

# DARWINISM AS RELIGION: WHAT LITERATURE TELLS US ABOUT EVOLUTION

*By Michael Ruse. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016*

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In his book *Darwinism as Religion: What Literature Tells Us About Evolution* Michael Ruse presents an argument for viewing Darwinism as a form of secular religion. He adopts an intersectional approach for viewing Darwinism so that we understand it is not only a scientific concept but that it also holds an important place in mainstream culture due to its close associations with Christian religion and British literature. The argument Ruse presents is based on the polythetic definition of religion, which places importance on a number of features, but does not solely rely on a single one of them.<sup>1</sup> The discussion of these different features – God, origins, humans, race and class, morality, sex, sin, and redemption – comprise Ruse’s discussion of the supplanting of Christianity by Darwinism beginning in the nineteenth century. By tracing the evolution of thought from the eighteenth century onwards through a discussion of canonical writers, such as Lord Byron, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy, Ruse makes the concept of evolution more accessible to those in the humanities.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Ruse, *Darwinism as Religion: What Literature Tells us about Evolution* (New York: Oxford UP, 2016), 82.

Through his use of the work of writers who make up the Western canon, and with whom we as readers are familiar, Ruse is able to trace the direction of mainstream thought on ideas of progress and evolution from the eighteenth century through to the twenty-first century. He begins with a discussion of the idea of progress in the eighteenth century, outlining the concept of progress as the theoretical “straw that broke the camel’s back” and allowed eighteenth century thinkers to begin to move away from a creationist understanding of the origin of life and a movement toward evolution. He begins with a discussion of William Godwin, who was involved in writing both theoretical texts and novels, and his novel *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams* is perceived as a vehicle for disseminating his ideas on philosophy and psychology to the masses. Using the example of Godwin, Ruse accentuates his theory that the idea of progress which would give way to evolutionary thinking was established during the latter half of the eighteenth century and establishes his technique for the rest of the book.

Into the nineteenth century the concept of progress, and therefore evolution, was pitted against religion. Although the political climate of the early nineteenth century in Britain was tense Ruse is still able to provide several literary examples of progress in the work of writers such as visionary poet William Blake, Jane Austen, and Charles Dickens. Blake was considered a radical, but issues of progress are also presented in the work of conservatives like Austen who understood that “things cannot stand still.”<sup>2</sup> The most interesting part of Ruse’s discussion comes when he shows the direct correlation between a piece of literature and the scientific theories contemporary to it. An example of this parallel is found in the work of Georges Cuvier, who opposed social progress, but nevertheless began work on a progressive fossil record, which Lord Byron reflects in *Don Juan*. The interaction between literature and the scientific world illustrates the prominence of the ideas of progress and evolution in Britain during the first half of the nineteenth century.

With the publication of *Origin of Species* (1859) and *Descent of Man* (1871) Darwin attempted to establish evolution as a professional scientific enterprise. He was not entirely successful in this endeavour, but he was successful in making evolution a popular science of the “public domain.”<sup>3</sup> Ruse makes a strong case for the importance of the role that novelists and poets played in interpreting and disseminating Darwin’s ideas. The idea that thinking within a Darwinian framework became a ubiquitous feature of the public sphere in the late nineteenth century is well established by Ruse, but he also brings attention to the fact that the community of professional scientists was the foremost critic of Darwin’s theories. Thus, evolution existed as popular science, but less so professionally, in the late nineteenth century and this widespread popularity helped to cement Darwinism in our collective consciousness.

Ruse goes on to juxtapose Darwinism against Christianity on the areas of God, origins, humans, race and class, morality, sex, sin, and redemption, which he identifies as the important features of a polythetic religion. Christianity was already in a state of decline when evolution gained popularity and Ruse examines the new approach which Darwinism provided to each area of religious life. It is interesting to note that the discussion of Darwinism as popular science was widespread throughout literary circles, even amongst dedicated Christians, who were quick to recognise the sauropod in the room. This active discussion of Darwinism as a secular form of religion in popular culture is reviewed in each chapter using pieces of literature which take either side of the argument, or in some cases contrasting the debate within a single piece of literature. Many of the ideas which Darwinism helped to spread were already being considered in literary circles prior to *Origin of Species* being published in 1859, with poets such as Walt Whitman contemplating the “nigh inconceivability of history.”<sup>4</sup> Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Lewis Carroll filled Victorian imaginations with images of fantastic creatures like the Jabberwocky, which readers could then experience in person in museums around the world.

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3 Ibid., 58.

4 Ibid., 103.

For Carroll, who was an Anglican Minister, and Conan Doyle, raised as a Catholic and remained spiritual throughout his life,<sup>5</sup> this interaction with the questions raised by progress and Darwinism illustrates the level of engagement and complicates the idea of reducing the debate to one of Christianity versus Darwinism. In the chapter “Sin and Redemption” the opposing viewpoints of evil are in discussion in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). The double reading, of original sin and “evolutionary parable”<sup>6</sup> show us the “different reflections of the same reality”<sup>7</sup> which were at odds in the late nineteenth century. This possibility of a double reading is reflective of not only the ongoing debate within popular culture, but also an internal debate taking place within the individual about the coexistence of religion and progress in one’s life.

Ruse contends that by the 1930s Darwinism and the theory of evolution have fully saturated Western society, while simultaneously receiving scientific accreditation through neo-Darwinian advances in science. This neo-Darwinian explosion, supported by molecular genetics, led to numerous areas of science that were fully professionalised—behaviour, paleontology biogeology, classification, anatomy, and embryology.<sup>8</sup> As knowledge of Darwinism and evolution became widespread the debate between religion and Darwinism lessened, but the ideas always remained in the background. As evidence of this Ruse presents us with a wide variety of mid-twentieth-century Anglo-American literature, ranging from William Faulkner to Kurt Vonnegut. As the twentieth century advanced, literature itself took as its point of departure Darwinian notions of progress, carrying over the intellectual controversies and polemics from the nineteenth century. Ruse shows us that these philosophical speculations were responsible for keeping Darwinism as popular science flourishing and at the forefront of popular culture.

The continued popularity of Darwinism sparked a reli-

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5 Ibid., 109.

6 Ibid., 194.

7 Ibid., 195.

8 Ibid., 222.

gious backlash from evangelical Christians and with the backlash “the rise of Creationism and related beliefs.”<sup>9</sup> To prove his thesis Ruse once again provides interesting literature from both sides of the debate, but the writers he cites from the late twentieth century also tend to increasingly come from the world of academia. On one side of the debate is the poetry of Philip Appleman, a professor and former editor of *Darwin: Norton Critical Edition* and on the other side the work of the Inklings, particularly C.S. Lewis, also an academic, but who was a devout Christian and “did not much care for science.”<sup>10</sup> The transition of the debate between Darwinism and religion into the classroom is an interesting point in the discussion which could serve to be investigated further. As an end to the discussion of the literary debate of the late-twentieth century Ruse situates the Christian viewpoint, saying, “Darwinism does not vanquish Christianity. Christianity absorbs Darwinism and thereby grows.”<sup>11</sup> This sentiment seems to be granting a degree of acceptance to the ideas of progress (to be used in support of religion) which have been influencing the religious and non-religious alike in Western culture for 300 years.

The final chapter in Ruse’s book, “Conflicting Visions,” continues to place the focus on the divide between Darwinism and Christianity, but through a post-9/11 lens. Here Ruse contends that this catastrophic event has caused an even greater divide between Darwinism and Christianity. Tracing the idea of progress and Darwinism over 300 years reveals to readers that as a society we have made little progress in coming to a consensus on the discussion. For Ian McEwan his writing in a post-9/11 world has turned more toward science than ever before and for Marilyn Robinson her work does the opposite—it attempts to ground us within ideas of Providence. It would appear that Anglo-American literature has become more partisan since the destruction of the twin towers, and Robinson sees Neo-Darwinism itself as a threat to the humanities,<sup>12</sup> due to the focus it places on science. On oppo-

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9 Ibid., 252.

10 Ibid., 258.

11 Ibid., 265.

12 Ibid., 280.

site ends of the spectrum, Robinson sees progress as “false hope,”<sup>13</sup> while McEwan sees “progress as everything” claiming that “Providence is a dated superstition.”<sup>14</sup> With this continued disagreement in mind Ruse ends the book in our current post-Darwinian world, realizing that we have still not reached the end of this debate, and we must continue in this ambiguous state.

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13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.