

RUMINATIONS ON RUSE AND RELIGION

by *George C. Williams*

Abstract. I am in general agreement with Ruse on most religious and scientific issues but find little justification in his partial return to Christianity. His rejection of the literal interpretation of certain “Jewish myths,” once started, can logically end only with the rejection of all the important content of both Old and New Testaments. His recognition that religious establishments have been responsible for much personal stress and many of history’s great tragedies is understated.

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I have known Michael Ruse for many years, have had many conversations with him, and have read many of his writings. I published a mostly laudatory review of his 1986 book *Taking Darwin Seriously* (*Quarterly Review of Biology* 61: 523–24). So it was not likely I would find many surprises in Ruse’s presentations of his views of Christianity or other major religious traditions. I find myself, as I expected, endorsing his reasoning and admiring his style again and again through both selections. I hope readers will bear this in mind through the rest of my presentation, which will emphasize our points of minor disagreement. I suspect my views are more akin to his of twenty years ago, because unlike Ruse, I have not come “halfway back” to religion.

Our autobiographies would have little in common. Both of my grandfathers were Southern gentlemen of antebellum Protestant outlook. Both married Roman Catholics from Ireland, so that my parents and I grew up in a tradition that might aptly be termed Roman Calvinism. Of their descendants, I was the only one to break decisively from the fold at an early age. Unlike Ruse, I can find nothing in my religious training that I have incorporated into my

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present worldview. The only item of positive value I received from the Roman Catholic Church was a key to the exit. For a brief time, I was a student in a Jesuit prep school and on one occasion had a one-on-one theological discussion with one of the faculty. He assured me that it was permissible for me to think seriously about religious issues. It was not many minutes later that I ceased to be a Catholic. It was some years later (in the U.S. Army in 1944) that I stopped acting like one.

I believe that Ruse is too gentle in his dissection of the conceptual foundations of Christianity. He sets the tone in the beginning of "Evolutionary Theory . . ." (1994a), noting that educated Christians have accepted the idea of biological evolution and therefore reject the need for "taking literally" the various "ancient Jewish myths about beginnings." He finds this encouraging and feels no disagreement "with the spirit of this general conclusion." I think I can identify later passages where he does seem to disagree, but for the moment let's take this polite beginning at face value. Which of the Jewish myths does he think a Christian can do without? How about the one that derives all human suffering and frailty from a snake's success in persuading a woman to eat an apple? If this is not accepted, what is the need for a redeemer? Unless the world prior to a few thousand B.C. was free of sin and suffering, Christ was wasting his time.

I am sure there can be many erudite rejoinders to this line of reasoning. Unwillingness to accept a myth "literally" is not the same as rejecting it. The snake and the apple can be symbols of something that went wrong, perhaps something complicated and immensely prolonged, early in the history of the earth (universe?). Perhaps also, this something could be set straight only by the crucifixion and resurrection of the son of God. It is indeed on this event that the whole question of the validity of Christianity depends. As Ruse puts it in "From Belief to Unbelief . . .", "either Jesus Christ was truly the son of God, or he was not" (Ruse 1994b, 32).

This question is unlikely to be answered in a way that can be supported by what most people would recognize as evidence, but this is a minor problem. The major one is that the question is devoid of any conceptual meaning. What could "son" and especially "truly the son" possibly mean in this context? Because of advances in biology, we now know in detail what *son* means. I am my father's son because he supplied the sperm that activated an egg of my mother's and provided me with half my genes. Is this what God did for Jesus? What do Christians think would be the result of counting Jesus' chromosomes, or of analyzing molecular polymorphisms in

his tissues and those of possible earthly fathers? I am sure that the possibility of theological obfuscation can be brought to bear here as elsewhere. "Son of God" could be said to have a deeper meaning than mere biology could imply. This deep (and utterly obscure) meaning is what Christians revere. They profess to believe *it* deeply, even if they cannot describe the *it* that they believe.

And why not simply put the whole of the New Testament into the group of Jewish myths that are not to be taken literally, as Ruse has already done with the Sermon on the Mount in "Evolutionary Theory . . .")? Of course, there is much historical truth in the New Testament. Myths routinely incorporate well-known realities whenever their originators think them germane. Egypt and Babylon are real places, Cyrus and Solomon real people. The same is true for the New Testament Bethlehem and Damascus and Tiberius and Herod. Jesus, I suppose, can be defined into historical existence: Somewhere near the east end of the Mediterranean, about the year 1, there was a religious leader who resembled the biblical Jesus more than anyone else did. He, by definition, is Jesus. How close a resemblance is the important question, but not one likely to get a clear answer.

It seems to me that not just some but all of the basic tenets of Christianity are patently absurd. There was no blissful Eden. I have documented the ubiquity and extremity of evil in biological nature (Williams 1989); the teeth on a tyrannosaur are clear evidence of pain and violent death, and our species has existed for less than 1 percent of the time since the extinction of *Tyrannosaurus*. Without a paradise lost there was nothing to be regained by the crucifixion and resurrection. Whatever these events may have accomplished is hard to detect. Did they mark the demonstrable end of an era of sin and the dawn of a new age of virtue and enlightenment? Are Christians noticeably more virtuous than Jews, or Buddhists, or atheists?

I can agree with Ruse that religion is not going to go away. Most people seem to have religious aspirations and a desire for the social cohesion and philosophical assurances offered by religious sects. Apparently Ruse does, and despite the content of my commentary, I recognize some of the same feelings in myself when he describes his passion for Bach's *Passions*. I wish he had not implied that only explicitly religious music affects him in this way. I also find parts of the *St. Matthew Passion* deeply stirring, but I can get the same feelings from secular music. For me, there is more spiritual meaning in the brief and simple Forgiveness Aria at the end of *Le Nozze di Figaro* than in any tract or sermon I have ever encountered.

Religion being here to stay, the relevant moral imperative is to channel the aspirations and desires in ways that will maximize the

benefit and minimize the cost. The social costs are real, as Ruse repeatedly emphasizes in his implication of religious culpability for many of the world's tragedies. Are there not also personal costs from unnecessary constraints on life-styles imposed by religious strictures? People who might enjoy a fine lager must forego it if they are strict Muslims. What must it be like to live a long and rigidly virtuous life, pass on to eternal rest, and only then find out it would have been perfectly acceptable to commit adultery?

One strategy that might be pursued, to make the best use of the religious impulse, would be to choose that which seems best among the currently viable religions. In other words, look for the best set of myths and traditional doctrines in relation to one's esthetically based desires for the world and for oneself. On this basis, I would choose Buddhism, for the no doubt inadequate reason of finding the Sermon at Benares a more agreeable philosophy than anything I have found in the Bible (I know almost nothing of the Koran). I believe that this Buddhist philosophy provides far less excuse for oppression and bigotry than the Bible does and far more encouragement for science and freedom of thought (for information on the Sermon at Benares, see Burt 1955, 27-32). I fail to see how any thoughtful person can do other than condemn such books as *Exodus* and *Joshua*, and I am glad that no fabulous history of the Crusades has been elevated to the status of sacred scripture for Christians.

While I concede the tenacity of religious feelings in the human population, I think it should be noted that people often profess to accept certain beliefs but do not act as if they believe them. I think this is much truer today than when I was immersed in Catholicism. My impression is that in 1940 most Catholic parents confronted with clear evidence that their child was subject to sexual advances by a priest would not have taken action. They would have been more inclined to reject the evidence of their senses than to believe that a recipient of Holy Orders could be so sinful. Yet even then there were inconsistencies between professed and actual beliefs. How many parents in 1940 would have been overjoyed at the death of their newly baptized infant?

But surely the inconsistency between professed and practiced beliefs is more prevalent today than a half-century ago. This is perhaps most evident in Roman Catholic sexual practices. In the 1940s, Catholic servicemen generally avoided the use of condoms and urged others to do so. Today, a large proportion of communicant Catholics reject, in their behavior and even in their expressed opinions, their leader's injunctions against contraception—a leader they are to regard as infallible. Yet they continue to attend church

services, when they find it convenient, and they continue to donate money to causes that they seem to reject. This kind of moral dishonesty is more deserving of condemnation than those that Ruse labels “unclean” or so absurd as to provide “a sense of farce.”

I can find no disagreement with Ruse on his view of the evolutionary origin of the moral sense. It evolved in our ancestors because it served biological fitness, and it evolved only in the form and to the extent that it had this effect. The form and extent related entirely to a tribal microcosm. I agree completely that its apparent independence of any conscious calculation of utility is entirely to be expected. We are better at convincing others of a proposition if we are ourselves convinced. Likewise, we can deceive others better if we are similarly deceived. We unwittingly deceive ourselves into thinking that there is a natural (God-given) morality because “natural selection serves it up” as such, as Ruse put it in an earlier work (1986, 244). Ruse is right that we evolved to be nepotistic and more closely concerned with familiar associates than with people just as real and needy and deserving on the other side of the earth. I do not see this, as perhaps he does, as regrettable. Here our motivations follow our capabilities. A given amount of effort is likely to be more effective in aiding a child in our own household than in aiding someone else’s. Likewise, we should feel at least a bit more responsible for abuses by Americans in Viet Nam than those by Vietnamese in Viet Nam.

I would also add that natural selection could not have had anything to do with the contemporary macroscopic effects of our moral propensities, either negative or positive. Nationalistic bigotry is an immensely important negative consequence of selection for the ability and inclination to indulge in nepotism and self-seeking deals disguised as morality within tribal microcosms. The important moral challenge today, as R. D. Alexander (1987, 195) so poetically put it, is “within-group amity serving between-group enmity.”

But we can also identify a desire for global human rights as an incidental effect of these same emotions produced for that same microcosm. If there is to be a collective human salvation, it can come only with the aid of this desire, and it has to be as global as possible. We need to be willing to make sacrifices not only for people in Bosnia or the Sudan but also for the twenty-second century and the twenty-second millennium. I have dealt in detail with this issue of a motivation for global unselfishness arising by selection for local selfishness (see Williams 1989).

I have been discussing earthly morality and neglecting the other

facet of religion discussed by Ruse, that of the hereafter. I suggest that the biologically adaptive specificities of the human mind may be a source of far more pervasive self-deception on such matters than Ruse suspects. Human mental capabilities were produced on the basis of one criterion only: how well they served the propagation of the genes that directed their development. They were not selected on the basis of how true a picture of nature they provided but only on how useful a picture, as Wilson (1989) cogently argued. Ruse (1986, 184) applies similar reasoning to the idea that things happen in nature because they are caused to happen. This is a useful idea, but not necessarily a true one. How seriously may our perceptions of reality be distorted by our constraining need to order our views for our elaborately syntactical mode of communication (Pinker and Bloom 1992)? How much self-deception derives from instinctive algorithms that worked well for providing adaptive solutions to problems of Stone Age economics but may be misleading as guides to logic or scientific validity (Cosmides and Tooby 1992)?

A more fundamental difficulty is the total dependence of religious ideas, like those of physical science and evolution, on intuitive perceptions of time. Ruse's speculations about life after death are a good example. What does "after" really mean? Is there some reasoned justification for dividing the course of history into *present*, *past*, and *future*? Does it not strike Ruse as an awfully odd coincidence, with so many billions of years of past cosmic history (and how many in the future?), that the *present* just happens to be within that infinitesimal part between his birth and death? Is there a logical or merely a utilitarian explanation for Alice's constraint: "I can't remember things before they happen" (chapter 5 of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*)? I suspect that questions about the persistence of awareness beyond biological death are so grossly naive as to have no resolution in whatever there may be in the way of reality. I wonder if this idea aggravates or relieves Ruse's terror of "nonbeing."

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