

Preaching to his own choir

A review of
Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?
The Relationship Between Science and Religion,
by Michael Ruse,
Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001

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In his book *The Blind Watchmaker*, Richard Dawkins made the famous statement, ‘Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist.’¹ Now, in *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?* Michael Ruse seeks to prove that a Darwinian can also be an intellectually fulfilled Christian. Ruse is a Canadian professor of philosophy at Florida State University, and a prolific writer on evolution, naturalism and philosophy. He first gained fame, or infamy, (depending on your perspective) as an expert witness against creation science in the 1981 court case, *McLean v. Arkansas*.²

Ruse’s approach

In *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?* Ruse seeks to answer his title question, ‘not dodging the difficult issues but aiming always to see how a fairly full-blooded version of Darwinism can compare and connect with a fairly traditional and no less full-blooded reading of Christianity’ (p. 217).

Ruse starts with chapters on the basics of Darwinism and Christianity. He goes on to spend the rest of the book addressing the specific issues he sees as most divisive, especially origin of life, the status of humans, naturalism, design,³ pain and ethics. Ruse’s starting point is that Darwinism is true: ‘We are not asking the question, Is Darwinism true? Rather, having assumed the truth of (some version of) Darwinism, we are asking, Can a Darwinian be

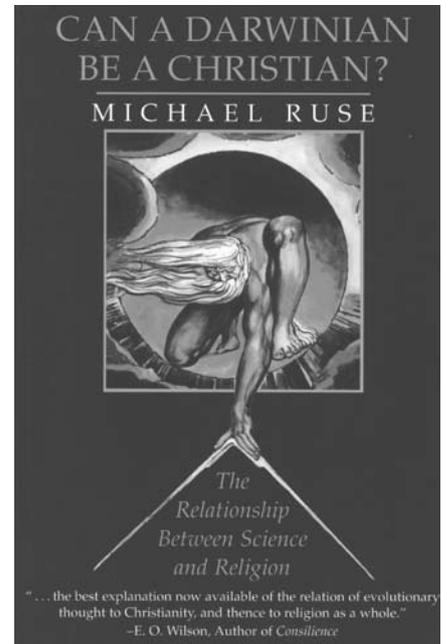
a Christian?’ (p. 58). This book’s approach is certainly presuppositional, but diametrically opposed to biblical presuppositionalism. To accept the Bible as the revealed, infallible Word of God means that our starting point is Scripture, and we view the world in light of this presupposition. Ruse’s starting point is the ‘truth’ of Darwinism, and hence he views everything in light of this presupposition.

So, right from the start, Ruse is denying a cardinal Christian belief that Jesus is Lord, because Jesus Himself said, ‘Scripture cannot be broken’ and used the Bible as His authority on every aspect it touched (‘it is written ...’).⁴

Ruse on Christianity

Ruse’s chapters on the basics of Darwinism and Christianity leave much to be desired. His coverage of Darwinism says nothing that creationists have not dealt with already in one form or another. The arguments from homology, biogeography, the fossil record, and even embryology are reshaped. The standard old transitional forms—*Archaeopteryx*⁵ and the horse evolution sequence⁶—are cited again. He makes a useful distinction (with unfortunate terminology) between the ‘fact of evolution’ (belief in the naturalistic common descent of all organisms), the ‘path of evolution’ (phylogeny) and the ‘mechanism of evolution’ (p. 12). All evolutionists agree on the ‘fact’, even though they may argue over the path and mechanism (pp. 28–32).

Ruse’s chapter overview of Christianity starts out promisingly, discussing the centrality of Christ, Original Sin properly attributed to the Fall in Eden, and salvation by grace. But some of this will be politely butchered in upcoming chapters, and there is already a hint of problems to come in his reference to ‘the early Jewish version of God’ (pp. 33–36). As the chapter progresses,



Ruse gets bogged down in a painful effort to summarize controversies in church history (the Reformation, the Enlightenment, higher criticism, liberalism, evangelicalism) without offending anyone or committing himself to anything. (Ruse will probably irritate both sides in every controversy, each feeling that their favoured views have been shortchanged.) After wading through this slough, we are finally ready to get into the arguments around the title question.

Allegorizing and origins

Ruse’s first task in discussing origins is to demonstrate that Genesis need not be read as history. This is his only option given his evolutionary commitment, and he knows it (pp. 66–67). He appeals to Augustine’s non-literal interpretation of Genesis (pp. 50–51), not noting that it was actually an anomaly among the church fathers, and neglecting to mention his scathing denunciations of old-earth belief.⁷ He argues for the equality of science with Scripture as sources of truth. In practice, however, he places science above Scripture: i.e. science informs us when the Bible is wrong, not vice versa. He fails to recognize that Scripture is propositional revelation (stated facts). But one should ask what the facts of nature actually are.

Nature is non-propositional revelation, and is always interpreted through a framework. The interpretations cannot be viewed as objectively known truth on par with Scripture.⁸ Ruse insists, 'Truth cannot be opposed to truth' (p. 51). But the problem goes back to Ruse's initial presupposition that Darwinism *is* truth.

Ruse also attempts to get Calvin on his side by quoting from his commentary on Genesis (p. 53). In context, Calvin was explaining the concept of a frame of reference: Genesis 1:16 doesn't mean that the sun and moon are the largest lights in the universe. They are the largest from our frame of reference, Calvin explained, so the Bible is accurate and understandable.⁹ However, Ruse quotes only Calvin's comments on Moses adapting 'to the common usage', giving the unfortunate impression that allegorical readings are in order. (Keep in mind that young-earth creationists do not take every word or verse in the Bible literally. We recognize the use of idioms, parables and other types of symbolisms in various sections of Scripture. We argue, however, that a proper interpretation of Genesis is that it is factual history.¹⁰) And Ruse once again shows his selective reading of a great commentator: in this same commentary, Calvin unambiguously affirms creation in six normal-length days, plants before the sun, Adam and Eve as the first couple, death and suffering as the result of the Fall, and a global Flood.¹¹

After finishing his unconvincing case for a non-historical reading of Genesis, Ruse gets to the chapter's topic, the origin of life. Ruse is optimistic that a naturalistic explanation will surface soon. His sentence might become a classic: 'But the odds are that something will pan out in some way before too long' (pp. 65–66). He reasons that since Genesis is already allegorized, it is pointless to quibble over one more step allowing a naturalistic origin of life (pp. 66–67). Ruse's optimism, however, is unwarranted: he's still relying on the mutilated old Miller–Urey experiment as a key to the origin of life (pp. 62–64).¹²

Naturalism

To understand this chapter, we must keep in mind that there are two types of naturalism: 'Methodological naturalism maintains that as far as scientific knowing is concerned, nature is all there is. Metaphysical naturalism ... goes much farther, insisting that nature is literally all there is.'¹³ The naturalism (both kinds) inherent in evolution has been one of the biggest problems for theists (Christian and non-Christian), and the Intelligent Design movement consistently raises this issue.¹⁴ Ruse's chapter on naturalism is thus central.

He starts with miracles, 'violations of or exceptions to [natural] law' (p. 95). In light of naturalism, can a Christian believe in miracles at all? Of course he doesn't bother to address the orthodox Christian position that miracles are an *addition* to natural law. This, in turn, is a deduction from the biblical view that miracles are *extraordinary* actions of God, while 'natural law' is merely our *description* of the *ordinary* way God upholds His creation (Colossians 1:15–17). Instead, Ruse thinks that natural laws are real entities that prescribe how things happen, which is analogous to claiming that the outline of a map causes the shape of the continents.

Instead, Ruse approvingly cites the liberal approach of explaining miracles away as naturalistic phenomena. For example, Lazarus was raised from a trance; water to wine was 'the enthusiasm of the moment'.

He even suggests that the Resurrection was not really a return from the dead, but that on the third day after the crucifixion 'a group of people, hitherto downcast, were filled with great joy and hope' (p. 96). Ruse should have known better than to touch on the central event of Christianity—abandon the Resurrection and there is no Christianity, as Paul makes clear (1 Corinthians 15:12–19). This alone demonstrates the baneful effects of evolutionary compromise. And of course, don't expect Ruse to explain *why* this group of downcast people should become full of hope if their

saviour was really gone for good, or explain where the body went, or even attempt to address leading apologists for the Resurrection.¹⁵

He follows up quickly, reassuring readers that it's fine to believe in what he claims are law-defying miracles (although it might be an irrational leap of faith), but only for 'salvation history' (pp. 97–98). 'It goes without saying', he says, 'that the creation of animals and plants was an entirely different matter and that there was no call here for miraculous intervention' (p. 98). No defense, no argument: 'It goes without saying.'

Ruse then tries to disprove the arguments that evolution leads to atheism. In making his case, Ruse concentrates on answering the arguments of Alvin Plantinga.¹⁶ Plantinga is a leading modal logician, and is the John A. O'Brien Professor of Philosophy at the University of Nôtre Dame (despite being non-Catholic). He has recently become an advocate of Intelligent Design. He is recognized by Ruse as America's leading philosopher of religion (p. 58). Ruse's arguments for the compatibility of (methodological) naturalism with Christianity tended toward the idea that religion and science are in separate domains of 'respectful noninterference'¹⁷ (to borrow Gould's terminology). In Ruse's words:

'The fact is that, having set the boundaries to science [naturalistically], many do go on immediately to claim that what lies beyond the boundaries is wrong or misguided or nonsensical There is often a slide from methodological to metaphysical naturalism But note that this is surely only a tendency, and if one is indeed a committed Christian then there is nothing in Darwinism, or in the notion of science that it supports, which says that your commitment is wrong or stupid. Yours is not a scientific commitment, but you knew that already' (p. 102).

Only a tendency? This 'tendency' to 'metaphysical naturalism' ('insisting that nature is literally all

there is¹³) is at the heart of the issue. The sharp divide between the physical world and God is an unbiblical and unsatisfactory answer. These were the problems that Plantinga was concerned with from the beginning. And we have seen where this tendency has led when Ruse's naturalistic dogma led him to deny the foundational doctrine of the Resurrection. Far from answering Plantinga, Ruse actually confirmed a major aspect of his concerns.

Ruse attempts to answer a final argument from Plantinga: an evolved universe has no guarantees that we can really know anything. In other words, we need to presuppose God in order to have a foundation for knowledge. (This is a facet of what is known as the transcendental argument for the existence of God.¹⁸) Ruse replies, 'Candidly, I am not sure how seriously we are supposed to take Plantinga's argument and example' (p. 107). Ruse tries to answer, but finally concludes that we can never really know. What then? He suggests,

'The Darwinian simply denies that truth can mean correspondence between one's ideas and reality, arguing rather that truth means ... a coherence between all the parts that we hold important and significant.'

Plantinga is dismissed as 'naïve or arrogant if he truly thinks that the Christian has an impregnable foundation of belief not shared by those of us who start from empirical evolutionary premises' (pp. 109–110).

Humans

Another important issue is the status of humans. In Christianity, human beings are viewed as special, unique objects of God's care. In Darwinism, humans are a chance (contingent) development. Ruse argues that the Darwinian Christian has two options. First, one could view the concept of progress that many Darwinians hold to as 'some support for the belief about the special significance of humans and the probability of their appearance' (p.

91). Second, the Darwinian Christian could view all the chance occurrences leading to humans as God's work, making humankind special (pp. 91–92). Note, however, that Ruse will not accept God directly interfering at any point in the evolutionary process. He also includes a lengthy discussion on the origin of souls (in the absence of an original couple). His conclusion is that souls evolved from lower forms of mind, will and emotion in animals. This brings him to one of the gravest of evolutionary problems: why would our minds, especially consciousness, evolve? He makes suggestions (many have), but does not give real solutions.¹⁹

Pain

Ruse is aware that pain and suffering are essential components of the natural selection process, and that this is troubling for Christians. Having accepted from the start that evolution is how we got here, he doesn't have the Fall to explain pain, and his options are pretty pathetic.

One possibility is pain as a route to faith.

'This is a neo-orthodox position. Faith, to be faith, must be a leap into the absurd ... physical evil may be necessary for our moral development. Without it, we would feel no inclination to better ourselves ...' (p. 133).

Of course, this is a straw man view of what faith is (*cf.* Hebrews 11:1).

The other possibility is that 'God can only do that which can be done' (p. 134). Evolution happened; natural selection is the way it happened; pain and suffering come with natural selection. 'Physical evil exists, and Darwinism explains why God had no choice but to allow it to occur' (p. 137). We now have a God who cannot work with anything other than evolution, and cannot even control his own creation. These conclusions only highlight the problems of merging Christianity and Darwinism. They do not solve them.



Photo by Heinrich Jakob, courtesy Morguefile

Darwinists accept death and suffering as a necessary part of life and evolution, but the Bible reveals it is a result of the Fall, and death will one day be overthrown (1 Cor 15:26).

Ethics

'Religions usually incorporate some kind of moral code ... and Christianity is a paradigm in this respect. Likewise for evolution-as-religion' (p. 158). Ruse's introductory summary of Christian ethics brings in some rather objectionable elements. Ruse implicitly interprets Christianity along evolutionary lines: it evolved from a more primitive Judaism (p. 159). In his terminology ('the God of the Jews') there is the implication that there was a different God in the Old Testament. Needless to say, this is contrary to historic, orthodox Christianity.

Ruse surveys the development of Christian and Darwinian (social Darwinist) ethics, and concludes that both groups span the spectrum. Pick a moral issue, and you will find Christians and Darwinians on both sides (p. 181). But just the fact that people calling themselves Christian are on both sides of a particular ethical position does not make both sides equally Christian. The issues must be judged by the objective standard of Scripture.²⁰ On the other hand, the Darwinist's standard is anything but objective. The Darwinists' interpretation of nature (a

notoriously hard-to-pin-down entity) is moulded by their presuppositions, and it is easy to form nature into many different things.

Ruse discusses his version of a Darwinian standard in relation to both social Darwinism and recent developments in sociobiology. Basic to his formulation is the evolutionary concept of progress (not accepted by all evolutionists) and the necessity of social harmony. Progress is good; it 'implies value', hence it gives 'moral obligation' to 'cherish, aid, and repair, or (at a minimum) not to hinder, the course of evolution' (pp. 182–183). Darwinism, Ruse reassures, would not support everybody doing his or her own thing. 'If everyone attempted it, then we would soon have a full blown societal Kantian contradiction' (p. 199).

There are problems with this. The transition from evolutionary progress to value and moral obligation runs headlong into the is/ought fallacy (turning what 'is' into a statement of what 'ought' to be), and Ruse knows it. He actually suggests that a belief in God can help to bridge that gap. (An interesting concept: God saving evolutionary ethics from its inherent problems!) Further, Ruse appeals to the Kantian ethics of everyone being nice (normative morality) to prevent the breakdown of society—a social contradiction (pp. 158, 168, 195–199).

The problem here is that social chaos is deemed bad. By what standard? If evolutionary progress is our standard, it might even be a good thing. Consider the concept of an evolutionary arms race (described by Ruse, pp. 85–86, 89–91). An animal evolves a certain capability (speed, for example) to escape a predator, and the predator then has to evolve likewise to keep up. They each escalate the other's selection-driven progress. Might not social chaos do the same for humans? If pain and struggle are really basic to evolution (pp. 131–132, 136–137), maybe a 'nice' ethic is wrong from an evolutionary viewpoint. Without an eternal standard, almost anything can be justified.

Conclusion

So, can a Darwinian be a Christian? Ruse says absolutely. And he says that it is not always easy (p. 217). Creationists have never denied that a Darwinian could be a Christian. But we would go further than saying it is difficult. We would have to say that it is basically inconsistent to be a Darwinian and a Christian. Interestingly, Ruse calls himself an 'ex-Christian'. It is somewhat incongruous to see an apostate lecture Christians on who can be one of them, when evidently he was not prepared to keep the faith himself.²¹

Despite his best efforts, Ruse's attempts at harmonizing the points of conflict between Christianity and Darwinism do not pass muster. It is also unclear exactly whom the book is supposed to convince. Certainly, no orthodox Christian should be taken in by any book that claims that the Resurrection is just an optional extra for Christians. It will probably get its best reception among the theological liberals who find their beliefs reaffirmed in a sophisticated way by Ruse. If they are not on guard for errors in science or loopholes in logic, they are less likely to notice them.

Superficially, *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?* is excellently argued. Bringing up a multitude of points against his views and then 'answering' them is quite impressive. But under close scrutiny, the arguments do not hold up. To someone not convinced at the start, the arguments are simply not very persuasive. And at the most basic level, the book is fatally flawed: for Ruse, the theories of fallible man take precedence over the authority of God's Word.

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