

Religion and biology beyond conflict

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Darwinism and Divinity: Essays on Evolution and Religious Belief. Edited by John Durant. Basil Blackwell: 1985. Pp.210. £15, \$24.95.

ONE of the main intellectual trends of the past 25 years has been the growing sensitivity to the sociology of knowledge. Our most carefully reasoned views, we are constantly being reminded, are shaped by complex affiliations and considerations that seem to have little to do with our reasoning itself. The impact of these extra-rational factors has long been recognized in areas involving soft reasoning, such as political thought. The revolution of the past 25 years is that such factors have come to be widely regarded as playing a large part in even our hard empirical reasoning. A host of post-Kuhnian historians of science have reinforced this point. Natural science, they argue, takes place not in the stable environments that we might imagine, but (to borrow an image from Richard Lewontin) as though bouncing back and forth on multiple trampolines of cultural forces that it both reshapes and is redirected by.

Nowhere are the reciprocal interactions of scientific and non-scientific cultural forces more evident than in the history of Darwinism. Most centrally, Darwinism has always aroused passions because it has been so mixed up with religion or the lack thereof. In addition, Darwinism and divinity do not even exhaust the principal forces in the interplay. As the present volume shows, both of them constantly have been used to promote or attack various social-political programmes. So while modern biology is shaped largely by a valid internal logic, its repeated interactions with these two most emotionally laden cultural activities, religion and politics, have long made it difficult to keep a clear focus on simply the biological issues.

Darwinism and Divinity is a series of essays which has grown out of a conference organized by the British Society for the History of Science in 1982. The works here selected reflect the rapidly growing consensus of the past decade that the old conflict paradigm for understanding relations between religion and science, even biological science, simply fails. John Durant, the editor, describes the volume as a kaleidoscope of knowledge in which each chapter reshapes the subject of religion and biological theory and displays new sets of relationships. If there is a coherence to such a design, it is in the underlying principle that the subject of biological thought and divinity is more complex than most people realize.

Whether by accident or design, the

essays display a number of other themes. Most central is that biological evolution constantly has been used illicitly to support differing views of the world. In his survey of a century of debate over Darwinism and religion, Durant speaks of the "idolatry" of the "deification of evolutionary process". Mary Midgley picks up this theme in "The Religion of Evolution", built around the thesis that "Evolution is the creation-myth of our age". Midgley points out that scientists themselves are sometimes guilty of misuse of science to support world-views. Once they get beyond the technical aspects of their books, she alleges, they abandon all their careful intellectual standards and engage in the wildest speculation and prophesy. Durant points out that, ironically, such misuses of evolutionary science to legitimate world-views encourages the forces of religious anti-evolutionism.

Another central motif is that Darwinism and divinity have often supported each other. John Hedley Brooke, in a particularly strong study, shows that Darwin was not simply reacting against Paley's argument for God's existence based on the design in nature, but that Paley's thought provided some of the structure for Darwin's own analysis. Darwin's loss of faith in providential guidance, which Brooke looks at closely, was connected largely to his moral revulsion at a God who would permit so much suffering. Since widespread death and suffering was not a discovery original to the nineteenth century, it may be added, this moral objection (common among Darwin's contemporaries) may have had as much to do with the character of nineteenth-century upper-class Protestantism as with Darwin's technical work.

The more substantial positive relationship between Darwinism and divinity has been in the many accommodations that theologians have made between biological evolution and Christian faith. A. R. Peacocke, in another of the outstanding contributions, traces some of these. He also presents his own view. However the Universe started, it had at least the potential to produce human beings who can think about it. The postulate of God is necessary to make sense of the "intellectually coherent and explorable existence which science continually unveils". God is continually creating the world, relating to it as a composer relates to a performance of his music. The performance is both independent of him and intimately an expression of his creativity. God is an improviser of unsurpassed ingenuity, working out through evolutionary processes all sorts of potentialities in his universe.

The past century has produced many such reconciliations. Why then has the mythology prevailed that evolutionary theories and Christianity are usually in conflict? One of the many reasons becomes clearer from Jim (formerly James R.)

Moore's essay on the use of evolution by liberal Protestants in the late nineteenth century. Moore, always interesting, suggests that the great disaster for biological evolution was that it was so successfully adapted, especially by theologians, to supporting liberal culture. When liberal culture was later perceived to fail, the orthodox canons of its scientific basis understandably came under attack from everyone from Marxists to fundamentalists.

A similar point is made in Eileen Barker's insightful essay on the fundamentalist attacks on modern biology. Barker also observes that science today is unrivalled as a standard for epistemology, but is distrusted as a source of metaphysics. Resentment of science is also related to "almost a religious mystique about the inner gnoses of modern science", a problem exacerbated by everyone's dependence on the authority of specialists. When, in addition, natural science is so widely used to support various claims about the world, it seems to many to be operating on a religious plane.

Reshaking the kaleidoscope turns up some odd relationships. In an apparent fit of fairness to all viewpoints, the editor includes an essay by an anthropologist and a sociologist that attempts, plausibly but simplistically, to explain religious teachings on sexuality in terms of their function for promoting human survival. The authors use modern data to explain some ancient religious teachings and their reductionist assumptions seem to exemplify tendencies that other authors deplore.

The "kaleidoscopic" organization of the book provides only glimpses of the subject and will not fully satisfy those looking for systematic analysis. Nonetheless, the volume succeeds in its apparent purpose. It points out, often with insight, that recent cultural exploration of the history of science reveals relationships between modern biology and religion that have many more sides than the old warfare metaphors allowed us to see. □

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