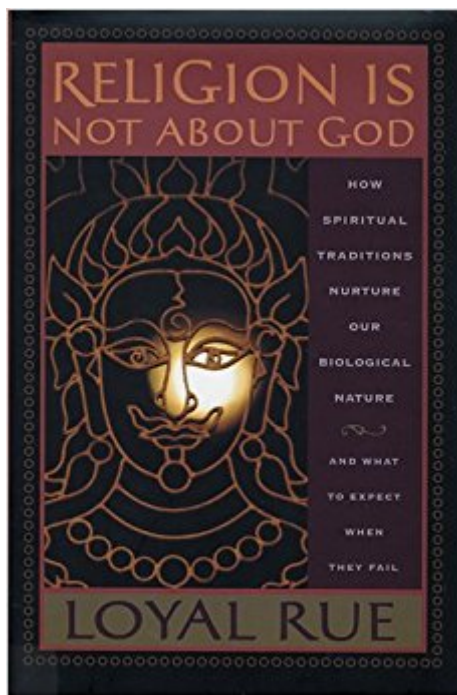




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# Religion Is Not About God: How Spiritual Traditions Nurture Our Biological Nature And What To Expect When They Fail



## Synopsis

Thousands of religious traditions have appeared over the course of human history but only a relative few have survived. Some speak of a myriad of gods, others of only one, and some recognize no gods at all. Volumes have been written attempting to prove the existence or non-existence of supernatural being(s). So, if religion is not about God, then what is it about? In this provocative book, Loyal Rue contends that religion, very basically, is about us. Successful religions are narrative (myth) traditions that influence human nature so that we might think, feel, and act in ways that are good for us, both individually and collectively. Through the use of images, symbols, and rituals, religion promotes reproductive fitness and survival through the facilitation of harmonious social relations. Drawing on examples from the major traditions-Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism-Rue shows how each religion, in its own way, has guided human behavior to advance the twin goals of personal fulfillment and social coherence. As all faiths are increasingly faced with a crisis of intellectual plausibility and moral relevance, this book presents a compelling and positive view of the centrality and meaning of religion. Loyal Rue, two-time Templeton Award winner, is a professor of philosophy and religion at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa.

## Book Information

Paperback: 408 pages

Publisher: Rutgers University Press (July 24, 2006)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0813539552

ISBN-13: 978-0813539553

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 0.8 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars 10 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #368,956 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #238 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Religious Studies > Psychology #544 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Religious Studies > Science & Religion #2052 in Books > Science & Math > History & Philosophy

## Customer Reviews

Loyal Rue has written a bold, scholarly, and gracefully composed discussion of the complex relations between the concepts of God and religion. I learned a great deal from the rich tapestry of facts that filled the gaps in my understanding of the history of these ideas and believe that readers will enjoy a similar intellectual experience. (Jerome Kagan research Professor of Psychology,

Harvard University)

Loyal Rue, two-time Templeton Award winner, is a professor of philosophy and religion at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa.

This is a book that requires some thought as you read it. It is not a polemic against your particular religion but more of an analysis of the place that religion plays in human culture. I don't always agree with what the author has to say here but his insights are useful and thought provoking. Rue starts his analysis by looking at human nature at almost an "intro to biology" level to build the case for how humans are influenced and where the emotive effects of religion are manifest. He then follows with a review of several major religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and finally Buddhism. Honestly I found the first 3 interesting but was less interested the latter two. Being more familiar with the religions allows the reader to see the point Rue is making. One can see elements that allow the tie in with society and human influence. The third and final section of Rue's book deals first with the crisis religion has today in a modern multi-centric world. I found this less compelling only because I can see how difficult it would be to sustain "myth-reality" not just from one challenge (i.e. science) but multiple, (nation states, commercialism, science, competing belief exposure). Rue deals with these individually, but the religious belief system anyone carries would have to deal with all at once. It is very interesting that he goes into some detail about commercialism and points up the same elements that it uses like religion to influence people. I don't think this is tongue in cheek as one reviewer suggests, I think Rue is right on the money. The final chapter is rightfully entitled doomsday as Rue spells out the looming ecologic disaster that we human beings are inflicting on this planet. Be warned it is truly depressing. I also found myself agreeing with the author that I am not optimistic that we will meet the threat in time to avoid catastrophic events. I am even less sanguine that post event, we will rise to the occasion. Overall this book is an interesting read. It requires thought but it is not hard to get through. It is certain to open new ways of viewing some aspects of our culture, whether it is your religion, your society or your own myth realities.

I've yet to finish the book but I am enjoying it thoroughly! Very thoughtful author.

This was the third and best book I have read written by Loyal Rue. He develops here a general theory of religion in this book. Yet you do not have to be a psychology or philosophy major to read

the book. I for one am a retired agronomist or horticulturist. He approaches the subject from an evolutionary psychologist point of view, emphasising human nature. Rue claims religion is not about God it is about us. It is not about coping with insecurities, it is about group survival. Rue's approach is to examine the following five religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism) to show how they fit his criteria. Then he adds Consumerism to this list, somewhat tongue-in-cheek I think. However, he does note that the prosperity gospel that appears to be a part of this 'religion' may be a "well-funded source of resistance" against promoting the view that sustainable goals and policies must be enacted to save civilization. He, like I and many others worry that we are using the world's resources at an unsustainable rate. Read this book and find out what the religions of this world have in common as they serve man.

Excellent book. Very informative. Enjoying it thoroughly.

Excellent

Exactly as promised! Thank you.

Almost half the book, a good part of Part 2, is devoted to explaining the gist of 5 major religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. For anyone interested in getting a good grasp of what any or all of these religions is about, I'd recommend this book for this benefit alone. Much of the chapter on Buddhism was superb: the difficult teaching of "no self" is explained as well as I've seen it presented anywhere. Similarly the heart of Islam seems well explained (in just a 27 page chapter): for anyone who doesn't appreciate the power of Islam, I'd strongly recommend this chapter. The other 3 religions are also presented with care and apparent respect. I had, however, a number of problems with the book: 1. The presentation seems Pollyanna-ish, despite Rue's concerns at the end of book of the future of religion. For example, the chapter on Christianity doesn't mention early Christianity's persecution of Gnostic Christians and destruction of their literature, nor the Inquisition, nor the European wars between Protestants and Catholics, nor recent problems such as those in Northern Ireland. Rue's claim of "social coherence" as a key benefit of religions seems questionable, yet he seems not disposed to questioning it. Rue claims the goals of "personal wholeness and social coherence" with only a brief warning that religious institutions might abuse their regulatory activity. B.F. Skinner devoted a chapter of "Science and Human Behavior" to the issues of religious control. Do Rue's appeals to human nature establish that a regard for

"personal wholeness" is a key factor in religions? If it is a key factor, does he establish that the meaning of "personal wholeness" isn't often inappropriately manipulated by religious authorities, beyond what might be needed for adequate "social coherence"? Is Rue's depiction of religion realistic and has he demonstrated that by any comparison with other plausible depictions? Some people might stay with a religion for other reasons than "personal wholeness". Is "personal wholeness" well-defined enough : Rue says it is "maximizing satisfaction of motives" which seems rather vague and hard to measure. Is it clearly critical to religious participation? Just mostly it and social coherence?2. Rue appears to have a favoritism of theism. He calls his book "Religion Is Not About God" even though one of his major religions, Buddhism, isn't about God to begin with. Sure, some Buddhists treat Buddha as a god and some Buddhist branches acknowledge gods, but that's not the gist of Buddhism. Worse, Rue speaks of the extremes of "nihilism and theism" when one opposite of theism, atheism, need not be nihilistic at all, and another opposite of theism, Buddhism, is one of the very major religions that Rue praises for providing meaningfulness.3. In his chapter on Christianity, for example, Rue, focusing on capturing the myth, ignores historical concerns. There is no mention of other religions of the time (excepting Judaism) such as the mystery religions or philosophies such as Stoicism. There seems no consideration at all that a philosophy might provide personal wholeness and social coherence. Rue takes for granted the historicity of Jesus, even though that isn't necessary to establish the myth and even though the historicity of Jesus has long been open to serious question (e.g. "The Jesus Puzzle"). Rue seems to have oversimplified in his effort to demonstrate that a religion, such as Christianity, leads to personal wholeness and social coherence.4. Rue seems to ignore whether there are non-religious ways to achieve personal wholeness and social coherence. By doing so, he seems in no position to assert that the contribution of religions to these goals exceeds that of other ways.5. While it is intriguing to consider Consumerism as a religion, as Rue does, it's hard to see how Consumerism can offer "personal wholeness", at least when one considers our American society, which seems to have many lonely, alienated affluent individuals. In fact, Consumerism arguably makes "personal wholeness" harder to attain, perhaps by leaving individuals with too much time on their hands and often too little meaningful contact with others.6. Here's Rue on human nature: "Human beings are star-born, earth-formed creatures endowed by evolutionary processes to seek reproductive fitness...Humans maximize their chances for reproductive fitness by managing the complexity of these systems in ways that are conducive to the simultaneous achievement of personal wholeness and social coherence." Star-born? So where does Rue establish that we need a sense of personal wholeness in order to reproduce? When Rue says personal wholeness is "maximizing satisfaction of motives",

why must it be "maximizing"? Can't I just get by, and be whole enough and reproductively fit enough? Won't it be stressful to have to maximize my personal wholeness and reproductive fitness? If I have a sex a lot, will that maximize my "satisfaction of motives" and, by itself, make me feel personally whole? Will satisfying my partner qualify as "maximizing conformity to shared standards of behavior".<sup>7</sup> Rue states that "Pinker is delivering the final, if not posthumous, deathblow to behaviorism". Perhaps Rue is unaware of a March 2004 article by Roddy Roediger, president of the American Psychological Society and himself a cognitive psychologist, in the APS's Observer entitled "What Happened to Behaviorism", in which Roediger emphasizes the debt the psychology owes to Skinner and Radical Behaviorism and the ongoing benefits of (Radical) Behaviorism. Perhaps Rue doesn't read "The Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis" or 'The Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior" or recognize the compassionate, helpful work of Applied Behavior Analysts. Rue associates with Behaviorism (during its hegemony) a "dogmatic prohibition against all theories of the mind." He characterizes Behaviorism's position as "science should not traffic in concepts about unobservable events...". But Skinner and Radical Behaviorists acknowledge private events as natural events and hence addressable by the science of Behavior Analysis because science is concerned with natural events whether they are observable or not. What Skinner and Radical Behaviorists object to is the practice of populating mind with fictitious entities (mentalisms) inferred from our behavior.<sup>8</sup> Rue not only believes Pinker delivered a deathblow to Behaviorism, he also state the Pinker's "How the Mind Works" makes "a good stab at the subject". Rue should read William Baum's "Understanding Behaviorism", which should give him a strong appreciation of why no one should wish that Behaviorism be dead, but also teach him about the dubiousness of the kind of mentalisms that Pinker's book is drenched in. Rue's analyses of religion doesn't seem to depend on Pinker anyway.<sup>9</sup> Rue states that that there be sufficient realism in a religion's root metaphor for it to be accepted. For Christianity, he then notes that the return of Christ to earth at the appointed time for the final judgment would have to have such realism in order for the myth to be effective. But for Islam, it isn't the root metaphor but the nature of who claimed it that he questions the realism of. He writes: "If you are a realist about Muhammed's epilepsy, then you are not likely to be a realist about his claims to be a messenger from God". Is it realism or ignorant discrimination that would reject Muhammed's claims on that basis? One of the most powerful depictions of God in human history and someone would discount it because it's believed to have been produced by someone suffering from epilepsy? To me it seems all the more marvelous if in fact someone could endure such an affliction and still produce a great work. William James even argued against dismissing the visions of epileptics. Rue seems to define what he

means by realism very loosely and then use expand on it arbitrarily.<sup>10</sup> There seems to be little or no reference to experimental support for Rue's claims: social psychology rather than cognitive science may be more apt for grounding his speculations experimentally. "Religion Is Not About God" was a mixed blessing. The religious studies was helpful, much of the psychology of religion was unhelpful and the cognitive science seemed a liability. If you want to learn about the religions he covers, consider reading the less speculative parts of Part 2, which were well worth the value of book for me.

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