

Book Review: Darwinism as Religion: What Literature Tells Us About Evolution by Michael Ruse

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Ruse, Michael. *Darwinism as Religion: What Literature Tells Us About Evolution*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. xvi + 310 pages. Hardcover, \$38.50.

As a relevant backdrop, Charles Darwin's publication *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859) sparked a change in thinking that became known as the Darwinian Revolution. Darwin argued that all organisms, including humankind, are the end product of a long, slow, natural process of evolution rather than the outcome of intelligent design by an omnipotent God. Michael Ruse, a philosopher of science with a deep knowledge of both the science and the history of the origins of organisms, argues that progress was an important aspect of Darwin's evolution by natural selection, brought on by the ongoing struggle for existence. The book is an impressive and detailed survey of Anglophone modern literature on the subject. It includes elite creative writings by Voltaire, Erasmus, Eliot, Hardy, James, Tennyson, Huxley, Stevenson, Dickinson, Conrad, Sinclair, Vonnegut, McEwan, and Robinson, among others.

The approach through creative writing is an attempt to show that evolutionary theory functioned as a secular religion. Ruse shows that contrary to what many think, including the opinions of the leading historians of the era, the Darwinian revolution was not only scientific, but also religious or metaphysical. The author summarizes Darwin's theory and notes that in its early reception, some recognized the potential for it to serve as a replacement for the creation narrative in the *Bible's* Book of Genesis. He demonstrates that through Darwin, evolutionary thought challenged Christian Scripture and made an effort to supplant it as a secular religion.

The introductory chapters highlight that the most important contribution of Darwin was the transition of evolutionary thought from pseudoscience to popular science. However, in what specific ways is science a religion or unlike religion? Ruse invokes Richard Dawkins, best known for his books *The Selfish Gene* (1976) and *The God Delusion* (2006), who argues that while religious faith lacks evidence, science is based on verifiable evidence. What's more, Darwinian evolutionary theory adopts the norms of good science, including coherence, consistency, and predictive ability. Invariably, religion is a belief system based solely on faith. So what makes Darwinism a competing religion? It not only provides alternative explanations about origins and the struggle for existence, its adherents believe in it with passionate conviction. Interestingly, Robert Louis Stevenson's *the Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) underscores the notion that Christianity and Darwinism are rivals; hence, different reflections of the same reality.

Ruse discusses some of the preoccupations of the Christian faith—God, origins, humans, morality, race, class, redemption, and the afterlife—and shows how many people thought, and continue to think, in ways that reject long-established Christian doctrines and are, in fact, based on Darwin's insights. In this context, by presenting evolutionary thinking in traditional theological categories, Ruse demonstrates that evolutionary thinking, like Christianity, requires

faith. Thus, in outlining a systematic theology of evolution throughout the book, Ruse argues that Darwinism is a secular, religious alternative to Christianity.

Beginning with the concept of God and the origin of the universe, the author contends that some creative writers like Thomas Henry Huxley, nicknamed Darwin's 'bulldog,' wanted to replace the old Christian theology with the new scientific theology of Darwinism. It is noted that, like Christians, evolutionists struggle to explain the origin of the universe. In addition, both in the past, as in the present, some thinkers have expressed concern about existential issues that confront humankind, such as suffering, the meaning of life, and the problem of evil. On this score, Voltaire, following the devastating Lisbon Earthquake of 1755, lamented in his poems the image of God that remained indifferent to the death and suffering for which He should feel responsible. If God, Voltaire queried, wants to remove evil and is able to remove evil, why then does evil exist? Alternatively, if God, he asserts, does not want to remove evil and is unable to remove evil, then God is neither benevolent nor omnipotent. Darwinians believe that natural evil is the cost of a functioning universe; Ruse explains that, basically, morality is founded in the evolution of pro-social behaviors in culture. In contrast, moral evil is believed to happen as a function of human free will because humans have a natural inclination to selfishness. Ergo, we expect humans to be a mixture of good and evil.

With respect to race and class, Christianity endorses these concepts and suggests that the differences can be significant. The Old Testament of the *Bible* indicates that some people are especially favored by God. For example, the Israelites are said to be the chosen people, whereas the others are not. Darwin's family was completely dedicated to the abolition of slavery, and Darwin asserted in *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871) that all humans are one stock, but there are massive differences within the species, including differences in constitution, acclimatization, liability to certain diseases, as well as in emotions and intellectual faculties.

Regarding redemption and the afterlife, Christianity dangles enticing incentives to believers by way of Heaven, eternal life, and bliss with the Creator. However, does Heaven exist or is it merely a projected wish fulfillment? Darwinian evolution offers a strikingly different explanation. As Ruse puts it, "Things are born, they grow, they live, they decline, they die, they rot.... We don't and shouldn't look for spiritual or divine purpose and all the dangerous nonsense that goes with such a search" (p. 255). This sentiment is echoed in current works such as Christopher Hitchens' (2007) text *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*.

Ruse's scholarship is thorough and engages deep questions that have concerned novelists and poets for a very long time. One singular takeaway from *Darwinism as Religion: What Literature Tells Us About Evolution* is that evolutionary theory functioned as a secular religion with its own tenets of faith and orthodoxy. It is doubtful that the book will convert the conventional religious faithful; nonetheless, the discussion is a worthwhile read for everyone

particularly students and academics in the fields of English literature, religion, biology, and the history of science.

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