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Review of *Darwinism as Religion* by Michael Ruse

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Darwinism as Religion: What literature tells us about evolution by Michael Ruse

Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2016. 328 pages, ISBN: 9780190241025. £43.49 (hardcover).

I have great appreciation for the late Professor Michael Ruse. He was an important voice in both the history and philosophy of science, and science and religion for a very long time and his passing last year was a big loss. His examination of the challenges around evolution and religion was a strong focus of both his research and popular writing. Ruse, having personally been an expert witness in some of the clashes (the 1981 McLean versus Arkansas trial), is one of the most qualified to write a work such as *Darwinism as Religion: What Literature Tells Us About Evolution*.

On its release, this book gained popular praise from those that oppose evolution. Given Ruse's opposition to the New Atheism, he was often cited by those opposed to a resolute materialism or scientistic dogmatism. In particular, Ruse is much used by creationists and those from the Intelligent Design movement, forgetting that Ruse himself approved of the verdict in the 2005 Kitzmiller versus Dover trial that ruled Intelligent Design was not science. My concern regarding this particular work of Ruse is that the title is cited rather than its content. Ruse has previously explored the scientific roots and history of evolutionary biology, but this work seeks to explore its popular influence and expression in the arts and literature.

This book is *not* a genetic fallacy, by which I mean that it does not explain away evolution due to its background or the conditions behind its emergence. From the introduction, Ruse makes clear that this is not a historical exploration of why evolution as an idea came into being through social, political, philosophical and environmental factors. Anyone looking to Ruse for evidence that Darwinism is *just* a religion will not find justification here. Instead, what Ruse seeks to achieve is an explanation of Darwinian thinking since *On The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man* as taking the form and role of a religion in opposition to the world system from which it emerged, principally Christianity (p. ix). This might sound promising to the opponents of evolution, but he is not saying that evolution is just that, more that it has taken the role of a "secular religious perspective" (p. ix) in its location of humans. Emphatically, he says "I am very much NOT saying that this is all there is to be said about evolutionary thinking" (p. x).

The first part of the book is a background of the philosophical and literary climate in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that preceded Darwin's work. Ruse outlines over the course of 300 years how evolutionary theory has influenced literature and the arts and vice versa. The Victorians seemed to see evolution coming (p. 7) and were more than happy to welcome its view of progress (p. 11). Progress is read into evolution and society even

today by many, as it was then. The resistance to religion articulately inherited through David Hume and Voltaire rallies evolution to its corner through the lens of Progress and is opposed by those wary of its pull (p. 13). Ruse commits time and an impressive array of sources to exploring how the role of Progress as a philosophy shaped the perception of evolution.

The second part of the book is committed to deepening the intellectual exploration of the ground before 1859. Ruse remarks that evolution was “not some new enthusiasm” (p. 33). The interplay of the emerging science and philosophical background are blended well. Perhaps surprisingly to some, neither deism nor materialism are principally in view. Alfred Tennyson among others shows a Christian openness to evolution pre-Darwin (p. 35). To those that blame Darwin for everything, Ruse makes it so plain how the theory was right there, ready to be discovered and accepted by Christian and non-Christian alike. Indeed, Ruse is keen to give most blame to the German textual critics (p. 40) for all the damage to Christianity.

The third part of the book deals with Darwin’s ideas as expressed in *On The Origin Of Species* and *The Descent of Man*. Those familiar with Ruse’s other books will recognise the expertise and wealth of background knowledge he calls upon. Darwin is no anti-Christian demolition man, and Ruse explains why. He is also no apologist for Progress (p. 48). Darwin’s underlying philosophy is deconstructed for what it is around questions of morality, human behaviour and epistemology. Given the importance of sexual selection to his theory, *The Descent of Man* is shown as a product of its time as well as scientific observation (p. 51). As the reader moves on, Ruse makes plain the popular and academic disagreement with Darwin’s claims as well as those of Thomas Henry Huxley and Alfred Russell Wallace.

As the book progresses, Ruse takes a chapter each to examine individual sources of tension and shows how Darwinian thinking has permeated modern thought in a manner characteristic of religion for many issues such as God, race, morality, sex, and human value amongst all animals. I appreciate his speculation on the future of a post-Darwinian world as the wisdom of a writer that has witnessed much of the movement of evolutionary perspective: “In the post-Darwinian world, not only does nature not sing, it is hard to hear the tunes of heaven either” (p. 282). His summaries of the individual topics are accessible to those with no background in either the science or the philosophy. However, despite the title, I expect those protesting that evolution is not a religion will find themselves well satisfied with Ruse as an ally after all.

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