

Cambridge University Press

0521637163 - Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?: The Relationship between Science and Religion

Michael Ruse

Frontmatter

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Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?

The Relationship between Science and Religion

This book addresses a question at the heart of the current debate about the relationship between science and religion, in particular between that form of evolutionary biology known as Darwinism and the basic tenets of the Christian faith. The question is: Can someone who accepts Darwin's theory of natural selection subscribe at the same time to the essential claims of Christianity?

Adopting a balanced perspective on the subject, Michael Ruse offers a serious examination of both Darwinism and Christianity. He covers a wide range of topics from the Scopes Monkey Trial to claims about the religious significance of extraterrestrials. He deals with major figures in the current science/religion debate (Richard Dawkins, Stephen Jay Gould, and E. O. Wilson on the science side, as well as Arthur Peacocke, Robert J. Russell, and Keith Ward on the religion side). He considers in detail the claims of the new creationism and reveals some surprising parallels between Darwinian materialists and traditional thinkers such as Saint Augustine.

Michael Ruse argues that, although it is at times difficult for a Darwinian to embrace Christian belief, it is by no means inconceivable. At the same time he suggests ways in which a Christian believer should have no difficulty accepting evolution in general, and Darwinism in particular.

Writing with verve and avoiding technical jargon, Michael Ruse has produced an important contribution to a sometimes overheated debate for anyone interested in, and perhaps even troubled by, these issues who seeks an informed and judicious guide.

The author of many books on Darwin and evolutionary biology, Michael Ruse is Lucyle T. Werkmeister Professor of Philosophy at the Florida State University. He has been much involved in debates with creationists and was an expert witness for the ACLU in the 1981 Arkansas creation trial when he spoke to the questions of the philosophy of evolution as opposed to that of creationism.

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*To the memory of my parents,
William and Margaret Ruse*

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Preface

Let me be open. I think that evolution is a fact and that Darwinism rules triumphant. Natural selection is not simply an important mechanism. It is the only significant cause of permanent organic change. I stand somewhere to the right of Archdeacon Paley on adaptation and design. I see purpose and function everywhere. I am an ardent naturalist and an enthusiastic reductionist, and those who disagree with me are wimps. I think that everything applies to humans, thought and action, and that sociobiology is the best thing to happen to the social sciences in the last century. The kindest thing that can be said for those who disagree – Marxists, feminists, constructivists, and fellow travellers – is that they speak from ignorance. Perhaps their genes make them do it.

Yet, all of this said, I cannot for the life of me see why so many – Darwinians and Christians alike – think that such a position as mine implies an immediate and emphatically negative response to the question I have posed in my title. Why should the devil have all the good tunes? Why should the devil have all the good science and philosophy? Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas would be appalled at such a presumption, and we should feel the same way. It may indeed be the case that a Darwinian cannot be a Christian, but this is something to be decided only after one has looked at the two systems and worked through their points of possible conflict and dispute. It is not to be settled a priori before one begins. It is certainly not to be settled in happy and total ignorance of what others claim and believe.

Because I feel so strongly about this, I have decided to take seriously my own admonition. What you have before you are the fruits of my

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PREFACE

labours. I will say that I have been surprised at some of the things I have learnt and that I now hold some conclusions that I would hitherto have rejected. But I should also say that I do not much care whether you or anyone else end by agreeing or disagreeing with me. I do care that you think my inquiry is serious and worth making and that my arguments, especially if you disagree with them, are worth considering. What I will say is that I have had more fun on this project than on anything similar for many years. It will be reward enough, if I can infect you with my enthusiasm and the sheer joy of intellectual inquiry, comparing and contrasting two major world systems. What more could either a Darwinian or a Christian ask of life?

I am much in the debt of many people who have listened to me, supplied me with references, and explained to me points of Christian belief. These include Francisco J. Ayala, Philip Hefner, Ernan McMullin, Arthur Peacocke, Robert J. Russell, and Keith Ward. For technical scientific advice, I am indebted to Ursula Goodenough, Russell Doolittle, and Kenneth Miller. Michael Behe, William Dembski, Phillip Johnson, Alvin Plantinga, and all of their fellow thinkers whom I criticize strongly have been unfailingly courteous and friendly, showing that one can have major intellectual differences which need not (and should not) translate into personal attitudes or behaviour. My fellow evolutionists Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Stephen Jay Gould, William Provine, and Edward O. Wilson have long shown that our complete disagreement on the science–religion relationship is far less important than the quest for truth and the warmth of friendship. Four people very kindly read the whole manuscript and gave me advice: John Beatty, Eduardo R. Cruz, Edward Oakes, S. J., and Robert Pennock. I am particularly indebted to the history and philosophy of science graduate students at the University of Minnesota who put me through a gruelling examination on the contents of the work. My biblical references are to the Revised Standard Version, and I feel a traitor to the King James Version. For capitalization of religious terms, and in making references to deity, I have followed the recommended practice of the *Chicago Manual of Style*, fourteenth edition. My editor at Cambridge University Press, Terence Moore, deserves many thanks for many things, not the least of which was suggesting the topic in the first place. My assistant, Alan Belk, and my secretary, Linda Jenkins, worked beyond the call of duty. As always, my family – my wife

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Lizzie and our children Emily, Oliver, and Edward – gave support and love.

One final word. I was born in Birmingham in the British Midlands in 1940, at the beginning of the Second World War. My father was a conscientious objector, and this brought him into contact with members of the Religious Society of Friends, the Quakers. After the war, he and my mother joined the society, and it was within this group that my sister and I were raised until 1953, when our mother died and the family that had been was no more. That was all long ago and far away, but every day I am aware that the deepest influence on my life was that loving Christian atmosphere created by my parents and their coreligionists in the Warwickshire Monthly Meeting, with which our local group was affiliated. If any of my readers feel that there is something in these pages which helps them on the spiritual route that we all must travel, thank those very ordinary and very wonderful people, not me.