Booknotes

War, Christianity and Darwinism are all interesting and important topics, but not perhaps, on the surface at least, with much to connect them. In *The Problem of War: Darwinism, Christianity and Their Battle to Understand Human Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press) Michael Ruse shows that there are in fact quite close connections and overlaps between the three. Christianity is a religion with a highly developed notion of original sin and a well thought out theory of justice and war (*jus ad bellum* and, importantly, *jus in bello*). Darwinism is, of course, a scientific theory, but its founders, starting with Darwin himself often take the science into realms of value, and so can be seen as, in a sense, religious. Furthermore, Darwin's own thinking in many areas has its roots in his Christian upbringing, and in the hands of some of its proponents, from T.H.Huxley and his grandson Julian, to E.O.Wilson as attempting to transform the science into a religion of progress, something to which Darwin himself was not wholly immune. Moreover, many of the most influential Christians and Darwinians will come together in seeing human beings as innately aggressive, violent and warlike (original sin, on the one hand, our biologically instinctive struggle to survive and propagate on the other). There is, then, a common starting point when we come to war.

Ruse's book is around 270 pages long, and through its pages walk a multitude of figures, great and small, from St Augustine and Darwin themselves right down to Nigel Biggar and Steven Pinker of our own day. Biggar represents a modern take on the Christian just war tradition (and on the necessity of war), while the Darwinian Pinker argues that there is hope of a secular sort, that our culture has developed in such a way that war may become increasingly anachronistic. Into this disagreement Ruse throws the interesting suggestion that both mainstream Augustinian Christianity and the preponderant Darwinian view may be wrong. Human nature may not be inherently wicked and aggressive, so our behavior may be redeemable by our own efforts, through culture and custom. Maybe too, as Robert Holmes, whom Ruse quotes, argues, a belief in original sin has acted as a self-fulfilling prophecy, its pessimism allowing Christians to acquiesce more than they should in war and evil more generally. Had the Church clung to its earlier practice of non-violence, how different might the history of the world have been? Some of the more

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intriguing passages in Ruse's book point to thinkers from both traditions who have bucked the inherently wicked strain in their traditions, Quakers such as W.C.Allee and W.H.Thorpe and a number of contemporary anthropologists who argue that hunter-gather-humans were, in the main, peaceable. On this view war, far from being an ever present temptation in humanity, arose as people settled in agricultural complexes, from which towns and states developed, leading to rising populations, border clashes and the development of better (or worse) weaponry.

This last suggestion is significant as the predominant Darwinian view, from Darwin's *The Descent of Man* to Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature* is that civilization in the form of towns and states has led to individuals curbing their naturally aggressive tendencies so as to extend their social instincts and sympathies to people in their own nation that they do not know, and ultimately to humanity as a whole. That, at least, is the hope. But what if we were not aggressive or sinful to start with? What if we were not killers to start with or (if we are Christians) we dispense with what Ruse calls 'Augustinian hang-ups'? That, at least, is where Ruse, himself an erstwhile Quaker, though a one-time proponent of original sin, as he tells us, leaves things at the end of his discussion.

It will be obvious even from this summary account that Ruse's treatment of the many figures he refers to is very broad brush. There is also a kind of mateyness about the style, in which author and reader are assumed to conspire: thus Newman 'scarpered off to the Church of Rome'; J.B.S. Haldane 'reveled in killing Germans, other soldiers did not altogether relish his enthusiasm, which was liable to attract fire to them'; while on Darwin's own view on war, war 'led to human beings. It may not be pleasant but then neither is going to the dentist.' This flippancy all gets a bit wearing and wearying. As does another thing. Not writing in sentences.

Style aside, apart from the interesting comparisons between Christianity and Darwinism, Ruse's argument is certainly thought-provoking. It is, though, difficult to assess. As he himself shows, the various twists and turns given to Darwinism since its original formulation go way beyond what follows from the science. This is also true of Darwin himself, as anyone who takes the trouble to read even a few pages of *The Descent of Man* will quickly realise, and as Ruse himself shows. All kinds of cultural influences are at work in the conclusions Darwin and other writers draw from the biology, as no doubt is true in analogous ways of the development of Christian doctrine.

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Having said all this, though, it is not clear that original sin/inherent aggressiveness can be dispatched so easily. We might all like it to be a matter of culture and environment, and, as Pinker suggests, to be able to move into an era of perpetual peace through moral and institutional developments. As Ruse reminds us, even strict science is not always value-free (he is anti-Popperian here), let alone extrapolations from science and history to more fundamental positions. At the end of his book Ruse states that 'the Augustinian human simply doesn't exist'. Is this a matter of decidable fact? Or is it itself a matter of balancing experience, history and knowledge of human nature, as far as one is able to do this, a process which may have got no further since the time of Homer, Plato, and, dare we say it, Jesus and Augustine? One of the figures Ruse devotes most time to in his book is the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, a committed Christian, who argued strongly for Christianly virtuous behavior in one's private life, while at the same time conceding that in certain circumstances, war being one of them, the choice will be for the lesser of two evils. And this is because, in Niebuhr's words, arguing against pacifists, 'their conviction is an illusion, because there are definite limits of moral goodwill and social intelligence beyond which even the most vital religion and the most astute educational programme will not carry a social group, whatever may be possible for individuals in an intimate society.' Niebuhr, speaking from a Christian perspective, goes on to say that the New Testament 'does not envisage a simple triumph of good over evil in history. It sees human history involved in the contradiction of sin to the end. That is why it sees no simple resolution to the problem of history.' Or, to put it in secular terms, solutions to old problems, of war, of politics, of institutions, always bring with them new problems, however well-meaning and clever we might be.

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