Religion without the Supernatural

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Before I begin I’d like to thank the planning committee for inviting me to participate in the New Perspectives program, not only once, but for a second time. These invitations have nudged my professional research in new directions. They have also been amazingly timely.

The first time Don Blosser contacted me to see if I would be interested in participating the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins had just visited Michigan State University. I was troubled by his argument that religious believers were not only mistaken to believe in God, but morally wrong to do so as well. I was even more disturbed by his attack on agnostics, which I considered myself to be. If you recall, I used the opportunity offered by New Perspectives to present a defense of agnosticism.

As I continued to write about agnosticism I realized that what troubled me most about Dawkins and his anti-religion polemic was that it was an attempt to close off rather than encourage dialogue. My defense of agnosticism was a response to this; it was an attempt to keep a space open for dialogue between theism and atheism. I wrestled with this issue for over a year and when I gave a paper on it last June at the annual meeting of the Highlands Institute for American Religious and Philosophical Thought I felt I had said pretty much everything I wanted to say about the topic. However, I was caught off guard when one of the participants asked me the following question during the question and answer period: “So now that you’ve
made the space for dialogue, how do you recommend we fill it?” It was a good question, but I did not have a good answer. It was not long after that that Don contacted me to ask if I would consider participating in the New Perspectives series for a second time. Here was my excuse to develop an answer.

So tonight I am grateful for this opportunity to share my first stab at an answer with a friendly and thoughtful audience. I am also humbled, for my work is not nearly complete. I’ve come to think of the project of as a task of intellectual cartography, intellectual map making. Right now it is very much a work in progress. I am mapping out the contours of the space between theism and atheism, but I haven’t filled in the details yet. If it were a roadmap, you’d see the major cities and interstate highways, but not the smaller towns and two-lane roads. Tonight I want to explore part of this space with you, not as an expert tour guide, but as someone who has been traveling through a new area and is now excited to explore it with friends.

The area I’d like to explore with you is the region of religious naturalism. Before we start on the journey, I want to help you get oriented by drawing the general outlines of the region. The boundaries are not marked by sharp lines, but they can be roughly distinguished by two shared commitments (Stone 2002: 382-83). The first is a commitment to naturalism, to the premise that we should look to the natural world, rather than some supernatural realm to explain and give meaning to our experience. The second is the claim that this commitment to naturalism does not preclude religion, that there can be authentic religious responses to the world that do not depend on the existence of a supernatural realm.
The region of religious naturalism is a relatively new region. Though its roots go back to the 17th century, I think it is fair to say that it emerged as a more recognizable theological movement in the first half of the 20th century. However, it was not until the 1980’s and 90’s that the term, “religious naturalism” was used consistently to designate a set of views emerging from a wide ranging conversation between theologians, scientists, and philosophers of religion. Gordon Kaufman, whose work many of you may be familiar with, made important contributions to these conversations up until his death this past summer.

Here’s a brief outline of how I’d like to proceed. First, I will define “naturalism” and explain how one might think of religion naturalistically. Second, I’ll use the concept of a naturalized religion to explain my reservations regarding supernatural religion. Third, I’ll sketch out what an alternative, religious naturalism, might look like. And finally, I’ll briefly identify what I take to be some of the key issues that need to be addressed.

I. Naturalism

What is Naturalism?

To explain how I will be using the term “naturalism” it will be helpful to think of the root word “natural” and some of the ways it is used. First, we sometimes use the term “natural” to refer to that which is ordinary or typical, in contrast to “unnatural” which refers to that which is

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1 The list usually includes a number of scholars at the University of Chicago School of Divinity – e.g., Henry Nelson Wieman, Bernard Melan, Bernard Loomer, George Burman Foster, Edward Schribner Ames, and Shailer Matthews as well as other. For more details see Stone’s recent book, Religious Naturalism Today: The Rebirth of a Forgotten Alternative (Stone 2009).

unusual, atypical, or out of the ordinary. This is obviously not the sense in which I want to use “natural” or “naturalism” tonight.

A second way in which we use the term “natural” is in contrast with “artificial.” The word “artificial” implies skillful or artful contrivance; the application of cleverness or ingenuity. What we’re getting at here is the contrast between things that come to be without human involvement and those things that are created through the intentional work of human intelligence. We’re drawing a contrast between the non-human and the human; between nature and culture.³ Again, however, this is not the sense in which I want to use the words “natural” or “naturalism” tonight.

The naturalism to which I am referring tonight relies on yet a third contrast, the contrast between the natural and the supernatural. The basic claim of “naturalism” understood in this sense is that the natural world is the whole of reality, everything that is. It is the claim that there is no supernatural realm distinct and separate from the natural world. Typically it is associated with materialism or physicalism, the view that everything in the universe is composed of the same basic constituents and that these constituents are all physical or material.

³ One could build a religion based on worship of the natural world or natural order. Some have even argued that the modern environmentalist movement is a religion of nature in this sense. Several years ago author Michael Crichton gave a speech entitled, “Environmentalism as Religion” in which he argued that the modern environmentalist movement was a religion that remapped Judeo-Christian beliefs and myths onto a view of our relationship to nature.

“There’s an initial Eden, a paradise, a state of grace and unity with nature, there’s a fall from grace into a state of pollution as a result of eating from the tree of knowledge, and as a result of our actions there is a judgment day coming for us all. We are all energy sinners, doomed to die, unless we seek salvation, which is now called sustainability. Sustainability is salvation in the church of the environment. Just as organic food is its communion, that pesticide-free wafer that the right people with the right beliefs imbibe” (Crichton 2009: 15).
One way to better understand this sense of “naturalism” is to think about what it says is and is not included in the natural world. The natural world includes everything that we know of and interact with. It includes not only the non-human things we often associate with nature, but also humans, human culture, and human mental life, all of which are material or dependent on material things. Thus, there is literally nothing outside of the natural world. The supernatural world understood as a realm of immaterial beings simply does not exist. Thus, naturalism would rule out what we often think of as non-corporeal entities such as souls or spirits, as well as the immaterial personal God of the Western monotheisms.

Naturalism understood in this sense makes the claim that the best and most reliable way to know the world is through the empirical sciences broadly construed. It distrusts or finds meaningless claims that cannot, at least theoretically, be verified through the application of these sciences.

I need to make one brief comment about my own position. Naturalism as I have described it makes some pretty brash ontological claims, that is claims about what sorts of things do and do not exist. I am always suspicious of such claims as they seem to overstep the bounds of what a close adherence to the empirical sciences would actually support. Thus, I am not making an argument that no supernatural entity or entities exist. I am, as I explained the last time I was here, agnostic on that matter. However, I am accepting naturalism in a methodological sense – without sufficient empirical evidence to the contrary I am assuming that there are no supernatural entities.
Naturalizing Religion

My guess is that while the notion of naturalism may be at least somewhat familiar to you, the idea of religious naturalism is probably less so. It may even strike you as an oxymoron. Isn’t naturalism a rejection of supernaturalism and, thus, of religion? How can you have a religion without the supernatural?

Before addressing these questions directly I need to say something about how a commitment to naturalism affects one’s view of religion. Implicit in naturalism is the claim that religion and religious experiences are natural phenomena for which we could offer natural explanations. In his book, Religion is not about God, philosopher Loyal Rue explains that a naturalistic theory of religion is one that “reduces religious experience and expressions to the status of natural events having natural causes. As such, a naturalistic theory of religion seeks to understand religious phenomena by using categories, concepts, principles, and methods compatible with the ones normally applied to non-religious domains of human behavior” (Rue 2005: 2).

Rue is certainly not the first person to naturalize religion. The notion that we should study religion as a natural phenomenon goes back at least to David Hume4, Ludwig Feuerbach5, and Sigmund Freud6. For the most part these represent what we would now call anthropological or psychological explanations for religion. More recently scholars have turned to evolutionary biology to account for religion.7 Many, if not most, of these attempts to

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4 See Natural History of Religion (1757), and Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (1779).
5 See The Essence of Christianity (1841).
6 See The Future of an Illusion (1927) and Civilization and its Discontents (1930).
7 One of the more well-know hostile attempts is Daniel Dennett’s 2006 book, Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon (Dennett 2007).
naturalize religion are not particularly friendly towards it. In fact, I think it would be fair to say that many strive not only to explain religion, but to explain it away.

A naturalized account of religion, however, need not be hostile to it. Rue is a good example. He provides a naturalistic account of religion, not with the goal of explaining it away, but of reconstructing religion in such a way that it can address the needs of the 21st century.\textsuperscript{8}

While Rue appeals to a variety of sciences in making his argument, evolutionary biology provides the overarching framework. He takes religion in its most general form to be a complex set of human behaviors that have evolved to promote both individual fulfillment and social cohesion. Thus, the opening paragraph of his book both poses and answers the question he hopes to generate from the title of his book.

“If religion is not about God, then what on earth is it about (for heaven’s sake)? It is about us. It is about manipulating our brains so that we might think, feel, and act in ways that are good for us, both individually and collectively. Religious traditions work like the bow of a violin, playing upon the strings of human nature to produce harmonious relations between individuals and their social and physical environments. Religions have always been about the business of adaptation, and they will always remain so” (Rue 2005: 1, emphasis in the original).

How do religions fulfill these twin functions of individual fulfillment and social cohesion? They do so by providing an overarching mythic narrative that integrates a cosmology with an axiology, that is, an understanding of how things really are and what things really matter.

These myths are supported and transmitted through a variety of “ancillary strategies,”

\textsuperscript{8}“... this book is not meant to be hostile to the religious life. Indeed, I hope the opposite message will come through clearly – that is, I regard religion generally to be a salutary thing. Religious phenomena are everywhere present in human life, and will undoubtedly remain so. As far as anyone can tell – and there is plenty of evidence to the point – there has never been a coherent human culture without a religious tradition. Religion comes naturally to human beings. It is a ‘given’, an important universal feature of human affairs. God or not. This book should therefore not be seen as an attempt to undermine religious sensibilities. If anything, it hopes to kindle insights that will enable us to deepen them” (Rue 2005: 3)
mechanisms “designed to assure that the narrative core will continue to be replicated indefinitely in the minds of individuals” (Rue 2005: 126). According to Rue, in the context of religion these include intellectual, aesthetic, experiential, ritual, and institutional strategies.

It is important to reemphasize that in explaining religion in this way, Rue is not explaining it away. To the contrary, he views it is a powerful and useful adaptive strategy. However, particular religions, he argues can “sometimes outlive their adaptive utility and occasionally become positive threats to human survival” (Rue 2005: 1). For this reason he follows his general account of religion with a discussion of the central myths and ancillary strategies employed in five prominent religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. His concludes that these myths, and thus the religions based on them, are inadequate to meet the challenges, particularly the social and environmental challenges currently facing us. In other words, they are no longer adaptive.

Why Not Supernatural Religion?

We don’t have time here to fully explore any of these myths or Rue’s analysis of them in detail tonight. However, it is worth looking briefly at the Christian mythic tradition in order to show how this notion of myth works and explain why I think that a mythic tradition based on supernaturalism is no longer adequate.

The Christian Mythic Tradition

At the heart of the Christian myth is the metaphor of God as person. On the one hand, God is wholly transcendent, that is separate from the world. On the other hand God relates to the world and the beings in it in notably personal ways. God loves, cares for, communicates
with, gets angry and frustrated with, and even enters into covenant with the beings that God has created. The Christian mythic narrative is built around this metaphor of a personal God in relationship with creation. It is the story of creation, alienation, and reconciliation.

Creation: The story begins with God creating the universe out of nothing – “creatio ex nihilo” and this creation was good. Among all the creatures humans enjoyed a special relationship to God. They were created in God’s image with free will and responsibility for both themselves and the rest of creation.

Alienation/fall: Though God’s creation was initially good, it did not remain this way. It was corrupted by the original human act of hubris. Humans disobeyed God by eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and as a result were left to face the challenges of survival in a fallen world. This event marked the start of a new, and often tumultuous, relationship between God and humanity.

Reconciliation: In response to continued disobedience God sent a great flood destroying all but a remnant of creation, the remnant saved on Noah’s ark. After the flood God made a covenant with Noah.

The repeated pattern of alienation and reconciliation: Humans soon disobeyed again and were alienated from God. However, this time God established a covenant with Abraham. If Abraham would obey God, then God would make him the father to a great nation. The ongoing relationship between God and God’s chosen people was marked by human disobedience followed by punishment and tragedy, (e.g., enslavement by Egypt, exile to Babylon), followed by a renewal of the covenant (e.g., deliverance from slavery, return from
exile). The three great monotheistic religions – Christianity, Judaism, and Islam – accept much, though not all, of the same narrative up to this point.

In Christianity, however, the narrative takes a fundamental turn in the person of Jesus as God incarnate. In this event God takes human form as Jesus of Nazareth. Through his life, death, and resurrection God ultimately reconciles the world to Godself, forgiving the balance of debt owed for ongoing disobedience. In response Christians are to bring the gospel of salvation to the world until the time when Jesus returns to bring a final victory.

This version of the Christian narrative I just provided is clearly a myth. That does not mean it is false, it simply means that it is a story that provides us with an explanation of why things are the way they are, that is a cosmology, and what should matter to us, an axiology. The world exists because God created it, humans are special because they are created in God’s image, there is pain and suffering in the world because of human sin, etc. What should matter to us is our relationship to God and obedience to God’s will.

According to Rue, adherents to a mythic tradition, such as Christianity, need not take every part of its myth literally, but they must take it to be realistic in some sense. In particular, it is important that the root metaphor be taken literally. This is where he believes the problem lies for Christianity. Rue argues that its mythic tradition has been compromised because a realistic interpretation of the root metaphor – God as person – is no longer tenable.

**Problems with the Christian Mythic Tradition**

Why is this metaphor no longer tenable? Over the next few minutes I’m going to offer three reasons why I think the metaphor is problematic. Rue concurs with me on the first two
problems. The third is implicit in a concern that permeates his work, a concern for the environment, but he does not mention it explicitly.

The first problem is that the increasing explanatory power of the sciences makes appeals to supernatural agency to explain our world less plausible.\textsuperscript{9} Contemporary science simply provides us with a more coherent cosmology. This is not to say that science has, or is even able to answer all questions. There are phenomena, such as consciousness, for which science has not yet been able to offer a fully adequate naturalistic explanation. Moreover, there are questions, such as “Why is there something rather than nothing?” that science may never be able answer. However, there is no need to fill in these gaps with a supernatural agent.\textsuperscript{10} As the explanatory power of the sciences has increased we more and more accept the general methodology of the sciences as the best means to acquire knowledge of the world.

\textsuperscript{9} According to theologian Gordon Kaufman, “The modern idea of ‘universe’ or ‘world’ is an all-inclusive one, the idea of all there is, the structured totality of all that exists. To speak, then, of some reality or being – God – who exists somehow beyond the world, transcending it as its creator and lord, not only strains credulity; it borders on being unintelligible” (Kaufman 1993: 45-46, emphasis in the original; Stone 2004).

\textsuperscript{10} The persistence of unanswered questions has prompted some religious believers to employ what is called a “God of the gaps” argument. The argument is that God is the explanation for unexplained or seemingly unexplainable phenomena. However, this has proven to be an unsuccessful argument for supernaturalism. The problem is that the strategy places science and religion in competition as two alternative approaches to explaining the same phenomena. As science has expanded its explanatory range over the last 400 years it has filled in many of the gaps previously filled by God with naturalistic explanations.

This suggests another strategy, one employed notably by the late Stephen J. Gould. His strategy, called Non-overlapping Magisteria or NOMA for short, was to take science and religion out of competition by claiming that they work on different issues in different non-overlapping domains. Science deals with questions of fact and theory, what is the universe made of and why does it work the way it does, whereas religion deals with questions of ultimate meaning and value. Here is how Gould describes the two domains.

“The net, or magisterium, of science covers the empirical realm: what is the universe made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory). The magisterium of religion extends over questions of ultimate meaning and moral value. These two magisteria do not overlap, nor do they encompass all inquiry (consider, for example the magisterium of art and the meaning of beauty). To cite the old clichés, science gets the age of rocks, and religion the rock of ages; science studies how the heavens go, religion how to get to heaven” (Gould, quoted by Dawkins (Dawkins 2008: 78-79)).\textsuperscript{10}

While this might seem like a strategy that resolves the tension between science and religion, I am not at all sure that it works. It is certainly true that religion deals with questions of ultimate meaning and value, but it inevitably does so within a larger context of or worldview that includes claims about what the universe is made of and how it
The second problem emerges not from the myth’s encounter with science, but from its encounter with other mythic traditions. The increasing awareness of religious pluralism draws our attention to the historical and cultural contingency of all mythic traditions and, as a result, makes it more difficult for Christians to interpret their myth literally. It makes it difficult for Christianity, or any other mythic tradition for that matter, to make an exclusive claim to truth. Unfortunately, this has not stopped religions from making truth claims about the nature of reality and how we are to live in light of it, claims that often conflict with the claims of other religious traditions. Moreover, because we shield these claims with the amour of faith and divine revelation, there is no way to adjudicate them through the use of reason and evidence. In western style democracies we respond to these conflicts by enforcing a truce of sorts, a truce established by prioritizing tolerance over truth. We agree to disagree, to tolerate the religious views of others as long as they tolerate ours. This is, however, an uneasy truce. It does not resolve the tension between the conviction that you know the truth about what God wants from us and that you should be tolerant of the beliefs that contradict this truth. Far too often the truce fails and violence results. While the New Atheists probably exaggerate the harm done in the name of religion, I think our sordid human history supports the claim that there are few things more dangerous as claims to truth based on divine revelation.

The third problem is that the “theological anthropology” – i.e., the attempt to describe the relationship between God, humans, and the world – of the Christian mythic tradition is both inconsistent with contemporary science and ecologically damaging. The theological works. So while religion may ask questions that science does not address, it does not do so independently of the questions that science does address. In other words, the domains overlap.
anthropology of the Christian tradition is dualistic and hierarchical. (The same is true for Judaism and Islam.) It depicts the universe as being comprised of both spiritual and physical realms, and prioritizes the spiritual over the physical. The spiritual realm is superior, pure, eternal, and immutable; the physical world is inferior, impure, transient, and changeable. The creator God is clearly a spiritual being, whereas the created or natural world is composed mostly of physical things. The one exception is humanity. Humans fall somewhere in between God and the natural world. We are physical beings created to live in the natural world, but we are also spiritual beings who are never truly at home in the physical world. We are pilgrims wandering from our temporary physical home, to our eternal spiritual home. Think of all the hymns, spirituals, and gospel songs that provide us with assurance that when we die we will go to our true home. Here are just a couple of examples. The first stanza from the spiritual “Wayfaring Stranger” (Unknown)

I'm just a poor wayfaring stranger
Traveling through, this world alone
There's no sickness, toil nor danger
In that bright land, to which I go

Chorus
I'm going there to see my mother/father
I'm going there no more to roam
I'm only going over Jordan
I'm only going over home

Or consider the lyrics to one of my favorite gospel tunes, “I'll Fly Away” (Unknown)

Some glad morning when this life is o'er,
I'll fly away;
To a home on God's celestial shore,
I'll fly away (I'll fly away).
Chorus
I'll fly away, Oh Glory
I'll fly away; (in the morning)
When I die, Hallelujah, by and by,
I'll fly away (I'll fly away).

When the shadows of this life have gone,
I'll fly away;
Like a bird from prison bars has flown,
I'll fly away (I'll fly away)

What's wrong with this theological anthropology? First of all, it isn't consistent with what science tells us about our place in the universe. I will say more about this later, but for now suffice it to say that contemporary science suggests that we are very much a part of this world. In fact, we are products of it. We may be unique in important ways, but we are fully at home here. Second, this view is also ecologically damaging. In this hierarchical world view humans have a special status. The Psalmist tells us that God made humans a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. As superior beings humans have dominion over the rest of nature. Thus, we are encouraged to think of humans as the only creatures with intrinsic value, and to view the earth and all non-human creatures as having only instrumental value – i.e., as resources for human use. Certainly there are many Christian environmentalists, and in recent years the theme of stewardship rather than dominion has gained popularity. However, it does little to change the anthropology or hierarchy. At best it

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11 I am certainly not the first to make this argument. In a controversial 1967 article, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” Lynn White Jr. laid the blame for the ecological crisis firmly at the feet of this Christian-Judeo anthropocentric world view (White 1967).

12 “You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor” (Psalms 8:5, New International Version).
makes us benevolent despots. I am afraid that a religion based on this anthropology will not have the moral resources to confront a growing environmental crisis, a crisis which will require us to rethink our relationship to the rest of the world.

These problems have pushed me to search for a mythic tradition that is more consistent with current scientific knowledge and responsive to both the challenges of cultural pluralism and environmental sustainability. The alternative Rue recommends is religious naturalism.

II. Constructing a Religious Naturalism

Building on Rue’s functional analysis of religion I’d like to sketch out what I think a religious naturalism might look like. Returning to the map-making analogy, I will draw only the rough contours and not fill in the specific details. In this process I will continue to draw on Rue’s work, but also on the work of Christian theologian Gordon Kaufman.

The Myth

The grand narrative of religious naturalism is the story of evolution as provided by contemporary science, or what Rue refers to more dramatically as the “epic of evolution.” It is the story of the universe from the big bang some twelve to fifteen billion years ago to the present. From this we understand what things exists and why things are the way they are – i.e., our cosmology – and begin to understand what is important – i.e., our axiology.

Here is how Rue describes the narrative.

The epic of evolution is the sprawling interdisciplinary narrative of evolutionary events that brought our universe from its ultimate origin in the big band to its present state of astonishing diversity and organization. In the course of these epic events matter was distilled out of radiant energy, segregated into galaxies, collapsed into stars, fused into
atoms, swirled into planets, spliced into molecules, captured into cells, mutated into species, compromised into ecosystems, provoked into thought, and cajoled into cultures. All of this (and much more) is what matter has done as systems upon systems of material organization have emerged over fifteen billion years of creative natural history (Rue 2005: 22).\(^\text{13}\)

Rue takes several chapters to unpack this narrative, but for our purposes I only want to identify those points that I think define the important contours of religious naturalism. I’ll start with the cosmology and then look at the axiology before completing the outline with a few comments about the ancillary strategies.

**Cosmology – Why are Things the Way They Are?**

The first point to note is that this cosmology provided by the epic of evolution attempts to be as consistent with the contemporary science as possible. This is not to say that science replaces religion or that religion has nothing to say that is not already said by science. It simply means that this narrative strives to be consistent with our best understanding of the world.

Second, the cosmology is naturalized and materialistic. There is no role for a supernatural agent in the narrative. Instead, matter itself is the main character. The universe is composed entirely of physical matter and the epic of evolution is a story of how this matter organizes itself into more diverse and complex systems. There are, to be sure, non-physical phenomena such as mental events. However, we should not confuse non-physical phenomena with non-physical entities, nor infer that because we experience subjective mental lives that

\[^{13}\text{Though Kaufman does not go into the same amount of detail as Rue, he seems to adopt a very similar cosmology, referring to the world or universe as “the structured whole of all that is,” (Kaufman 1993: 113) and arguing that this structure whole can be characterized as “that vast ecosystem in process of evolutionary development” (Kaufman 1993: 124).}\]
there must be non-physical minds or souls that have those experiences. Mental phenomena result from, and are dependent on, physical events.

Third, though it is naturalized and materialistic, it is not necessarily reductionistic. Often naturalism is associated with reductionism, the idea that all complex phenomena can be explained in terms of more basic entities or mechanisms. For instance, a reductionist might attempt to explain human behavior through biology, biology through chemistry, and chemistry through physics, and by so doing argue that the ultimate explanation of human behavior is to be found in physics. However, naturalism need not be reductionistic\(^\text{14}\) and I do not interpret the story in this way. Though it is a story about matter and the organization of matter into more complex systems, there is no claim about whether we can or cannot explain everything in terms of the behavior of basic particles of matter.

The reason I opt for a nonreductionist account is a fourth characteristic of this cosmology – the emergence of novelty. Notice that Rue’s narrative chronicles a long series of events, each leading to increased levels of diversity, organization and complexity. As matter organizes itself in these ways it demonstrates a remarkable ability to organize itself into systems that exhibit novel characteristics, what philosophers refer to as “emergent properties.” An important characteristic of emergent properties is that they cannot be predicted or fully explained. In other words, they are not reducible to previous realities.\(^\text{15}\)

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\(^{14}\) For instance, in defining his version of naturalism physicist and theologian Willem Drees argues that while physics “offers us the best available description” of the “natural world at its finest level of analysis,” that it may be unable to describe certain types of phenomena that occur at levels of greater complexity. In such cases, it will be necessary to employ concepts that “do not belong to the vocabulary of fundamental physics” (Drees 1996: 14-16).

\(^{15}\) Kaufman describes emergence as a concept used to characterize developments that lead to new realities that are not reducible to previous ones (Kaufman 2007: 915-16).
Let me explain this further by exploring the example of consciousness. Scientists have made tremendous progress in the past few decades and we now understand a great deal about the relationship between our brains and our subjective mental experiences. For quite some time they have been able to identify areas of the brain associated with certain sorts of cognitive and emotional experiences, and advances in brain scanning techniques promise to push this ability even further. There is overwhelming evidence that consciousness is dependent on brain functioning. However, this does not mean that consciousness is simply reducible to brain functioning. While brain activity is observable, subjective experience is not. If I have never tasted chocolate, a full description of the brain state associated with someone tasting chocolate would still not tell me what chocolate tasted like. There would always be something missing in the explanation—what it was like to taste chocolate. Consciousness is an emergent reality, a new reality dependent on a previous reality—i.e., the brain and its activity—but not completely explainable in terms of it.

Though Rue does not dwell on emergence, it seems to be an important part of the story. I think it also needs to lie at the heart of religious naturalism\textsuperscript{16,17} because of the significance it has for how humans understand themselves and their place in the universe. The next two points address this understanding.

\textsuperscript{16} Stuart Kauffman writes,

\begin{quote}
We live, therefore, in an emergent universe. This emergence often is entirely unpredictable beforehand, from the evolution of novel functionalities in organisms to the evolution of the economy and human history. We are surrounded on all sides by a creativity that cannot even be prestated. Thus we have the first glimmerings of a new scientific worldview, beyond reductionism. In our universe emergence is real, and there is ceaseless, stunning creativity that has given rise to our biosphere, our humanity, and our history. We are partial co-creators of this emergent creativity (Kauffman 2007: 903).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} Gordon Kaufman prefers to use the word “creativity” to describe “the idea of the previously nonexistent, the new, the novel simply coming into being through time, without any explanation” (Kaufman 2007: 917).
First, the epic of evolution tells us that we humans are fully part of this world and in no sense separate from it. We are products of emergence. We are beings that have emerged and evolved through the same processes that have shaped the universe as a whole. To bring the point home bluntly Rue refers to humans as “star-born, earth-formed, fitness-maximizing biochemical systems” (Rue 2005: 26, emphasis in the original).  

Second, and this perhaps softens the previous point, though humans are not separate from the world, we are, as far as we know, unique in certain ways. One must be careful here. The philosophical and theological literature is littered with unsuccessful attempts to define human nature or establish claims to human uniqueness and superiority – e.g., only humans are created in God’s image, have immortal souls, are intelligent, are moral beings, etc. I do not want to step into that quagmire. The point I’d like to make here is that, whatever other characteristics we might have, humans possess self-conscious awareness and the ability to use complex symbol systems, such as language. This gives us the ability to reflect on our experience and in the process to form different patterns of living – i.e., different cultures – and significantly change the world around us. In short humans are both the products of an

18 Rue writes, “We are one of these “ways” along with all the other species that have come to populate the planet. Like the others, humans have evolved with a unique combination of traits for doing what every life form must do – that is, to endure and to reproduce. Whatever excellent qualities a species may come to possess will mean nothing in the end if they are not consistent with reproductive fitness, the wherewithal to endure and to reproduce sustainedly. This is what really counts in the game of life. So when we come, eventually, to consider the fancywork of human nature – our intelligence, our affections, our moral sense – it will be important to recall that these qualities are purchased on the account of traits that contribute to our reproductive fitness. This principle of reproductive fitness, therefore, is a superordinate principle that applies to all living systems” (Rue 2005: 26).

19 Gordon Kaufman makes a similar point when he writes that humans “exist really as point-instants in a vast, complex ecosystem, hundreds of millions of light-years across and billions of years old,” adding that because of this humanity “cannot be thought of as a distinct and independent reality, separable from the world; it must be thought of as essentially in the world, part of the ecosystem within which it emerged” (Kaufman 1993: 112).
emergent universe and participants in the ongoing process of our own emergence. Gordon Kaufman thus refers to humans as biohistorical beings, “modes of reality that grasp and shape and create themselves in and through historical processes” (Kaufman 1993: 103). To use the language of creativity, we are both created and co-creators.20

Finally, if we live in a truly emergent universe, then there will be things about it that we cannot know. Understanding this is essential to understanding ourselves. While emergence releases our potential as co-creators, it also reminds us of limitations we cannot escape. We cannot know everything about the universe or about how our actions will ultimately affect it. I am speaking not just of the limitations that result from human finitude, but limitations that are the consequence of living in a universe that produces inexplicable novelty. I find Gordon Kaufman’s use of the concept of mystery very valuable here. When we are doing theology (and I would add philosophy) what we are dealing with will be “at the very limits of our intellectual capacities. We will be concerning ourselves with profound puzzles, conundrums that we cannot solve and that we should not expect to solve, but which are of great import to us nevertheless” (Kaufman 1993). Because emergence is thus bound up with mystery, the pride we take in our ability to create should be chastened by the humility of knowing that we cannot know everything.

Since I am talking about mystery and humility, this is a good time to emphasize that the epic of evolution, is a myth. Again, this is not to imply that it is a fiction or that parts of it are

20 Gordon Kaufman’s identifies three different modalities of creativity (Kaufman 2007: 917-18) (what I am referring to as emergence). Creativity1 is the beginning of the universe, the big bang, the emergence of a new reality from a context that is unknowable to us. Creativity2 is the creativity that takes place in the universe through the evolutionary process, the process that led to the emergence of human beings. In this case the emergence of novelty takes place in the context of what previously exists. Finally creativity3 is “the creation of extraordinarily complex cultures by human beings, human symbolic creativity” (Kaufman 2007: 918).
false. On the contrary, the intent is to make it as consistent as possible with the best
knowledge we have of the world. Nevertheless, it is a narrative, a story, and as such it is told
from a limited perspective. Like all narratives it is selective. When you tell a story you do not
include every possible detail. Instead you select those elements that are essential to the plot of
the story and the message that you want to convey. In the process, you imbue the story with
value and meaning. You can see this perspective in the epic of evolution if you reflect on how
the narrative starts off with the big bang and ends with emergence of human life and culture.
That is, it starts out as a story of the entire universe and ends as a story of our small corner of it.
It is not the story of the universe at all, but our story. It is our cosmology. It is the story we use
to explain the world and our place in it.

I mention this as a word of caution. If we forget that the story is a myth we run the risk
of overestimating our value and importance. By placing ourselves at the center of the story, we
run the risk of placing ourselves at the center of the universe; we run the risk of confusing the
relevance of humans to our own story with the relevance of humans to the universe. It seems
that the theological anthropology of traditional monotheism can appear in other guises. This
strikes me as extremely dangerous, both to ourselves and to the world in which we live.

Axiology – What Should Matter to Us?

Let me turn now to axiology. What does the epic of evolution tell us about what is
important?21

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21 Normally, I should worry about committing the naturalistic fallacy, the fallacy of deducing what should be the
case from what is the case, of deducing normative statements from descriptive ones. However, since we are
constructing a narrative rather than a tight logical argument, I think I can avoid that.
The first point is that there is no external, eternal moral order imposed on the universe. Values and meanings emerge through the process of evolution. I won’t try to give a complete account of the origins of value, but I would tend to concur with mathematical biologist and philosopher Stuart Kauffman that the emergence of values depends on the prior reality of agency, understood as the ability of an organism to act and modify the universe on its own behalf (Kauffman 2007: 909). This does not require consciousness, but it does require life. Living organisms can be made better or worse off by conditions in their environment. To the extent that they seek out conditions that make them better off, they can be said to be valuing; to the extent that the conditions make them better off, those conditions can be said to be of value to them. As living things increase in cognitive and social complexity they value not only biological survival, but survival of particular ways of being in the world.

Second, we humans are by nature moral beings; we have evolved as moral beings. There are good evolutionary accounts drawing on the concepts of kin selection and reciprocal altruism that provide explanations of the emergence of morality in humans. These accounts challenge the notion that we are by nature rational, purely self interested creatures on which morality must somehow be imposed from the outside. We are, to be sure, naturally concerned with our own welfare, but we also possess natural inclinations to care for others and even to act altruistically. These natural inclinations provide the basic moral sentiments common to our species. This is not a biological argument for some sort of universal morality. These sentiments are too general and nonspecific to support that type of claim. The different physical and social environments in which humans live channel these sentiments into quite diverse sets of cultural norms. In this sense we are both inheritors and authors or creators of our morality.
Third, emergence shapes our moral lives in important ways. At the most basic level this ability of matter to organize itself into more diverse and complex forms, is what has made us what we are as moral beings. It is what has given us not only the moral sentiments, but also the power to create and the ability to reflect. These powers, however, are also the source of our moral responsibility. As beings who not only participate in emergence through our actions in the world, but who also do so self-consciously we become morally responsible for how things will go in the future, at least in our small part of the universe. This responsibility increases as our power to impact the world expands. In my lifetime the twin threats of nuclear annihilation and global warming have been grave reminders of our ability to affect the world in more and more profound ways. The recognition that who and what we are is dependent on emergence should lead us to value emergence more broadly, and when we do we will recognize an obligation to nurture and promote those physical and social conditions that foster ongoing emergence. In other words, one of our duties as creative beings is to promote ongoing creativity.

Fourth, the ethics of religious naturalism will be ecological. I suppose at one level this could be perceived as simply a stance based only on enlightened self-interest. The past 50 years of environmental research has made it abundantly clear that although we have an incredible power to change the ecosystems in which we live, we are not independent of them. We now recognize that our survival depends upon the biosphere in which we live, so it is only prudent to develop an ethic that takes our relationship to the broader biotic community seriously.

However, the justification of an ecological ethic stems largely from the recognition that we are, at a fundamental level, biological beings and, thus, members of a broader biotic
community. For this reason our ethics cannot be strongly anthropocentric. Humans may be, at least for the time being, the only species capable of moral agency, but this does not imply that we are the only things that value or are of value. We have obligations not only to each other, but to the other members of this community and to the community as a whole.

Another reason that our ethics must be ecological stems from our obligation to foster conditions that promote emergence and/or creativity. A full development of this would take quite some time, so let me just mention a bit of what I mean by this. We tend to think of human creativity in very individualistic terms, the exemplar being the creative genius, the person who is able to conceive of the world in a radically different way and whose work, in retrospect we come to see has changed the way we see the world. However, a focus on this model, I believe, leaves us with a misguided impression. Human creativity does not take place in total isolation, nor is it the expression of pure freedom. It happens within communities and depends on a background of shared symbols, meanings, and values. Thus, human creativity requires both freedom and structure, openness to change and stability. Thus, if we are committed to fostering the conditions that promote emergence or creativity, we need to think in terms of healthy communities, we need to think ecologically.

**Ancillary Strategies**

Let me recap for a moment. I have been using the structure of Loyal Rue’s project of naturalizing religion to try and sketch what religious naturalism might look like. For Rue, religion is not about God, but about us. It is an adaptive strategy evolved in humans as a way of promoting individual fulfillment and social cohesion. It does this by providing an overarching narrative that explains how things are and what things matter. Using this model I have been
trying to describe what a religion based on naturalism, that is, a religion which does not assume the existence of a supernatural realm might look like. Thus, far I have focused on the narrative. However, in Rue’s theory the narrative must be accompanied by a set of intellectual, aesthetic, experiential, ritual, and institutional strategies that are designed to support and replicate it. I’ll turn to these now.

Intellectual: As I have emphasized over and again, the grand narrative of religious naturalism, the epic of evolution, strives to be consistent with what the best of contemporary science tells us about the world. So at the intellectual heart of religious naturalism is a basic understanding of the natural sciences. Moreover, as I have argued that the morality of religious naturalism is an ecological ethics, the study of ecology and environmental sciences are particularly important.

There is, however, a temptation within religious naturalism to make science an idol, what some people refer to in more secular terms as scientism. Scientism dogmatically promotes science, especially empirical science, from a particularly effective and reliable way of understanding the world, to the only legitimate way of understanding it. Giving in to this would be a terrible mistake.

To counter this tendency, it would be important to incorporate other materials into the intellectual core of religious naturalism. There are several theologians, philosophers, and scientists who have or are working intentionally in this area. I already have mentioned, Rue, Gordon Kaufman, and Stuart Kauffman, but there are several others worth note – Willem Drees, Jerome Stone, Ursula Goodenough, Donald Crosby, Charles Hardwick, and Michael Hogue are a few that come immediately to mind. They are working at the intersections of
science, philosophy, and theology to explore the intellectual underpinnings of religious naturalism. Institutionally one of the places this happens is at the Highlands Institute for American Religious and Philosophical Thought.

I don’t want to limit this intellectual work to academics. At the risk of excluding many valuable materials, let me just suggest two. One would be the works of Aldo Leopold. In his essay, “The Land Ethic” he argues for an ecological ethic and in his collection of nature essays put together in A Sand County Almanac he illustrates rather than argues for this ecological ethic through storytelling and personal reflection.

Another invaluable intellectual resource would be The Earth Charter. This document was developed by the independent Earth Charter Commission, which was convened as a follow-up to the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. The Earth Charter nicely expresses the basic moral commitments that I have argued flow from religious naturalism by articulating a set of principles organized under four main headings: 1) Respect and care for the community of life, 2) Ecological integrity, 3) Social and economic justice, and 4) Democracy, nonviolence, and peace(Commission).

I hesitate to say much of anything about the aesthetics of religious naturalism – I just am not qualified, particularly when it comes to the domains of the visual, performing arts, or literary arts. I do not mean to say that this is unimportant, and in fact, I think it would be a rich area to explore by someone more qualified.

I hesitate to say much about ritual or institutional strategies either, but for a very different reason. My sense is that it meaningful rituals and institutions emerge out of the lived, communal practice of a religion, and cannot be deduced in advance from the intellectual
underpinnings. It is hard to say what practices might take on religious significance. Moreover, much will depend on how religious naturalism takes shape in relation to currently established religions. Historically, we know that when one religion replaces another religion in a certain culture or region, it does not simply erase the established tradition. The process is much more complex. It erases some elements (often by force) but incorporates others. What rituals and institutions religious naturalism would adopt from currently existing religious traditions is hard to anticipate.

III. Remaining Issues

What I have provided here is only a preliminary sketch of one version of religious naturalism. There are many details to fill and outstanding issues to resolve. In closing want to very briefly raise two such issues. Perhaps during the question and answer period more will come up.

Can Religious Naturalism Evoke Emotionally Satisfying Religious Experiences?

When I speculated about what the ancillary strategies of religious naturalism might look like, I said nothing about the experiential strategies. I think it is fair to ask whether religious naturalism will meet the emotional needs that we look to the religious life to meet. I’m reminded of William James comments about the importance of faith in a transcendent moral order.

Let our common experiences be enveloped in an eternal moral order; let our suffering have an immortal significance; let Heaven smile upon earth, and deities pay their visits; let faith and hope be the atmosphere which man breathes in; -- and his days pass by with zest; they stir with prospects, they thrill with remoter values. Place round them on the contrary the curdling cold and gloom and absence of all permanent
meaning which for pure naturalism and the popular science evolutionism of our time are all that is visible ultimately, and the thrill stops short, or turns rather to anxious trembling (James 1958: 122).

While I think there are resources within religious naturalism to inspire awe and reverence, motivate, and comfort, I think the concern James so eloquently expresses is legitimate. However, the response to it can only partially be answered philosophically or theologically. To a large degree the success of religious naturalism in this area will depend on how we develop the ritual, aesthetic, and institutional dimensions.

Should We Talk About God?

While I have found Gordon Kaufman’s work extremely helpful I think I am ready to part company with him on this issue.

Though Kaufman explicitly rejects the idea of a personal God and even of the idea of God as a supernatural entity, he continues to refer to God and defends the practice. More specifically, he points to the symbolic weight that the word “God” carries. The word, he argues, points to a profound but existentially important mystery, to something that lies beyond our full comprehension and yet serves as the ultimate point of reference and the only appropriate object of worship and devotion (Kaufman 1993: 3-17). With a nod to the significance of emergence, he refers to God as “the mystery of creativity” (Kaufman 2007).

This strategy has the advantage of allowing Kaufman to connect what he finds particularly important in religious naturalism – i.e., the notion of emergence – with traditional themes in Christianity. By referring to emergence as creativity and creativity as God he is able to draw a bridge between the naturalistic notion of emergence and the Christian understanding
of God as creator, the ultimate source of what is. Just as important, this bridge allows him to present his religious naturalism more easily to a Christian audience.

I have some serious reservations about this and I regret that I will never have the opportunity to talk with him about it (he died this past summer). First of all, if we are to avoid an Alice in Wonderland experience in our conversations about religion, then words must retain their meanings as much as possible. It is often the case that we use the same word without realizing that we mean different things by it. This causes enough problems when we do it unintentionally; I’d prefer to avoid doing it intentionally.

Second, and I think this is perhaps more to the point, if we continue to use the term “God” we will have difficulty escaping from the mythic traditions in which that concept is used. This may explain the deeper motivation behind Kaufman’s strategy. The corpus of his work makes it clear that he seeks to works towards religious naturalism from within Christian tradition, modifying it from the inside out. I am not opposed to this, but I am not optimistic about its prospects either. As a philosopher who works from outside of a religious perspective I prefer to make a clear separation.

**Conclusion**

As you can probably sense by now, I find the region of religious naturalism an exciting place to explore. I’m not entirely sure that this is how I would fill the space between theism and atheism, but I think it has rich potential. But is time for me to stop the whirlwind tour and find out what parts, if any, you would like to examine more closely.
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