

“Religion Is Not About God”— Responding to Loyal Rue

RELIGIOUS NATURALISM AND THE FUTURE
OF CHRISTIANITY

by Donald M. Braxton

Abstract. Loyal Rue suggests that religion is not about God as such but about the cultivation of personal and social well-being. Religion *may* employ cultural resources that include concepts of supernatural agencies, but religion’s essential functionalities are not dependent on that particular resource. I largely endorse Rue’s view of religion and employ Rue as a guide to thinking through its consequences for the future of Christianity. For Rue, two challenges face Christianity: the erosion of confidence in personal-god concepts and the ecological crisis engulfing the planet. In the face of these twin momentous changes, I suggest ways in which certain cultural tropes in the Christian matrix will rise to the fore and others will erode.

Keywords: Christianity; ecological collapse; religious naturalism; sacramentality; sacrifice

In this essay I engage Loyal Rue’s *Religion Is Not About God* in the context of thinking about the future of Christianity and religious naturalism. As a religious naturalist myself, I regard this book as a major contribution to the literature on multiple levels, not all of which I address here.¹

Rue’s book contains three major parts: a general and naturalistic theory of religion, the application of his theory to what typically are called the world religions, and some speculations regarding the future of religion under the potential crisis of ecological collapse. I divide my treatment of the

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book into three corresponding topics and one concluding section of “further reflection” suggested by the book itself. These topics are naturalizing religion, naturalizing Christianity, the future of naturalized religion under conditions of environmental crisis, and the potential shape of an emergent religious naturalism.

Even patterning my analysis in this manner, I leave substantial parts of Rue’s nuanced book untouched. For example, I ignore the question of the accuracy of his analysis of the world religions except for Christianity, since the interest of this dialogue is the payoff for thinking about the future of religious naturalism in a largely Christian society. I leave it to others better versed in the traditions I neglect to determine whether the portraits they encounter in Rue’s book are perceptive. I regard the analyses as accurate and helpful, but others with more knowledge may be able to offer correctives to this impression which I cannot.² Additional lacunae in my analysis are treatments of certain details underlying his use of contemporary psychology for his general theory of religion. Although I outline the basic features of his theory of religion, grounded as it is in specific claims about our evolved human psychology, I do not give full attention to the particular mechanisms he implicates. Again, I set aside this task for others more qualified to assess their accuracy and explanatory power. What the reader may expect from this essay is largely an attempt to situate Rue’s theory of religion in a larger discussion of the cultural evolution of religion generally and Christianity particularly.

SEEKING A GENERAL AND NATURALISTIC THEORY OF RELIGION

At the broadest level, Rue’s book offers a general theory of religion. He intends to tell us “where religion comes from, and how it functions.” The premises of any general theory of religion are, he continues, that “universal properties of structure and function can be found lurking behind the varying details of religious phenomena” (Rue 2005, 2).

Already here Rue engages an ongoing debate between Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment theorizing about religion. As in many such discussions, a spectrum of positions exists. At one end are the Enlightenment rationalists who believe in universal and culture-transcending standards of rationality. At the other extreme are the postmodernists who believe all standards are at their base arbitrary cultural constructions ultimately premised on social-structural assertions of power. Rue stakes out a terrain somewhere to the Enlightenment side of the spectrum but with hearty doses of epistemological humility.³ His justification for the viability of a general theory of religion is grounded in recent advances in understandings of human nature that build upon insights from evolutionary theory and, in particular, various mind/brain sciences. “The human brain sculpted by the evolutionary process has a complex modular organization. . . . The

modular brain is the biological substrate for all meanings: for all individuals, for all cultures, for all times and circumstances” (p. 8). Summarizing this vision of human beings (and its implicit theory of human nature) at the end of Part One, he writes that “human beings are wholly the products of a cosmic evolutionary process, that we, like all other living beings, are star-born, earth-formed, fitness maximizing creatures endowed by natural selection with a selection of species-typical traits for negotiating a livelihood on this planet” (p. 122).

What are the structures of human nature on the basis of which religion is constructed? Rue paints a complex picture of nested systems operating in the human organism. Biochemical processes create the conditions for the emergence of the neural systems our bodies use to process information. These neural systems are the necessary prerequisite for our reflex and perceptual systems. Organizing, storing, and learning from data, these basic systems allow the construction of complex memory systems, especially our working memory, which enables organism-level assessments. Further, as we have recently learned from such neuroscientific researchers as Joseph Ledoux (1998) and Antonio Damasio (1999), humans employ emotional valencing systems to identify the various goals they entertain in working memory in order to come to actionable decisions. Thus, what we think of as our mind is a complex assembly of short- and long-term memory systems, emotional valencing, and various cognitive operators. This is the seat of consciousness.

Human consciousness is a particular version of animal consciousness. It is characterized by a far greater degree of complexity than the general consciousness exhibited by nonhuman animal life. The wellspring of this complexity is that human consciousness possesses the additional resource of extragenetic information in the form of culture. Language-mediated culture frees human consciousness from mere reliance on behaviors transmitted genetically. Humans can access the rich domain of extragenetic information called culture and literally reshape themselves to various degrees guided by the wisdom embedded in symbolic systems. One such system is religion. According to Rue, our mind/brains have evolved to be cognitively open to the influence of culture. Human mental flexibility has been the source of our success as a species. It is our evolutionary niche.

Because the advances on which Rue bases his anthropology are rooted in the modern evolutionary narrative, the other feature of his general theory of religion is that it is naturalistic. He defines a naturalistic theory of religion as one that reduces religious experiences and expressions to the status of “natural events having natural causes” (p. 2). Here we stumble upon a second ongoing discussion in the academic study of religion. As with the issue of a general theory of religion, so also in this context a range of opinions exists, and defenders of all varieties can be found. On one end of the spectrum we find the tradition of David Hume’s naturalistic history

of religion and its inheritors such as Daniel Dennett, Scott Atran, Stewart Guthrie, and Pascal Boyer. On the other end are the defenders of supernaturalistic causality such as orthodox Protestant and Catholic theologians Friedrich Schleiermacher, Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich. In an intermediate position we find the phenomenologists of religion who substitute for traditional religious concepts terms like “ontic power,” “the sacred,” or “the numinous,” terms that seem to apply to real but not natural things. In this debate, Rue sides clearly with the tradition of Hume and rules out any meaningful place for supernatural causality in the explanation of religion. In this regard, he locates himself in the growing consensus of folks who study religion academically, or, more precisely stated, who study religion without confessional commitments.

The history of Religious Studies as a discipline has been subjected in recent years to some very thorough analysis. Rue’s own theory of religion is deeply influenced by these discussions, even though that influence remains largely in the background. It is worth pondering Rue’s choices in this larger context.⁴

What we think of as the modern disciple of Religious Studies has its birth in the liberal wings of nineteenth-century Protestant theology. In that matrix of relatively tolerant religious beliefs, a new approach to the study of our growing knowledge of the world’s religions emerged under the heading of *Religionswissenschaft*. Combining liberal Protestant sensibilities with rapidly developing social science methodologies, *Religionswissenschaft* sought a more neutral and inclusive ground from which to appreciate the insights and wisdom of non-Christian religious traditions. At the heart of these approaches was the hypothesis of a culture-independent encounter with a world-transcending power variously called “the holy,” “the sacred,” “the absolute,” “the real,” “ultimacy,” or “the numinous,” understood here in a technical sense of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century phenomenology. Subjectively real encounters with transcendent religious powers needed to be described and taken as “the given” data of academic inquiry behind which one could not go academically. In the United States, scholars of religion became aware of this school of thought chiefly through the work of Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade, but behind these notable authors stood the work of C. J. Bleeker, Joachim Wach, and Gerardus van der Leeuw. Born of the desire to respect the religious experiences of all people, this approach sought to bracket inquiry into the objective truth of any particular religious manifestations, or claims made as a result of said experiences, and to rest content with the fact that the experiences were “true” for believers. As Religious Studies matured in the United States, the idea that scholars of religion studied something *sui generis*, that is, something unique to its own domain, provided a powerful justification for the existence of independent programs in American colleges and uni-

versities.⁵ Many scholars operating today are the beneficiaries of this era's work, including Rue and myself. Departments of Theology, Religion, and Religious Studies, as distinguished from preseminary and seminary programs, are largely the products of this spirit of inquiry.

Recent scholarship, however, has tended to question the adequacy of this model of Religious Studies for at least two reasons. First, it is becoming clear that the hypothesizing of some *sui generis* experience only clothed in culture-specific discourses is a circular argument. It only presupposes as a given that which it seeks to analyze and explain. For this reason, commentators accuse this position of being a theology masquerading as an academic inquiry (Wiebe 1999). Second, the natural and social sciences have advanced so much in the last several decades that domains formerly considered as being beyond our reach are now open to critical scrutiny. Human behavior and the mind-brain have been explored in levels of detail that were unavailable to an earlier era of scholars of religion. It is precisely these domains to which Rue takes recourse in developing his own general and naturalistic theory of religion. The upshot of these two developments is a greater willingness on the part of those housed in Religious Studies to embrace explanatory and reductionistic paradigms. Rue clearly falls into the latter camp. Whereas in the not-too-distant past such an enterprise would have counted as marginal, in the current climate he is part of a growing and vocal new trend in Religious Studies.

It is important to be clear what Rue's intellectual commitments mean for the study of religion generally and his theory of religion in particular. His endorsement of a consilient scientific materialism in the study of religion does not mean that he discounts the fact that people do entertain ideas about supernatural realities or supernatural explanations for natural phenomena. People certainly make such inferences all the time. Nor does it mean that people do not experience subjectively compelling and intense moments on the basis of which commitments to various religious visions are solidified. Surely they do. Rue and other defenders of this form of religious studies agree that the discipline is bound to give an accurate and satisfying accounting of the power of these experiences. Rue does, however, embrace the Humean tradition of the naturalistic study of religion, and this implies, according to the dictates of consilient scientific materialism, that all such supernatural ideas and explanations are more satisfyingly explained in terms of natural processes than if they are simply accepted at face value. In Rue's words, "naturalists oppose explanations that unnecessarily assume a transcendent order of entities and events having causal influence in the order of nature. Why posit two orders of being where one is sufficient? . . . This book casts its lot with a version of naturalism I will call *consilient scientific materialism*" (pp. 12, 14).

For the purposes of this essay, no greater treatment of the assumptions of this form of naturalism is necessary, but Rue's arrival at an endorsement

of consilient scientific materialism⁶ points to another fundamental issue that deserves some exploration. Rue is motivated in this book to develop his theory of religion because contemporary scientific knowledge makes it possible to study religion in this manner, and academic credibility makes it increasingly necessary.

For Rue, science consists of all attempts to organize our knowledge of physical, biological, psychological, and cultural facts. His definition embraces not only the so-called hard sciences but also the social sciences and various aspects of what usually are referred to as the humanities. Within the humanities, the crucial issue is whether the disciplines are “critical.” While Rue certainly accepts methodological diversity, he believes they should nevertheless share a common agenda, “the collaborative enterprise of systematically organizing our knowledge of the natural order.” Therefore, although some fields entertain “lingering attachments to traditional agendas . . . all plausible explanations of natural phenomena will find their place among these disciplines” (pp. 15–16). Among the lingering attachments to traditional agendas Rue would classify the older models of phenomenological investigations into religion, especially to the extent they hypothesize some mystified domain under such headings as “the sacred” or “ultimacy.” These are, in Russell McCutcheon’s words, theological agendas and fail the test of science. It probably goes without saying that many scholars in the humanities and social sciences are resistant to this idea. To Rue’s mind, if Religious Studies programs wish to be taken seriously as contributing to actual knowledge in the larger academy, they need to aspire to making scientifically consistent claims, ideally ones that generate testable, falsifiable claims.

Any reader of Rue’s book cannot help but notice that a further motivating factor underlies his agenda. Part of the urgency of the book is to place the disciplines of religious studies on the level playing field of academia beyond the pale of obscurantism and esoteric invocations. This commitment generates the intellectual impulse to articulate a general and naturalistic theory of religion. Equal if not greater urgency, however, comes from his ethical conviction that our population faces a monumental environmental crisis to which only the social power of religion can offer adequate response strategies. “The life-support systems of the earth, upon which the survival of our species depends absolutely, are in a state of serious decline on a global scale. . . . This leaves us with a critical choice between unpleasant options” (p. 341).

Global ecological degradation is a powerful source of urgency for Rue, as it probably is for many engaged in the religion-and-science dialogue, but this urgency is further exacerbated by the fact that we live in a period of what Rue calls “myth-realism” decline.⁷ Myth-realism is Rue’s name for how seriously a society takes its basic stories. When Rue argues that many of the most important myths on which the world’s religions are premised

have lost plausibility and motivational power, he fears an intense state of moral confusion at a time when we can least afford it as a species. In the face of dramatic environmental decline, no greater tragedy could befall our species than to have our basic religious stories fail to convince and to motivate positive behavioral responses. The implication is that if these religious traditions, including Christianity, continue to adhere to antiquated cosmologies, we may not be able to count on them to motivate people to make the hard decisions imposed upon us by impending ecological crises.

Here we see Rue's normative commitment for encouraging Religious Studies to do its job better. As a scholarly discipline, Religious Studies is uniquely situated to engage in the scientific study of religion and to explore the mechanisms religions use to motivate human behavior. On the basis of these investigations, religions can explore the potential "design space" in which religions are likely to unfold. Religious Studies cannot advocate for one or another set of religious choices, but it can make suggestions about which cultural patterns are more or less likely to succeed given what it knows about human nature. Later on I explore just one such scenario: the formulation of a future religious naturalism designed to cope with an impending ecological crisis.

The emergence of a compelling scientific account of the origins and functions of religion and the loss of plausibility of traditional religious myths in the face of global environmental crisis—together these two prongs create a tightrope effect throughout Rue's book. For him, the temporal horizon against which we must transform human cultures is very short, yet the decline of traditional myths brought about by science is already fairly advanced. The question that hangs over the book is whether a compelling, scientifically informed religious worldview can be articulated in time to reorient human behavior toward sustainable living. In the mix of these considerations, how will traditional Christianity fare in this pursuit? Will it be able to adapt to the changing cultural landscape? Given its powerful authority in our society, can we expect it to help in the transition, or will it be an impediment? With these questions in mind, we turn to Rue's treatment of Christianity.

WHAT IT WOULD TAKE TO NATURALIZE CHRISTIANITY

For Rue, the core myth of Christianity is the assertion that Jesus of Nazareth is the incarnation of the one, true God. As such, this person provided the fullest disclosure of the nature and personality of God. In this move, not only is salvation now mediated definitively through the person of Jesus, but understanding his personality becomes the crucial hermeneutical move in unlocking all the mysteries of nature and human history (pp. 196–99).

For this myth to retain persuasiveness, it depends on several root metaphors, as all myths ultimately do. Like Judaism, Christianity derives from

the mythic inheritance of Israelite religion and cosmology. At the heart of this cultural matrix, which we can refer to simply as the Abrahamic monotheisms (including Islam), lies the root metaphor of the personhood of God. Tied to the personhood of God are two conceptual adjuncts: cosmological dualism and eschatology. To my reading of Rue's argument, both of these ideological commitments appear secondary to the personhood of God. Christian eschatological commitments appear to derive from a deep-felt desire to redeem the meaningfulness of history. The meaningfulness of history must be defended if beliefs regarding divine providence are to be safeguarded. And providence must be substantiated in turn because of beliefs regarding the personhood of deity. Similarly, cosmological dualism is necessary to account for the apparent default condition of divine absence in what Christians (and in different ways Jews and Muslims) widely regard as a fallen world. Indeed, the entire Christian mythical edifice of the incarnation is necessary only because of divine absence. How can we know the will of God in a world so riddled with sin? The Christian response must be that it can be known only in the action of God decisively revealed in the person of Jesus. Why must we look there? Because God's nature and personality is absent in the normal world of our perceptions, or at least divine presence is profoundly obscured in the rest of what we name "God's creation." For these reasons, Christ was identified with the Greek notion of *logos*, the logic or interpretive key to the universe, an image most decisively preserved in the *pantokrator* theology and iconography of Greek orthodoxy but also preserved to some extent in all Christian expressions.

The problem for Christianity, as for many other religious traditions, is that, according to Rue, the plausibility of core metaphors such as the personhood of God and supernatural agencies is in serious decline. Because the core myth of Christianity and many other traditional religious expressions depend on this core metaphor, the compelling nature of Christian narrative erodes. "The explanatory power of the personhood metaphor has, however, been severely compromised since the rise of modern science. The principal reason for this has been a reversal in the direction of explanation: Whereas we once explained nature in personal terms, we now explain personal reality in natural terms" (p. 315).

In fact, echoing Richard Dawkins's famous proclamation regarding human intellectual and emotional satisfactions,⁸ Rue contends that we now possess a "fairly complete and compelling naturalistic understanding of how mind-reading humans came up with the idea of God and came to use the metaphor for therapeutic and social purposes" (p. 318). The upshot of these discoveries, rooted in the evolutionary story of our species, is the erosion of realism now ascribed to the mythic core of Christianity. We are aware of the processes that gave rise to religion in the human animal. We are aware of the purposes it serves and the reasons for its particular manifestations. Religion seems all-too-human, and for any enterprise that de-

depends on the confusion of the differences between discovery “in nature” and simple “invention” and/or “projection onto nature” of human needs and interests, this more sophisticated and scientific understanding spells trouble for the plausibility of many religious narratives. The loss of myth realism translates into the erosion of cultural influence in Rue’s understanding of religion.

We might ask, along with Rue: Can we imagine a nonsupernatural, nontheistic Christianity, one that eliminates Christian reliance upon the root metaphor of the personhood of divinity? Intimately connected to this deletion is that we would also eliminate the need for the cosmological dualism and the eschatological vision adopted by Christians to explain systematically the personhood of God. Such a development would indeed be monumental because it would achieve a basic desideratum for Rue. It would effectively naturalize Christianity and thereby pave the road for a potential consilience of science and religion, at least the Abrahamic monotheisms.

Pursuant to just this question, in the final pages of his book Rue identifies a variety of liberal religious thinkers who are exploring pathways to maintaining the relevance of various traditional religious options in the face of science. He mentions a series of conferences sponsored by the Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions. He also lists some persons whom he calls prophets of the myth of religious naturalism including Gordon Kaufman, Holmes Rolston, Sallie McFague, Rosemary Ruether, Brian Swimme, Thomas Berry, and Ursula Goodenough. In the final analysis, however, Rue is dubious about the impact this group can really have in the current context. Like all prophets, this advance guard of visionaries is an elite force, working on the edge of current discourse, pushing heroically for a new vision, but ultimately of little consequence to mainstream discourse. In response to his participation in the Harvard conferences, for example, he writes:

If we could be confident that the Harvard conferences told the whole story, then no one could doubt that the received traditions possess a concerted will to lead a radical global transformation. But unfortunately there is much more to the story. While liberal theologians were busy working out the foundations for an environmental ethics, religious conservatives were busy forging alliances with right-wing politics. (p. 354)

Ultimately, Rue does not think our received religious traditions will be willing to undergo a cultural revolution of the magnitude demanded by our impending environmental crisis until the price of not making the transition becomes prohibitive. Anthropomorphizing religion is simply too well designed to cooperate with our intuitive psychology of personifying nature to willingly sacrifice itself. Only when the cultural landscape shifts as a result of major environmental crisis will the cultural unfitnes of supernatural categories for long-term human survival become truly manifest.

Added to the various political and cultural subdivisions within any one religious tradition Rue also notes that religious voices of both naturalist and supernaturalist varieties must contend with the progressive encroachment of religious and cultural pluralism in the awareness of their once informationally isolated potential believers (pp. 324–28). The sheer volume and diversity of religious options we face today enervates, he believes, any momentum a single myth can gain for itself.⁹ Rue believes that modern prophets of religious naturalism, like the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures, will not be recognized as such until after our version of the Babylonian Captivity—that is to say, a major ecological collapse—has occurred.

Even if such scenarios play themselves out in the manner he envisions in the long run, Rue appears to be quite open to novel possibilities in the transformation of religious and nonreligious traditions in the short run. Each of his chapters on the world religions explores ways in which religions harness prosocial emotions and behaviors, what he calls “overlaps of self-interest commensurate with an enlarged social order” (p. 165). It is possible that these mythic inheritances can still be activated to, say, grant moral considerability to the natural world or to self-regulate human population growth and consumption. In this regard, Rue joins voices like Max Oelschlaeger, who in his book *Caring for Creation* (1994) argued that we need not be squeamish about ideological purity or supremacy when it comes to the search for allies in combating ecocollapse:

When it comes to protecting the future of life on this planet, *solidarity is more important than ideological supremacy*. . . . My argument encourages people of faith both within and outside the Judeo-Christian mainstream to reconsider the role of their religion in a time of ecocrisis. Even though there are grounds for disagreements among us, the concern I have is for the common good. (1994, 8–9)

Rue’s pragmatism extends further to considering some nonreligious traditions as viable sources of allies to ameliorate a looming ecocrisis. For example, he considers “the myth of consumerism” as a potential candidate for the promotion of social coherence (2005, 328–40). To be sure, the version of the myth of “market providence” he has in mind requires a variety of transformations to be of service to ecological conservation. It requires a form of principled materialism, what is called by some advocates “green consumerism.” This argument is not new to Rue, however. Entrepreneur and environmental activist Paul Hawken first advocated a green economics in his *The Next Economy* (1984) and *The Ecology of Commerce* (1993). Not as green as Hawken, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman has nevertheless also recently advocated a vision of globalization with profound ecological implications in his *The World Is Flat* (2005).¹⁰

Let us consider briefly how a Friedman might be transformed into an ally in Rue’s search for fungible cultural resources. In Friedman’s picture of the interpenetrating markets of the global economy, it becomes increasingly difficult for consumers to externalize the less desirable by-products

of their consumption and population growth. For Friedman, the sheer power of global interdependency means that we all will have a vested interest in solving ecological problems wherever they may occur. Echoing the consumerist myth for ecological conservation, Friedman opines:

... we in the West have a fundamental interest in keeping the American dream alive in Beijing and Boise and Bangalore. But we have to stop fooling ourselves that it can be done in a flat world with 3 billion potential new consumers—if we don't find a radical new approach to energy usage and conservation. If we fail to do so, we will be courting both an environmental and geopolitical whirlwind. If there was ever a time for some big collaboration, it is now, and the subject is energy. I would love to see a grand China–United States Manhattan Project, a crash project to develop clean, alternative energies, bringing together China's best scientists and its political ability to implement pilot projects, with America's best brains, technology, and money. (2005, 412–13)

Friedman, as well as many in the green consumerism movement, probably underestimates the difficulty of growing a global economy out of its current ecological crisis, an observation Rue quickly makes in his own reaction to the consumerist myth (pp. 339–40), but the point for us here is not where they fall short but how to harness the social and political capital they represent *wherever* they are forward-looking. This is the great strength of the pragmatist's approach. It is of course also true that we need to ask more than what fifty simple things we can do to save the planet, which seems to be mostly what the unregulated market has had to offer up to this point. We need to be asking what fifty really *difficult* things are going to be required of us to avert catastrophe! (I pursue this point below in my discussion of the role of sacrifice in religious thought.) But even as we push for fifty difficult things, as pragmatists like Rue we can still be glad for the fifty simple ones. To restate the pragmatic credo, we need solidarity more than we need ideological purity. We run the risk of misreading Rue in this regard unless we clearly distinguish between what he regards as short-term political agendas and long-term ideological inevitabilities.

To return from our considerations of nonreligious resources to the case of Christianity, even if efforts to naturalize Christianity could receive widespread publicity and prove to possess strong appeal, there are other limitations regarding how far one can push this agenda. The limitations become fairly apparent when we phrase the question in this manner: If we begin to understand Christianity as an evolved social and therapeutic cultural construct—as our own work of art, so to speak—is not the natural trajectory simply to discard the myth altogether in favor of some more scientifically oriented worldview? Rue seems to acknowledge this fact with the final line of his book in the section “In the End, Irony”:

In the end, however, there may be a fair amount of irony all around. Nihilists may reject the certitude of values, yet they cannot possibly live a value-free existence. Theists will insist that religion is about a transcendent God, yet the God they worshipped and served is always incarnate in natural forms. And religious

naturalists may affirm the sacredness of Nature and practice eco-centric piety sincerely, yet deep down they must know that religion is no more about Nature than it is about God. (pp. 367–68)

I take this final statement to be a reaffirmation of his basic definition of religion, namely, that it was designed by us to meet personal and social needs and that it does not possess, no matter how much we need to believe that it does, any necessary correlates in a supernatural agency or a moral order implicit in nature. Once the curtain has been pulled away from the wizard, no amount of yearning will be able to force us to bow down before the idol again, at least not with any degree of sincerity. If and when that occurs to religious devotees individually or collectively, the search for a novel story that does not lack realism and credibility will have to be undertaken. For Rue, and for the religious naturalists he encourages at the end of the book, the obvious candidate is evolution itself.¹¹

One option that Rue does not explore in this text, although it was the basis of an earlier book, *By the Grace of Guile* (1994), is whether one path toward ecological sanity is to creatively deceive inherited traditions to use their own best resources against their more recalcitrant antiecollogical and antiscientific dimensions. This version of the noble lie was an attractive option for Rue in the past, but for him it may simply be too late for this strategy to work and, as the good pragmatist, he has jettisoned it in favor of his current scenario.

THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE FACE OF ENVIRONMENTAL COLLAPSE

Given the parameters established by Rue, what is the future of Christianity? It is clear from the foregoing that Rue believes some form of religious naturalism will eventually triumph as various traditions morph into a format more consistent with the common narrative of evolutionary theory, but, as he suggests in the book's closing pages, it is very difficult to imagine a pathway that does not entail some form of environmental collapse as the crucial motivating factor.

Environmental collapse has been on the minds of scientists for some time, but it is gaining momentum in current public and academic discourse. Jared Diamond's recent *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (2005) is exemplary. For Diamond we are already looking at collapse scenarios in some locations. In addition, we face serious new and synergistic difficulties with global warming, destruction of wildlife, its habitat, and genetic diversity, shortages of fresh water and arable land, urbanization, the loss of wild food sources on land and in the sea, global fossil fuel dependency and depletion, and the resulting political instabilities created by these forces. Diamond argues for a fairly direct correlation between environmental collapse and political instability in Afghanistan,

Bangladesh, Burundi, Haiti, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Madagascar, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Rwanda, the Solomon Islands, and Somalia (2005, 496–99). For both Diamond and Rue, the underlying causes of our environmental challenges are clear—there are too many humans expecting too much in their consumption behavior, so human societies constantly exceed the carrying capacities of their environments.

Of the two authors, Diamond seems to hold out more hope than Rue does for our abilities as a species to modify our behavior and muster the political will requisite to the task. Diamond underscores two very broad reasons for hope. He argues that (1) the environmental crisis is still within our control (probably on the basis of technological innovation, a belief he seems to share with Friedman) and (2) environmental thinking has been diffusing at a “very rapid rate” since the 1960s (2005, 521–22). He further elaborates a set of fundamental choices human beings must make in the very near future. One choice has to do with more attentiveness to long-term planning. This element of the argument is of less interest to us here since it is hard to imagine who would disagree with it, Rue included. The second choice entails what he calls “reconsideration of core values.” As we read further, Diamond seems to mean by this reconsideration that we need to make some painful decisions regarding environmental well-being and economic well-being as these have been traditionally defined in liberal economic theory. In Rue’s language from *Religion Is Not About God*, this process of values reassessment is called a reorganization of our goal hierarchies. Both authors have in mind that we need to redefine human well-being in such a manner that it does not lead to exceeding the planet’s carrying capacity.

The interesting thing about Diamond’s book, however, is that it ends exactly where Rue picks up. What Rue adds to Diamond’s treatment of collapse scenarios is essentially an analysis of the role of religion in motivating transformations of core values. Whereas in Diamond religion is for the most part invisible, or simply submerged in a larger amalgam of cultural forces, for Rue religion is front and center. In this difference, we may speculate, we could be looking at an explanation for their different assessments regarding humanity’s future. Rue is convinced that religion will be fundamental to the transformation of our core values, whereas Diamond identifies it as simply one among many cultural influences. For Rue, the cultural influence of religion is in serious decline, and therefore its ability to mobilize and justify any sacrifice is progressively limited. Add to this consideration the notoriously conservative nature of religious traditions when faced with change, and we begin to see our hopes for a powerful social transformation recede. For Diamond, by contrast, the decline of the plausibility of religious myths does not limit the ability of human beings to undertake values changes to the degree that it does for Rue. At least in *Collapse*, Diamond seems more interested in the biophysical realities of

geography and rainfall, soil depths, and rate of resource extraction than he is in religion. Thus, Diamond may be more optimistic because he estimates human value systems as more readily malleable than Rue. These differences should not be construed as too significant, however, for Rue clearly is open to the possibility of contributions from nonreligious cultural institutions, and Diamond clearly would welcome the contributions of religiously motivated institutions in addressing social and political agendas. It seems largely a difference in emphasis.

We can infer from Rue's interpretation that Christianity will continue to fragment in the face of both widespread environmental collapse and a growing awareness of religious pluralism. Some Christians will engage this pluralism as well as attempt to tackle the environmental crisis from within a traditional, orthodox theological position, and some will react against it by reasserting exclusivist and triumphalist doctrines. Apocalyptic scenarios are likely to be in ascendancy. Still others will make forays into naturalizing Christianity (and other religious traditions), becoming what we might call small-*c* cultural Christians (or whatever lowercase initial is appropriate to the religious tradition undergoing metamorphosis). We might even toy with the idea that some will engage in Rue-esque guile strategies while others will employ piecemeal components of the tradition such as, for example, a "faithful remnant" theology in the face of an impending eco-holocaust. In the end, ecological crisis will drive people into the arms of some version of religious naturalism for the simple reason that their survival will depend upon it. Environmental changes necessitate cultural evolution no less than biological evolution. Rue argues:

Religious Naturalism is already in the air, but it is not yet a robust mythic tradition because ancillary strategies are not in place to exert a full-court press on behavior mediating systems. We may see some movement in this direction during the coming decades, but it is unlikely that religious naturalism will become a dominant influence until the events of history render alternative mythic visions irrelevant and unpalatable. (2005, 366)

We cannot help but conclude that the future of Christianity will ultimately be to pass the baton to some scientifically informed, yet-to-be-determined religious naturalism.

GROWING RELIGIOUS NATURALISM OUT OF CHRISTIANITY

Suppose we were to speculate about what form a yet-to-be-determined religious naturalism would take. Such a religious naturalism would be an additional option on the landscape of choices populating the marketplace of ideas. Can we envision and even design a religion using Rue's theory of religion with components selected and optimized for coping with a set of environmental signals of significant decline or collapse? If Rue is correct that major environmental decline is a looming inevitability, would it not

make sense to anticipate this decline and begin to model now a religious vision to assist human beings to survive the transition? It seems to me that it does, although any such effort will be very speculative.

Rather than reinvent the wheel, we may employ Rue's theory of religion to understand what makes Christianity work for many people in today's society and to capitalize on these successful design features while avoiding aspects that disable our current perceptions of how badly our species is overshooting the world's carrying capacity. A Future Religious Naturalism (FRN) should not be shy about learning from other religious heritages and deploying those strategies wherever it aids its cause.

These thoughts take us well beyond where Rue leaves us at the close of his book and well beyond where Religious Studies can go. We enter here the realm of normative commitments and speculative thought experiments. In the following proposal, I do not explore all possible design options of a FRN. Nor do I speak as an academic, although I draw upon my academic expertise to craft a potentially viable religious vision. My thought experiment also does not suggest that there are not multiple viable forms of religious naturalism in the offing. Rather, I seek simply to employ Rue's general and naturalistic theory of religion as a template for the possible evolution of a novel cultural channel through which human religiosity might one day flow and recommend it for consideration to those convinced that we face overwhelming environmental problems. At most, the reader will discover my incomplete and groping efforts toward a frame of reference for the future. It is my hope that this picture will underscore the productivity of Rue's theory of religion for other thinkers interested in such pursuits.

Rue's theory of religion suggests that every religion evolves around a core myth or narrative that tells the story of the place of humanity within a larger picture of the world. A FRN will inevitably turn to cosmic and biological evolution for this grand narrative. The core inspirational feature of this narrative will be its capacity for emergence, the capacity of the universe to generate novel complexity from simpler forms. As Darwin saw grandeur in his contemplation and understanding of the interdependent species inhabiting a common river bank, so a FRN will cultivate a sense of wonder around the generosity of a universe characterized by emergence (Goodenough and Deacon 2003). The evolutionary picture drawn by the current state of our natural sciences is of a universe productive of marvelous novelty and complexity. From broken symmetries emerge physical laws, from physical laws emerge chemical properties, from chemistry emerges biology, from biology emerges psychology, and from psychology emerges human culture. What we call religion is that matrix of ideas and behaviors human beings produce when they look upon this complexity and seek to respond in manners appropriate to what we think ourselves to be and what we think we ought to live for. Historically, human beings have articulated their religious readings of and reactions to the universe

with the aid of systems populated by a variety of supernatural agencies, a schematization of the natural world that cooperated well with our evolved intuitive psychologies and social intelligence. Whereas historic religious supernaturalisms have often read in the complexity of the world the hand of one or more designing and intelligent agencies (the gods), a FRN grounded in the story of evolution will eschew such ascriptions in favor of the blind forces of natural law and the slow workings of reproduction, mutation, and competition. Rather than bemoan this insight as a denigration of the human species, a FRN will embrace this understanding as a token of our common kinship with all life. The core lesson will be the generosity of a nature that brought us forth. Employing Rue's theory as a template, if evolution is its grand narrative, emergence is the root metaphor of a FRN.

For Rue master narratives and their attendant metaphors serve to shape and direct human emotions toward helpful personal and social expressions. If evolution and emergence beat at the heart of a FRN, how might this shape and direct human emotions? Certainly, the exponents of evolution today regard the narrative as inspirational and uplifting. What greater gift can there be than to be a species endowed with the capacity to perceive, comprehend, and align itself with the very forces that have governed our universe for more than 12 billion years? To wrap one's mind around the immensities of space and time is to feel awe, wonder, and humility. To see how a small planet adrift in space could have nurtured in its bosom the grand experiment that is life is to peek into Darwin's "mystery of mysteries." To rest our eyes upon the landscapes of our lives and to understand how they have enabled the formation of creatures such as us is to sense a surging loyalty to the sustained vitality of these life-giving ecosystems. Evolution outlines the grand arc of cosmic events. It forms the incredible journey the world has undergone such that we improbable creatures could emerge. It informs us of the grounds of our ecological citizenship.

If Rue is correct that the principal task of religion is to violate the naturalistic fallacy by confusing facts and values, human beings will necessarily have to ask what emergence implies about us and what we can and ought to do in response to the evolution story. In other words, what novel value hierarchies can we derive from our common evolutionary story for how we should live? By far the most promising and immediate moral discourse to arise in this context is a form of neo-Aristotelian naturalism given a novel religious reinterpretation (Goodenough and Deacon 2003). A FRN will attempt to identify the conditions under which human beings flourish as natural participants in the evolutionary story and derive from that vision a set of practices by means of which we cultivate our personal and social well-being. The resultant list of virtues can then be applied to the manners in which we as individuals and collectivities negotiate a livelihood for ourselves on a planet adrift in a universe characterized by emergence. Liveli-

hoods can then be promoted or resisted on the basis of whether they cultivate or retard the virtues implied by a FRN.

Although emergence is characteristic of the universe we inhabit, it is not evenly distributed throughout it. Emergence is most likely at the boundary between specific degrees of order and chaos (Waldrop 1992, 198–240). Complexity studies in fields as diverse as animal and human behavior, particle physics, organic chemistry, and the neurosciences all point to particular mixtures of order and chaos where phase transitions are concentrated and nature's inherent capacity to experiment is maximized. My suggestion for religious naturalism's ethical framework is the cultivation of a *scientifically informed mindfulness* as a novel hybrid of meditation/introspection and empirical investigation. Science may then be reconceived as a form of training ground for various skills in the observation and manipulation of nature, with rich consequences for human satisfactions. Although this skill set is not usually conceived as a meditative task, and this clearly asks science to become something more for our species than it has been up to now, there seems no inherent reason that science cannot be used in this way. I am heartened, for example, by contemporary discourses around empathy in scientific discovery (Keller 1983).

One might speculate that such mindfulness would be suited to the subtle detections of an analog to "a golden ratio" of order to chaos, not unlike past myths of the Pythagoreans, Renaissance, and Daoist fascinations with alchemical moments, or Christian transubstantiation mythologies. In turn, the perception of these transformational birthings or emergences, celebrated in a FRN's myth and ritual, might serve well as an inspirational Aristotelian "golden mean" for human, ecological, and perhaps one day posthuman flourishing. Aristotle's famous notion of moral action as a balance between excess and defect could find a novel application as a consequence of the contemporary science of complexity studies. If an evolving planet is the birth mother of our existence, attentiveness to the processes of gestation in evolution will be the hallmark of any FRN. For a FRN no less than for traditional Aristotelian ethics, the golden mean is not a fixed standard so much as an aesthetic judgment of fitting responses given trained perception of the dynamics of any interlinked network of relationships. We may come to think of the scientific enterprise as itself a kind of school of virtue in the sense that it incarnates the disciplined pursuit of the mindfulness of nature. Whereas monastics traditionally have turned the task of mindfulness into an introspective examination of the mechanisms of consciousness, a FRN converts the universe at large into its monastery and extols mindful and reverent investigation of natural wonders, including our own emergence as linguistic and cultural beings. A FRN would then find its most important institutional expression in a novel form of this-worldly monasticism. By this-worldly I mean simply the absence of the

world-fleeing dimensions of traditional monastic communities and the cultivation of scientific pursuits.

Following Rue's theory, if this thought experiment in a FRN is to have any success, if it is to mature into a viable religious option with widespread appeal for large populations, it will have to evolve ancillary strategies that Rue designates as the intellectual, the ritual, the experiential, the aesthetic, and the institutional domains. Any fully mature religious naturalism will have to exhibit robust expressions in each of these areas. In this context, I want merely to suggest what I think are promising routes for Christianity to contribute to a FRN across these domains.

Of the many aspects of received Christianity, I underscore the positive and negative "feedback loops" contained in the notions of sacrament and sacrifice. In the Christian tradition, sacrament is the locus of transformational gift, a unity of infinite and finite in a moment of relational encounter. By contrast, sacrifice is the negative or limiting factor that calls humanity to renounce various dimensions of life for the sake of the well-being of the collective. Variations of this fundamental and dynamic equilibrium between sacrament and sacrifice may be found in the liturgical seasons of Lent and Easter, the rituals of offering and the Lord's Supper, or the theological categories of crucifixion and resurrection. I turn first to the idea of sacrifice and second to the tradition of sacramentality.

Sacrifice. Anthropologist Scott Atran (2002, 114–46) suggests that to function religion depends upon a basic sense of sacrifice. Sacrifice is a form of social signaling, communicating to members that one is serious and invested in the cooperative undertakings of a community. Such sacrifices must be both costly to the individual and hard to fake so that community members can be reassured that no freeloading is taking place. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the story of Abraham and Isaac is emblematic of the transactions I am thinking of here, but most traditional Christian atonement theories also seem to have a mercantile tit-for-tat logic to them. In most religions, according to Atran, social cohesion appears to be achieved best by dramatic, public signals of continued commitment through personal sacrifices—tithing, undergoing personal bodily injury or permanent marking, fasting, and the like. Religious participants envision a variety of benefits from communal cooperation, but the cost of these benefits is the willingness to forgo many narrower self-interests for the sake of communal strength. We clearly see here what Rue calls "overlaps of self-interest" for social well-being. In Atran's terminology, religions function as social entities because they cooperate, and this cooperation enables more robust competition in the landscape of cultural options.

A FRN is motivated at least in part by a deep sense of humanity's overshoot of the earth's life-support systems. Unless humanity can find rather direct and immediate measures to curtail its population growth and con-

sumption patterns, a collapse pattern seems almost assured. In religious language, what naturalists are calling for is a form of sacrifice for the sake of social well-being, where the social entity with which we are called to cooperate is recast in evolutionary and ecological terms.

The greatest difficulty facing a FRN is to persuade human beings to identify their self-interests with the interests of other species, landscapes, and ecologies. Humanity seems unwilling or unable to give up some features of its current behavior for the sake of ecological sanity, either because it is not convinced it is endangered or because it lacks the cultural resources to identify with the nonhuman world. The evolutionary story's chief virtue is that it trains its devotees to understand that without the continuing vitality of a complex and interconnected ecological life support system no human well-being is possible.

The power of Christianity resides in its ability to mobilize sacrificial behavior by patterning good human life on the atoning killing of one person as a perfect offering, freely given, to a deity. This offering signals to the community the self-sacrificial commitment of a supernatural agent, namely the vicarious donation embodied in the person of Jesus. Because this being is willing to sacrifice "his only begotten son" for the sake of restoring covenantal unity, human prosocial emotions are heavily activated and human beings are invited into emulation of this exemplary act. Christians are to embrace the gift of grace bestowed by divine sacrifice and become themselves conduits for further social signaling, that is, for extensive sacrifices for the sake of their religion. Christianity is hugely successful as a religion precisely in this regard, especially given the anthropomorphic language in which these social exchanges are transacted. The image of innocent suffering for the sake of others plays on human social emotions and unleashes powerful human responses.

A FRN, however, cannot use these mechanisms of folk psychology and anthropomorphism to encourage solidarity and group cohesion. In the absence of an anthropomorphic deity, what might it employ? One obvious suggestion is the so-called Gaia hypothesis—the mythologizing of the planet as a singular superorganism. A FRN could mythologize the planet as a secular and ecological superorganism and thereby activate and harness human prosocial behaviors, which could then be employed to encourage human sacrifice for the sake of Gaia's (the planet's) well-being. Many religious naturalists are likely to resist this move, however, because the choice of a FRN will be motivated in part by its abandonment of the anthropomorphic imagery of past religions, and the Gaia hypothesis smacks of superstitious thinking. Nevertheless, it is difficult to conceive of a successful FRN that does not use our evolved theory of mind architecture in some fashion to posit some meta-entity with which we can at least minimally relate. Especially when we consider the domain of sacrifice and its presupposed mechanisms of psychological identification, some totemic emblem

such as “Gaia” seems very attractive. Certainly, the track records of the world religions indicate that identification is most readily accomplished through the ascription of anthropomorphic elements. A FRN ought not to abandon it out of hand despite any scruples it may have.

The idea of sacrifice and inherent limitations on humanity would need to be reinforced across all of Rue’s domains. It would require aesthetic appreciation of the value of ecological limits, balance, equilibrium, and death itself in the economy of life. In the experiential domain, a FRN would cultivate intense emotional identification through constant exposure to nonhuman species as well as the sublimation of sacrificial pain in the cycles of predation at the heart of various food chains. Further, it would require the establishment of novel institutional structures that both celebrate and police the emergent ecospirituality and nature mysticism. A FRN would most likely have close association with ecologically minded public and private sector institutions as well as a deep investment in integrating its own bureaucratic expressions into scientific and policy institutions. Finally, it would require novel craftings of myths and their intellectual exploration by a cadre of professional storytellers and nature intelligentsia well versed in both the evolutionary history of the universe and the planet and the behavior of complex adaptive systems (emergence).

Sacrament. The second great strength of Christianity, or at least many branches of it (some eschew overt sacramental celebration), is its emphasis on sacramentality. Sacramentalism in Christianity is premised on the idea that a small and finite thing can stand in the place of, and make experientially present to communicants, a massive and infinite thing (*finitum capax infiniti*) (Smith 1995, 941–43). Historically, this sacramentality principle has been embedded in a cosmological dualism such that the infinite is conceived as an invader of natural processes.

For a FRN, there is no reason for it to remain so encoded. Indeed, it cannot remain so encoded if the lessons of naturalism are to be preserved. To paraphrase a famous statement of process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, there is no reason that we need to invoke a transcendent power as an exception to natural laws when we could simply invoke it as their chief exemplification.¹² Sacraments can be just as readily engaged symbolically as especially pregnant examples of emergent properties as they have been employed to invoke supernatural agencies. For example, the wonder of bread and wine in a Christian communion ritual may be conceived as incarnating a deity “in, with, and under” their material presence, as my traditional Lutheran upbringing taught me, or the wonder can be in the common yet powerful realities of the vast history of human agriculture, wheat domestication, and fruit juice fermentation. Emergence saturates many steps in this long narrative—the mental rewiring required to invest artifacts with symbolic standing, the transition from foraging to settled

agrarian communities at the heart of our species' success, the digestive processes of yeast strains giving birth to the human appreciation of leavened bread and fermented liquids, the communal behaviors of feeding and being fed, and so on—and all of these may be reinscribed into the sacramental moment as dramatic examples of emergent properties of humanity's deep evolutionary past. The ritualistic and communal attentiveness to the identification and celebration of moments of something-more-from-nothing-but holds vast potential for religious engagement and satisfaction. The road seems clear for a FRN to exploit the design potentials of the sacrament for its own purposes, bridging the transition from supernaturalistic Christianity to novel religious naturalisms.

In fact, there is no clear reason why sacramentality need be limited to what is simply known from our evolutionary past. Emergence is a phenomenon of surprise, of novel behaviors of complex, interdependent systems, and this surprise may be incorporated into a FRN, enamored of its appearance in unexpected places. Science trains its practitioners in the aesthetic sensibilities to suspect “something” might be in this or that hypothesis. The well-designed experiment is celebrated by scientists precisely because it brings to the scientific community's attention some fundamental feature of the natural world that has gone undetected up to that point. In complexity studies, the search is for the right combination of networked elements to produce group-level properties that were not there before the networking occurred—something more from nothing but. Can we imagine a religious devotional system wherein these aesthetic sensibilities would be trained for ritual-communal use? Would not a churchlike worship of the emergence of Bernard convection cells, Belousov-Zhabotinski reactions, computer-aided musical algorithms, firefly synchronization, and so on be successful in provoking the awe, wonder, gratitude, and humility of religious devotion? I am relatively optimistic that it could do just that, and even that it should.

Again, this version of the sacramental principle would require intense deployment throughout Rue's ancillary strategies. An eco-intelligentsia would work out the range of philosophical and psychological consequences of a this-worldly sacramental system. Artists would exploit the dynamics of emergence for their aesthetic creations so that when communicants gathered, they would be coming into a ritual space already structured by their aesthetic expectations. Ritual specialists and priests would think about the theatrical presentation of sacramental tokens of emergence. Networks of religious organizations would link to foster the creative ebullience of productivity in this cultural miming of natural processes. If emergence truly is a fundamental feature of the evolutionary story, FRN would align itself with these principles to allow itself to evolve culturally. To the degree that a network of mutually connected cultural enclaves could intentionally “side” with their own evolutionary processes, we begin to see what a naturalist

“doctrine of salvation” might be. Grace and gratitude abound in the community open to its own evolution.

Taken together, sacrifice and sacrament would constitute the positive and negative feedback loops of a sustainable cultural “reaction.” If sacrament is the giftedness of nature’s creativity brought into the attention of our species, sacrifice is freely embraced experience of limitation. As the woof and weave of a new cultural fabric, they would yield a strength that neither could achieve alone, and that would direct cultural evolution in pathways hopefully more sustainable than our current ecological suicide.

These imaginative speculations are not a religion but only a groping toward a religion of the future guided by the best knowledge Religious Studies can offer. Like evolution’s own processes, I have sought to tinker opportunistically with the cultural inheritances we have received from Christianity while allowing Rue’s theory of religion and his concerns for humanity’s unsustainable trajectory to guide my hand. In the design space created by Rue’s insightful analysis of religion, many variations are possible, and I propose my draft as only one among many. But these musings may entice others to engage in the same form of speculation. In such small ways, larger cultural constructs are built, and perhaps even with enough cleverness to attract conversion before that conversion is forced by a radical decline in the health of the planet. With sagacious mappings like Rue’s book, we may be one step closer to a novel stage in religion’s own cultural evolution.

CONCLUSION

Loyal Rue’s *Religion Is Not About God* is a *tour-de-force* argument for a naturalistic explanation of religion, an argument premised on the results of current evolutionary theory and the various sciences of human nature. These findings not only support the possibility of a naturalistic accounting of religion, they positively demand one if Religious Studies is to remain engaged and academically credible in the current academy. The application of his theory of religion to Christianity raises serious questions about the long-term viability of a naturalized Christianity. In particular, if the naturalistic account of religion underscores that religion is really about us, our personal and social well-being, and does not support the anthropomorphizing of the universe with our values, desires, and species attributes, it is difficult to see how the metaphor of the personhood of God can be sustained under the constant attention of the natural sciences. There seem to be fewer and fewer gaps through which a supernatural agency can peek. To the extent that Christianity is dependent on that trope, it seems that Christianity, and all the Abrahamic monotheisms, will be the cultural loser in the religion-and-science dialogue. The two paths envisioned by Rue

seem to be either a philosophically nonrealistic, small-*c* Christian movement or one that attempts to trick the tradition to work against itself by creatively yet deceptively using its vocabulary to chart new directions.

Rue's book ends with speculations about a potential environmental collapse and the role such a collapse might play in transforming human religious consciousness. I have attempted to take on that challenge and think my way into a novel cultural configuration radically reshaped by the sensibilities engendered of an ecologically more informed future. I recommend Rue's book, and indeed his larger corpus, to anyone interested in attempting similar paths.

NOTES

A version of this essay was prepared for the Annual Meeting of the Society of Christian Ethics, Phoenix, Arizona, 8 January 2006. Critical readings of the draft were made by Loyal Rue, Michael Cavanaugh, Ted Laurensen, Ursula Goodenough, Philip Hefner, Art Francis, and Jeff Dahms. I thank them for their time and keen insight.

1. A manifestolike statement of religious naturalism is as follows:

"We find our sources of meaning within the natural world, where humans are understood to be emergent from and hence a part of nature. Our religious quest is informed and guided by the deepening and evolving understandings fostered by scientific inquiry. It is also informed and guided by the mindful understandings inherent in our human traditions, including art, literature, philosophy, and the religions of the world.

"The natural world and its emergent manifestations in human creativity and community are the focus of our immersion, wonder, and reverence. We may describe our religious sensibilities using various words that have various connotations—like the sacred, or the source, or god—but it is our common naturalistic orientation that generates our shared sense of place, gratitude, and joy.

"We acknowledge as well a shared set of values and concerns pertaining to peace, justice, dignity, cultural and ecological diversity, and planetary sustainability. We may differ on how these concerns are best addressed, but we are committed to participating in their resolution." (<http://www.religiousnaturalism.org>)

2. It is my suspicion that scholars who specialize in any of these religious traditions will find much to criticize, but I believe that these criticisms will have more to do with standard criticisms of specialists directed against general theories. Rue's intention in the book is to display how a general theory of religion can illuminate basic patterns in large-scale religious traditions. By definition, general theories of religion will be disappointing to specialists because they classify, streamline, and reduce complexity to underlying commonalities. Any scientific theory of the origins and functions of religion in the human species will reduce diversity and nuance to structure. The real question is not whether Rue addresses the vast array of expressions of living religions but whether he, or anyone dedicated to his theory, among whom I would number myself, can, when pushed, traverse the distance between generalization and specificity.

3. I contend that it is in this context that the much-debated final section of the book, "In the End, Irony" (pp. 367–68), is best understood. Rue's point is that ultimate explanations are simply to be received with high degrees of skepticism. Nevertheless, more proximate explanations, pragmatically negotiated among religions and the best scientific accountings of reality, are still to be sought and to be held in high regard. Current cosmology and evolutionary thinking may not be the final word, but it is the best we have. Moreover, this body of knowledge has proven itself pragmatically and empirically superior to most rival accountings.

4. I refer the interested reader to the March 2006 issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (Vol. 74, no. 1), which is entirely dedicated to the question of the future of the study of religion in the academy.

5. Russell McCutcheon (2003) has been especially forceful in his arguments for this development.

6. As I read Rue, his position on a “consilient scientific materialism” does not differ markedly from E. O. Wilson’s book-length treatment in *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (1998). In fact, Wilson acknowledges Rue as one of the readers/commentators on an early draft of *Consilience* (p. 322). It would not be an exaggeration to say that the consilience of knowledge is a driving impulse for Rue’s theory of religion.

7. Rue first made this point in *Amythia: Crisis in the History of Western Culture* (1989). On modernization and changes in global values, see Inglehart 2000, an article that depends upon a global survey process spanning more than a quarter of a century and 61 nations. I owe my awareness of this ambitious project to Bob McCue.

8. The famous line is “Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist” (Dawkins [1986] 1996, 6).

9. It is either really bad news or really good news for those of us in Religious Studies that there is almost nothing I can offer students these days that they cannot find for free on the Internet. For a fascinating collection of essays on how the Worldwide Web is changing religion and the search for religious information, see Hoelsgaard and Warburg 2005.

10. It is not my intention to nominate Friedman for an environmental heroism award. In my estimation, his vision of globalization is far too optimistic, his enthusiasm for technology’s ability to solve pressing social needs and problems too sanguine. But the point is that he does not need to be a heroic environmentalist to be of use to the pragmatic search for help where help can be found.

11. The viability of using evolution as the source of a compelling mythic narrative may be judged by various recent efforts to craft an “inspirational” human story. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry undertook a mythologized version of cosmic evolution in *The Universe Story* (1992). More recently, Richard Dawkins has written *The Ancestor’s Tale* (2004). Stephen Baxter’s *Evolution* (2003) attempts to tell the story of hominid evolution in dramatic or narrative fashion. Of the three titles, Dawkins’s project is the least interested in overt mythologizing, yet even he engages in poetic impulses when he constructs his narrative as a retelling of *The Canterbury Tales* complete with pilgrimage overtones. Each of these stories engages in varying degrees of poetic license and anthropomorphism to intensify the identification human readers will feel with nonhuman processes, to bridge the gap between the understanding of physical and biological processes and human sensations of moral loyalty. For example, Baxter’s book opens with a proposed conference on the “globalization of human empathy” where the fate of humanity hangs on the question of whether humans can expand their sense of moral commitment beyond the merely human sphere. For Rue, the task of religion is to commit the naturalistic fallacy, that is, to fuse human morality and amoral reality in a single story. Religious stories succeed to the extent that this con-fusion of fact and value is compelling and encourages humanity to reorient its behavior in manners conducive to survival. It seems to me that these three books, and probably others of which I am not aware, pursue just this agenda and deserve a place in a future religious naturalism’s (FRN) canonical deliberations.

12. I am referring to Whitehead’s famous ontological principle as he applies it to God as an actual entity: “In the first place, God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save their collapse. He is their chief exemplification” (Whitehead 1978, 343).

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