the Western world. Consumerism has all the ancillary strategies of a developed religion and shows itself to be powerful in its ability to unite personal wholeness with social coherence. The problem is that consumerism has a fatal flaw: "it is a major force driving us toward an environmental crisis of global proportion" (p. 340). It is leading us directly toward Doomsday. Humans already exceed the carrying capacity of the earth, and we witness crises in the quality and amount of air, land, water, and energy as species disappear in inordinate numbers and the earth heats up.

For Rue, the big question confronting humanity is whether the world's religious traditions, weakened as they are, will respond to the environmental challenge with moral leadership. He acknowledges that the intellectual resources are in place to do so, but the ancillary strategies are missing. Take the Christian tradition in the United States, for example. Liberal theologians have worked out responsible environmental ethics, but they preach to a choir whose numbers are diminishing. The vast majority of Christians are religious conservatives who have aligned with right-wing politics in promoting a baptized version of consumerism, the "prosperity gospel." Doomsday is coming, and there will be "hell to pay" with unimaginable death and devastation in the short run. Rue describes several possible scenarios of destruction (p. 319).

Following the debacle, however, there will be remnants of humanity surviving in some local communities that had previously learned a measure of sustainability and where mechanisms for food production and distribution remain somewhat intact. These remnants will begin mythmaking anew, struggling to understand what went wrong and how to put it right. They will see Nature as "the ultimate source of truth and value and the ultimate context for human fulfillment" (p. 361) and will rue the fatal failure of humanity to live in harmony with Nature. A new mythic core will arise: the myth of religious naturalism. Indeed, Rue's book is an early version of it, with many of its elements spelled out—the story of the natural history of the cosmos from the Big Bang to the environmental crisis and beyond, an ecocentric morality based on "the imperative to sustain human life on the planet . . . within the limits of natural systems" (p. 363), and a yet-to-arise root metaphor expressing the divinity of nature and the naturalization of divinity. The post-Doomsday religious naturalists will begin human life anew and will be known for their reverence, awe, and love for Nature; sympathy for living things; guilt for having violated Nature; and a sense of gratitude for the sacredness of Nature.

This new myth owes much to Judeo-Christianity, with its notion of a faithful remnant surviving God's judgment and its dramatic structure of death followed by resurrection. In his book's final section, "In the End, Irony," Rue reveals that, even though religion to a large extent is not about God but is about us in our struggle for survival, religion *is* about God as the perceived ultimate ground of unity between fact and value, cosmology and morality. The last word in the book is "God," and we now know that, according to Rue, her name is Nature.

I now pose some questions to Rue's argument, structuring them in response to Rue's different authorial voices.

First, I question whether Rue, in his role as a philosopher of religion, can successfully sustain his "consilient scientific materialism," which as I understand it consists of the following elements: (1) "the order of being is the order of nature—the natural is the real and the real is natural" (p. 12); (2) all natural facts are contingent on a substrate of material reality; (3) a natural fact is something that can be investigated by science at one of four levels—the physical, biological, psychological, or cultural/symbolic; and (4) the sciences that study them converge in a "coherent, unified meshwork of ideas that renders intelligible the full scope of human experience" (p. 16). One troubling anomaly for this naturalist/materialist agenda is whether the phenomenon of consciousness can be wholly reduced to natural facts and their material substrata. This is the so-called "hard problem" of consciousness (Chalmers 1997).

I contend that the first-person experience of consciousness is in principle irreducible to natural facts and is not a possible object of scientific investigation. Even if the materialistic program could be successfully applied to such conscious activities as thinking and perceiving, reducing them to neuronal mechanisms, the felt experiences (qualia) of thinking and perceiving would be left unexplained. The reason is that immediate self-consciousness necessarily eludes scientific analysis because it is not a sensibly observable object, even in the form of a neural process, but an "inner life" that accompanies these other activities of consciousness. This inner life is constituted as an awareness of what it is like to be the one I am (Nagel 1974). It is an immediate consciousness that "I" have of how it is with me. Any attempt to objectify my inner life misses the phenomenon, which recedes behind the effort to objectify it and thus systematically escapes objectification.

In my view, philosophers of religion should not dismiss or ignore the claims of naturalism/materialism because they contribute much to our growing understanding of the substrate of material reality. Such is surely the case with the philosophy of mind. It is absolutely necessary to take account of neurobiology, but it is nonetheless not sufficient to understand the mind. Rue writes as if the human being is a complicated organism whose responses to the environment are controlled entirely by algorithms

(a word he uses frequently). However, it seems clear to me that human beings exhibit conscious behavior that cannot be explained as entirely algorithmic, or rule-driven. With William Klink, I define the fundamental property of *consciousness* as the capacity of a system to opt among alternatives such that results are neither random (that is, equally probable) nor determined (altogether predictable) (Klemm and Klink 2006). According to this definition, an algorithmic device can never be *conscious* simply because it has no alternatives open to it. An algorithmic device is determined (Searle 1980).[1] Now, if naturalism/materialism cannot account for the phenomenon of consciousness, is the only alternative a substance or property dualism? Hopefully not. Dualism is widely discredited today both by philosophers who find unanswerable metaphysical problems in attempting to relate mind and matter and by neuroscientists who think dualism lacks adequate scientific backing.

Consider a third possibility that is embedded within the theoretical framework of *theological humanism* (Klemm and Schweiker in press). This is a stance toward the proper meaning of life that is paradoxically both humanistic and theological in equal measure. Rue would call it a metamyth. Theological humanism proposes a doctrine of human being as a finite and fallible creature of the earth, determined, yet free at least in modest measure, and capable of changing. Theological humanism insists on a normative, theological principle by which to guide, measure, and integrate human activities into personal wholeness and social coherence. The norm is *integrity of life*, conceived as the symbol of God's being. Under this self-transcending norm, theological humanism integrates opposing forces into complex unities. Consequently, it fully accepts the power and significance of natural science without being naturalistic or materialistic but also acknowledges the irreducibility of human consciousness (and the reality of human freedom) without being dualistic or idealistic. How does it do this? One way to overcome the opposition between dualism and materialism is by enriching the concept of matter. The fundamental property of consciousness as the capacity to opt among alternatives is an ingredient in matter itself, as is evident in the quantum behavior of elemental properties of matter at the microphysical level. The remarkable feature of quantum behavior is that microphysical systems opt between alternatives open to them in ways that are neither individually predictable nor random. Such opting at the microphysical level signifies the presence of protomental conscious life that underlies the phenomena explained by quantum theory. In other words, quantum systems display a "subjectivity of opting" that is a primitive form of consciousness, not reducible to any more fundamental category. Matter at the quantum level exhibits not only material aspects, such as the invariant properties of mass, spin, and charge, but also protomental properties that are manifest in experiments in which matter itself opts from a set of alternatives that are specified by quantum theory.

If some kind of protoconsciousness is among the elemental constituents of matter, the "hard problem" of consciousness is potentially solved. The question is, how do purely natural/material processes give rise to the elusive phenomenon of inner, conscious life? The answer is that they do not. Consciousness is present in matter/nature in a primitive form from the beginning. There is a hierarchy of matter, starting with fundamental constituents such as electrons and nuclei, passing through atoms such as the hydrogen atom, to molecules (such as the water molecule), and on to more and more complex systems, the kinds of which Rue ably spells out in his book. At each level in the hierarchy, more alternatives are in principle open to the system.[2] Because consciousness is shared by human beings and the constituents of all matter in the universe, this model of consciousness opens the possibility of a revised or modified panpsychism (the doctrine that all things exhibit some mental or protomental qualities) that is based on scientific and not metaphysical warrant (Skribina 2005). Theological humanism thus may entertain the possibility of a modified panpsychism that in principle integrates contemporary science with a nonreductionist phenomenology of consciousness.

Second, I question the activity of mythmaking through which Rue constructs a justificatory narrative to support his religious naturalism. He tells the "epic of evolution" as if it were a seamless whole with beginning, middle, and a projected end. Rue's myth displays enormous internal continuity, as if Nature herself were pushing events from behind and leading them toward their *telos* (Changeux and Ricoeur 2000, 245–46). In fact, Rue is constructing a narrative retrospectively in light of his current moral preoccupation with the environmental crisis. He smooths over major discontinuities in the evolutionary accounts, including the emergence of organic life forms from inorganic life and the emergence of human consciousness from neural systems. Rue's mythmaking becomes prophecy when he projects into the future as if writing a new Book of Revelation. Passionately assessing the human damage to life-support systems on Earth, Rue paints a frightening prospect of Doomsday. In his view, we are doomed, and religious naturalism will emerge as the Truth after Doomsday. In retrospect, the handful of surviving humans will come to see that what matters in life is to bring our actions into conformance with Nature.

Again, I propose an alternative vision. Theological humanism agrees with Rue about the severity of the environmental crisis and the urgent need to mobilize all resources to address the crisis. Theological humanism proceeds cautiously and with much trepidation, yet with some hope that we can make transformations and corrections in response to the crisis. Perhaps it is not too late.

Theological humanism identifies two major threats to human existence today. The first is *overhumanization*, caused by an aimless exercise of freedom—that is, freedom unhinged from highest values and set narcissistically

in service to the will to power. Overhumanization is the result of humanism that has separated itself from theology to inhabit a universalized, nihilistic space. Overhumanization marks an attitude in which humans feel no higher constraint on human power; it acknowledges no symbol of God, no divine command, by which to guide and measure human activity. It is the result of critique run wild and theology suppressed. Overhumanization produces a global environment in which there is no "outside" to human activity and its constructed realities. Transcendence disappears, leaving only the human face—in Rue's view, the face of consumerism. Rue's book gives profound testimony to overhumanization and its disastrous consequences.

The second threat is *hypertheism*, caused by freedom's placing itself under some particular interpretation of divine law while not recognizing that God's law is mediated by human wills. Hypertheism signals the commitment to comply in all aspects of life with a particular presentation of God's revealed will. It turns a particular symbol of God into an idol by confusing the symbol with the universal reality symbolized, while supposing that it deals not at all with a symbol but with the real thing. Hypertheism is the result of theology that has separated itself from humanism to occupy a particular confessional position. It claims to know God and God's will in ways that defy critical thought. It withholds critique from its sacred scriptures, practices, and beliefs and gives full rein to theistic theology. Hypertheism is driven by a desire for certainty and security. It seeks refuge in a chosen sacred language and particular religious communities in a struggle against the "others." Hypertheism is manifest in all areas of culture but is most evident in the world of religion, where we see strident fundamentalisms determining what humans do here and now with the promises of rewards in heaven. To live one's life in all its details for God, and yet to have a local, particularized notion of God—that is the essence of hypertheism.

These two threats divide the population into secular humanists and religious zealots, but in spite of their differences they work toward similar nefarious ends. Overhumanization renders precarious the human situation by wantonly despoiling the world, turning freedom into license. Hypertheism diminishes human and nonhuman life by turning God into a supernatural hyperbeing whose law disables human freedom. It is ironic that although Rue denounces the extreme religious right (and especially the prosperity-gospel movement) for its hypertheism, his religious naturalism represents a kind of hypertheism with Nature in the role of God. Theological humanism aims to integrate these opposing forces into a stance that is informed by both humanism and theology without going to either extreme.

Third, in his role as theologian, Rue effectively names Nature "God" and "God" Nature. Is this adequate? Is God Nature? I do not think so. Consider what these terms mean. In Christian philosophical theology, *God* means "that than which none greater can be conceived" (Anselm of

Canterbury). Within the worldview of Christian theism, God so conceived signifies the one perfect, infinite Supreme Being (the Creator), who is set over against Nature conceived as finite being (the created world). According to this picture, we think *God* analogically in theoretical reason as the standard of Truth in knowledge, and we think *God* in practical reason as the standard of the Highest Good in action. In both cases, the idea of God provides the finite thinker with a point of view from which to judge the truth of Nature. Is Nature supreme and limitless perfection of being? No—it is splendid but flawed; the being of Nature is everywhere mixed with nonbeing. Is natural life the highest good? No—it is awesome but often cruel; life is always haunted by death.

The problem with the theistic picture was named by G. W. F. Hegel as the "bad infinite." Hegel reasoned that if we think of God as infinite being and of the created world as finite being, God is limited by the finite and hence is not unlimited, which is the meaning of infinite. If the God of theism is *a* being, albeit even a Supreme Being, the God of theism cannot be God. We can think a greater God: "Being Itself," taken as the unity of finite and infinite being. Being Itself, perhaps conceived as the universal life force or will to power, is God, as perhaps Nietzsche suggested. If so, radical critique seems to undercut the divinity of God. Or does it?

Paul Tillich, perhaps most powerfully among recent theologians, thinks beyond the death of God announced by the radical critique of theism with his notion of the "God beyond the God of theism" (1952, 187). For Tillich, as is well known, *God* means Being Itself, which in turn means that God cannot be defined by a concept, because Being Itself is the indefinable presupposition of all thinking of being. To think "Being Itself" is to think an unanswerable question: What is the meaning of being? Yet, for Tillich, God means more than Being Itself. God is also a symbol. The symbol *God* is that place in language where an answer to the unanswerable question is found: "God is the meaning of being." Tillich insists that religious symbols participate in their referents when they have power to elicit and evoke ultimate concern in those who respond to them. When my lived response to the symbol *God* existentially confers on me the courage to be in spite of nonbeing, the symbol itself gives me the power to be. The symbol *God* overcomes meaninglessness by enabling me to accept it into my own being through the courageous affirmation and expression of meaninglessness. So also with the ideals of Truth and Goodness. In our finitude, we do not know the Truth or the Highest Good, but the symbol *God* empowers the search for them and enables the mind to judge what is lacking in truth or goodness. *God* is a word that refers the mind to the indefinability of Being Itself and yet provides us with the power of meaningfulness in spite of our encounter with the Nothingness of meaninglessness.

Theological humanism engages theological thinking beyond the radical critique of Western thought, modifying Tillich's classical answer to nihilism.

It thinks *God* as a meaning-giving symbol for humanity facing the crises of overhumanization and hypertheism. The core idea and substance of the symbol *God* in theological humanism is the integrity of life. It conceives of God's being God as the integrity of life, the unity and wholeness of life. It thinks of the ethical command as "in all actions and relations respect and enhance the integrity of life." Both theoretically and practically, *God* for theological humanism signifies the principle of unity and wholeness in life—the principle that makes the universe a *uni*verse and not a fragmented chaos. Because life has a natural order and integrity at all levels, theological humanism asserts that humans have an innate awareness of the divine at all levels of their being. Awareness of the divine is both intrinsically human and theological. Humans have an immediate awareness of God's presence in the biological, affective life of vital needs and desires; the lived body is already and importantly attuned to the real presence of God in itself and the world it encounters through image and word. Humans are likewise aware of the sacred dimension of things in their social relations of family, friendship, and community. These relations incorporate the need for free communication, mutual recognition, and shared experiences of God's real presence with others. In their reflective lives, humans are aware that standards for measuring beliefs and actions are immediately present to them (to wit, Thomas's "fourth way") through the inherited forms and meanings of language and culture. Finally, humans are aware of the divine depth of meaning in the wholeness of life itself, conceived as the manifestation of God's own integrity (Schweiker 1995). Theological humanism is not human-centered; humans are but a part of life. It seeks balance and harmony with all other parts of life in order to respect and protect the God-given integrity of life.

Theological humanism makes a stronger case than religious naturalism does because it focuses on the human being within the whole of nature under "God" and is free to emphasize a whole range of issues pressing upon a beleaguered humanity living on an endangered planet. The environmental crisis surely looms before us, but so do problems of human injustice, the commercialization of art and loss of beauty, and the like. We need a norm higher than Nature, for we can conceive of Fascist or slave societies that can produce personal wholeness and social coherence while existing in harmony with nature.

Notes

1. I basically agree with John Searle's Chinese room example, which is intended to show the irreducibility of consciousness to programmable functions. Understanding meanings within a language always involves something more than following rules. Likewise, any device such as a computer that embodies the structure of a Turing machine can never be conscious. It may be able to simulate consciousness, but it can never properly embody consciousness.
2. Clearly one has to answer why, then, many macroscopic systems do not exhibit quantum behavior. There are answers to this question, but I do not go into the arguments here. For a full account see Klemm and Klink 2006.

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