

MY JOURNEY IN THE WORLD OF RELIGION- AND-SCIENCE

by Michael Ruse

I did not consciously choose to get involved in the field of science-religion studies. I suspect that I am not alone in having rather backed into it. I come from a Quaker background, so the thought of studying either religion or theology never once raised its head as an option; we did not have priests, and, although (as I now realize) there is a very distinctive Quaker theology, for young people (as I then was) the teaching was much more directed toward moral and social issues than toward ultimate questions. I was very interested in science, but, finding that I was really not that excited by empirical inquiry, my career as a scholar was turned toward philosophy, a bend in the route of life that I have never regretted. Even then, however, science-religion was not a focus, as I trained and started working as a philosopher of science.

Not until I was around forty (in 1980) did my thoughts started turning seriously to issues in the science-religion field. Professionally, as a philosopher of science, my chosen field of study was evolutionary biology. (Chosen, I might say, for the cynical, academic, ecological reason that there was little work on the topic, and that little was rather bad.) Much influenced by the currents of the time, overwhelmingly so by Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), which urged those interested in the nature of science to turn to its history, I had written a book on the Darwinian Revolution (Ruse 1979). As part of the territory, I had had to deal with the religious aspects of the event, both revealed and natural theological. I stress that this had been only one part of the story—there was also science itself, not to mention philosophy and what one might call social issues.

To my great surprise, I found that this work qualified me to get caught up in the public issues of the day. Born in England, I had of course heard of fundamentalism and I suspect even of the Scopes monkey trial, but, as

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the twentieth century entered its final quarter, I had never suspected that biblical literalism and the subsequent denial of evolution could still be a live issue. It was not the first or last time that I was deeply mistaken! The so-called scientific creationists had great success getting their ideas noticed and eventually began to score successes in influencing school boards, textbook publishers, and eventually the state of Arkansas where a bill was passed mandating the “balanced treatment” of Genesis and evolution in state-supported schools.

Because of my knowledge and expertise, I got involved in the fight, eventually appearing as a witness for the American Civil Liberties Union in its successful attack on the law and its overthrow as something prohibited by the Constitution (Ruse 1988). Naturally, I was pleased and excited, but, although one consequence of this engagement was to bring me into contact with people working in the science-religion field (notably the editor of *Zygon*), I myself did not at once throw up everything and immerse myself in topics on the front between science and religion. In fact, for the past twenty-five years my major project has been a massive study of the nature of cultural values in empirical science—a study that focused on the role of the ideology of social progress in evolutionary thinking from the eighteenth century down to the present. This has led to a series of works, looking at the history (Ruse 1996), trying to relate it philosophically to the nature of science (Ruse 1999), and also seeing how topics like metaphor are significant in guiding (perhaps constraining) our thinking (Ruse 2003).

But, along the way—partly because of my main work—I did start to think seriously and systematically about science and religion as a topic, and in recent years this interest has intensified. It would be a bit glib to say that this interest is purely a function of the fact that I am getting older and hence have a personal stake. It is more because, with my major study now virtually finished, I am able to turn to other topics. Also, I am spurred both by the reincarnation of literalism under the guise of Intelligent Design theory (for instance Johnson 1991; Behe 1996)—something I call Creationism-lite—and by the strident hostility to religion shown by such atheistic evolutionists as Daniel Dennett (2006) and Richard Dawkins (2007). Perhaps, in my distaste for irrationalism and fanaticism of any kind, I am coming full circle back to my Quaker childhood.

Since the beginning of the new millennium I have written two books directly on science-and-religion questions. *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian? The Relationship between Science and Religion* (2001) is more philosophical and takes up the implications of natural selection and random mutation for a spectrum of issues including the place of miracles, the nature of claims about original sin, and the hopes of a God-based moral code. *The Evolution-Creation Struggle* (2005) is more historical and tries to locate the present-day controversies in twin reactions to the Enlighten-

ment, arguing—to the great disgust of the Darwinian fanatics—that it takes two to quarrel and that we evolutionists should look to our motives and claims as well as to those of the other side. I argue this notwithstanding the fact that, in science, I am and always have been a totally dedicated Darwinian—if you doubt this, look at my recent book *Darwinism and Its Discontents* (2006). I think it is fair and balanced, but even my supporters think that the book goes over the top! It therefore tells us something about me and others that my Creationist (and Intelligent Design) friends disagree with me, and yet I detect a note of empathy for what I try to think and say, whereas my fellow Darwinians (the fanatics, that is) are vitriolic in their opposition to whatever I say.

I am coming to the end of my career, but I am not dead yet! (That is why I moved from Canada, which has compulsory retirement, to the United States, which does not.) Asking the question that the editor of *Zygon* has posed to me: What do I think of the present state of science-religion studies? Let me leave on one side more sociological questions like the huge growth, thanks primarily to the largess of the Templeton Foundation. Let me speak more to the intellectual issues.¹

I confess that my feelings about the field of science-religion studies are somewhat like the curate's response when the bishop asked him at breakfast if his egg was fresh. "I do assure you, my Lord, it is good in parts."² There is some wonderful work being done. There is also a lot of second-rate work and much that descends to the level of the truly awful. At my age, I don't too much care about these sorts of things, and in any case I have other arrows in my quiver, but if someone told me that the general academic status of science-religion work was low to awful, I should be confirmed in my suspicions rather than surprised.

I do not think that we have an overall bog-brown with flashes of excellence shining through somewhat randomly. I think some areas are really pretty good—really good—and some are not. In particular, I feel it a privilege to live in an age when the historians are writing on the history of the relationship—more precisely, the relationships—between science and religion. Ron Numbers (1992) on the history of creationism, for instance, and David Livingstone (1987) on conservative Christians and their reactions to evolution (and how the geography matters), and Peter Harrison (2003) on the science-religion relationship at the time of the Reformation—each of their books has left me impressed and far more knowledgeable and understanding. The work in this direction is absolutely terrific.

It is the work in my own field, philosophy (and I suppose it would be fair to include the neighboring area of theology, although I am no theologian), that disappoints me. Article after article, book after book, seems to me to hover between the trivial and the inane. I will never agree with Dennett and Dawkins in their total condemnation of everything, but after reading what is on offer, I do sometimes share their sense of why we should

even bother. Fundamental questions about the nature of existence, about God, about the human being (the soul, for instance), about morality, get thin discussions that rarely ever show ways forward in fertile manners and often—too often—spin wheels, epicycles on epicycles.

I am not saying that nothing good ever gets done. It would be churlish not to recognize the merits of Ian Barbour's textbook on science and religion (1997), surely a valuable introduction to the field. Ernan McMullin's Augustinian reflections on the science-religion divide (1986; 1996; 2000) are always stimulating, although I regret he has never written a systematic theology of the topic. Nancey Murphy (1990) tried in a lively way to bring currents in the philosophy of science to bear on thinking about religion; I am not sure that it worked, but the effort was stimulating and forward-looking. There are other books I could mention. But collectively they do not make an energetic, quality field.

I am hesitant to get too personal and to start naming names. If you look at my writings—especially *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?*²—and judge both by explicit references and even more by those whom I simply ignore on these crucial issues, you will start to get a good idea of those whose work does not inspire me. Here, rather, let me try to pinpoint the reason for my unease and make a suggestion about how I think things might be remedied. Wolfhart Pannenberg has in fact gone before me in making the charge. He has critiqued a leading figure in the science-religion field on the grounds that this figure, although a very eminent scientist, simply does not know his theology. I thought at the time the criticism was a bit harsh—in a way, I still do—but Pannenberg has a point. Too many people in the science-religion field are simply not properly trained. You cannot write on these things without some real understanding of philosophy and theology. A good background in science and a deep Christian faith are not enough.

Admittedly, Dawkins in *The God Delusion* (2007) is a parody of a person who ventures into philosophy and theology without knowing the slightest thing about either, but we in the field of science and religion are not immune from this problem. Take for instance discussions of thought, of consciousness, freedom, the soul, and that entire cluster of things that is so crucial to Christian belief and to virtually every other sophisticated religion. Of course, you need knowledge of contemporary thinking about the brain and so forth. But it is not enough to do what we want to do. You have got to plunge into the philosophy of mind and of action theory and much more. It wouldn't hurt, either, to study some theology, both Roman Catholic and Protestant.³

I suspect a lot of readers will find me irritating and unfair. A lot of people do these days! All I can say is that the converse to what I am faulting is shown by the work in the history of science and religion. Writers such as Numbers and Livingstone are trained historians, and this shows. I suspect that many will charge—many already have charged—that the

trouble lies with me and not with the world. Everybody knows that I am not a believer. And I am not an atheist. I think of myself as an agnostic, or a skeptic, although admittedly I am a bit iffy on most of the claims of Christianity. The charge will be made that I am simply not going to be sympathetic to the work done in science-religion because I am not a believer and hence I do not really want it to succeed. I am using my critical claims as a way to hide my nonbelief.

At one level I can reply only that there may be truth in this. There is an enthusiasm in the field these days for the notion of emergence, an enthusiasm I find extremely irritating. It is not that I necessarily think that emergence is a phony concept but that it seems all too clear that by uncritically embracing emergence people are trying on the cheap or on the sly to get spirituality or some such thing out of material things. It can't be done, folks, and remember you heard it first from me. Judge me prejudiced on such issues or not. I will say, however, that I find it interesting that my prejudice does not go over to history. Livingstone is a Christian, Numbers is not. I think as highly of the work of the first as I do of the second. When I wrote *The Evolution-Creation Struggle* (2005), the work that most influenced me was Mark Noll's *America's God* (2002). I think it a work of genius, and the fact that Noll is an evangelical Christian was the very backbone of the book and what made it so great. I would also say that if the science-religion work cannot impress me—a nonbeliever perhaps, but a sincere friend and fellow traveler certainly—then do not hope for success with others.

So what is my remedy? It is obvious. I think we need to start again. We need to learn to walk before we can run. If I were setting up a program in science and religion—actually I am doing just this within my more general Program in the History and Philosophy of Science at Florida State University—I would have students work hard in fields like the philosophy of mind and of action theory, of ethics and of related areas like game theory, and only then would I let them loose on science-religion. Going the other way, I would have students immerse themselves in the great thinkers—philosophers and theologians—of the past and see how their ideas still speak to us today. How Augustine on time can be related to issues that emerge in modern physics; how Aquinas on natural law relates to entities that have been created by Darwinian selection theory; how Jonathan Edwards on free will gives insight into freedom in a time of Freud and of chemical processes controlling the brain and subsequent action.

Let us stop flying around the world to fancy conferences in beautiful places, and get back to our studies, to our books and to the task of tearing the ideas down and rebuilding with new insights. There is lots of real work waiting to be done. And if it doesn't always pan out as we might like, there will still be real results of great worth. Let us not work to gain respect. Let us work because the task is worthy. The respect will follow.

NOTES

1. Full disclosure: I received a large sum from the Foundation to support the writing of my *Darwin and Design: Does Evolution Have a Purpose?* (2003). I won the money fair and square in a competition, and I wrote what I think is a pretty good book and did it on time. The Foundation was absolutely honorable in paying as they said they would and never even asked for a mention in the Preface. I was proud to take the money and to acknowledge the support publicly.

2. The reference is to a cartoon making fun of the insecurity of a junior clergyman at the table of a very senior clergyman. It was drawn by George Du Maurier, grandfather of the novelist, and appeared in the English comic magazine *Punch* in 1895. I once saw the original. I had been invited to lunch by Nora Barlow, granddaughter of Charles Darwin. The cartoon was hanging on the wall of the dining room of her house in Cambridge. Unlike the time I had lunch with Ralph Burhoe, the founder of *Zygon*, I do not think we started with a grace to natural selection.

3. To tell a story about myself, I learned a huge amount about Christian thinking on the soul from reading Charles Hodge's massive *Systematic Theology* (1872). I turned to it to find ammunition for my claims about nineteenth-century anti-Darwinism but came away with a lot more. (Laugh at me for my naivete if you like, but put me to shame by doing better.)

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