

Theology Forum **Brief**

An On-line Publication of the CU Theology Forum

Theology Forum Staff

Director, Ed. L. Miller

Assistants:

Austin Smith, Daniel Smith, & Theresa Weynand

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From the Director

Some hiatuses are longer than others. After the publication of *The Theology Forum Brief*, No. 9, we are finally ready with No. 10—after fifteen years. The *Brief* was always thought of as an occasional newsletter, but maybe not *that* occasional!

Also, it has become apparent that, given the new world computer technology, it is no longer feasible (at least not for the Theology Forum) to print, issue, and mail a hard version of the *Brief*. The *Brief* will henceforth be an *electronic* newsletter, readily accessible by means of the Theology Forum website: www.colorado.edu/philosophy/TheoForum.

In the meantime, the Theology Forum has continued its good work, initiated way back in 1967, of providing a lecture series, a one-hour weekly seminar, and many other but less clearly defined activities. It is, as we think of it, A Center for Theological/Philosophical Discussion. The slash is important. It suggests the *intersection* of the disciplines of theology and philosophy. The word "discussion," too, is important. It emphasizes that the Theo Forum (as we usually call it) seeks to cultivate, in a variety of ways, a dialogical—not to say a little diabolical—give-and-take.

Sponsored by the Philosophy Department of the University of Colorado, at Boulder, the Theo Forum is perhaps something unique among state colleges and universities in the United States. Untold numbers of students at CU have found in the various activities of the Theo Forum a kind of "haven"—as it has been called—in which their self-conscious interest in matters theological may be cultivated. The resurrection of the *Brief* and the addition of a website, along with a renewal of our existing programs, will, we hope, be a means of continuing and extending the Forum's usefulness.

By the way, it could not be done (at least not on the desired scale) without the generosity of committed donors.

Ed. L. Miller, Director, Theology Forum

Michael Ruse, *Can a Darwinian Be A Christian? The Relationship Between Science and Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Hardcover, 242 + xi pages. \$24.95.

Reviewed by James F. Sennett, Professor of Philosophy and Interdisciplinary Studies, Lincoln Christian College and Seminary, Lincoln, Illinois.

2001 marks twenty years since the American Civil Liberties Union successfully sued the State of Arkansas to overturn a law requiring the teaching of scientific creationism in public schools alongside the theory of biological evolution. That trial was the symbolic beginning of a new round of warfare between the proponents of special creation and the advocates of naturalistic Darwinism. Throughout these twenty years, one of the most prominent voices in the latter camp has been that of the ACLU's chief expert witness, Michael Ruse, now Lucyle T. Werkmeister Professor of Philosophy at Florida State University.

Now we have from Ruse's prolific and always entertaining pen a book that raises a question as profound as it is ironic. I say "ironic" because, based on the literature the creation-evolution debate has produced, one would think the answer to the question quite obvious, and about the only thing that scholars on both sides could agree on. Were we to pose the question "are Darwinism and Christianity compatible" of such evolutionary heroes as Richard Dawkins, Stephen J. Gould, P. T. Atkins, or E. O. Wilson, the response would be a resounding and univocal "NO!" Were we to inquire likewise of old line creationists like Henry Morris, John Whitcomb, or Duane Gish, or of the new breed of intelligent design advocates like William Dembski, Philip Johnson, or Michael Behe, we would again receive a unanimous denial. So will Ruse dare to break ranks with this rare and adamant agreement?

The answer is a most adamant "yes." In this work Ruse offers a staunch, thorough, and (for this reviewer, at least) thoroughly convincing defense of the compatibility of evolution and biblical creation. After introductory chapters on Darwinism and Christianity, he systematically addresses ten issues of apparent conflict between the two: the origin of human life, the nature of human beings, the doctrine of naturalism, the notion of design, the problem of pain, extraterrestrial life, Christian ethics, social Darwinism, sociobiology, and freedom and determinism. With each of these he argues that proper and defensible understandings of Darwinism and Christianity can support the adoption of both into one worldview.

Of course, the proper and defensible understandings he proposes are not ones that will satisfy the zealots in the opposing camps. For instance, the brand of Darwinism he advocates is one that does not entail or even strongly suggest metaphysical naturalism. For those who see in Darwinism a secular salvation that renders all supernatural religions superfluous, this will never do. On the other hand, the Christianity he sees compatible with Darwinism is one that does not adhere to a literal historical reading of the Genesis creation stories or to any kind of "special" creation that maintains immutable integrity of all living species. For those who insist that all truth is literal truth, this likewise will be completely unacceptable.

Ruse never claims to have found a path between these two systems of belief that will satisfy everyone and end the conflict. He claims only to show that there *need* not be conflict between the two – that conflict only comes if someone chooses not to relinquish non-essential doctrines of either Darwinism or Christianity. And this he does show admirably. I believe Ruse's chief contribution is to show that the creation-evolution debate is almost always a

debate over peripherals – a debate over issues that are near and dear to the hearts of the debaters but far afield from the essentials of Darwinism or Christianity. As long-time creation-evolution compatibilist John Clayton is fond of saying, “It’s not science vs. religion; it’s scientists vs. theologians.”

As a Christian who has been a creation-evolution compatibilist for many years (ever since I discovered the illuminating writings of Howard Van Til), it is refreshing finally to hear a prominent advocate of Darwinism proclaim his compatibilist convictions. Since the days of Teilhard de Chardin, it has never been difficult to find noted theists who understand their faith to be fully capable of incorporating evolutionary theory. Today the most important theologians in the science-religion dialogue movement – people like Robert J. Russell, John Polkinghorne, Arthur Peacocke, Keith Ward, Nancy Murphy, Ian Barbour, and Philip Clayton – are unanimous in their support of compatibilism. On the other hand, I do not know of a single prominent voice in the evolution sciences who has publicly pronounced compatibilist convictions before Ruse.

I also highly commend Ruse for the obvious care he took in studying Christianity. His knowledge of the history of the church, the development of certain theological doctrines, and the relationship between different branches of Christendom is both accurate and impressive.

While he often (and understandably) places inordinate weight on Catholic theology and history, his overall treatment of Christianity is more noted theists who understand their faith to be fully capable of incorporating evolutionary theory. Today the most important theologians in the science-religion dialogue movement – people like Robert J. Russell, John Polkinghorne, Arthur Peacocke, Keith Ward, Nancy Murphy, Ian Barbour, and Philip Clayton – are unanimous in their support of compatibilism. On the other hand, I do not know of a single prominent voice in the evolution sciences who has publicly pronounced compatibilist convictions before Ruse.

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The only substantive criticism I have is that there are places where Ruse makes his task too difficult – it is not as hard to defend compatibilism as he sometimes imagines. These places are usually related to the supposed metaphysical implications of Darwinism. Ruse is convinced that Darwinism connotes a rigidly deterministic, invariably law-governed universe, and so can only achieve his compatibility in such areas as miracles and free will by adopting highly suspect reinterpretations of these doctrines that many thinking Christians – perhaps the vast majority – would reject.

Ruse is unnecessarily intimidated by a universe with genuine elbow room, despite the continued evidence from quantum mechanics, chaos theory, cybernetics, and many other branches of science that that is exactly the kind of universe we have. But surely the mounting evidence for indeterminism does not compromise the evidence supporting the theory of evolution. After all, Darwin saw his system as one driven by *chance* and necessity. The willingness to convert the status of that chance from epistemic to metaphysical does not thwart Darwinism, and it makes creation-evolution compatibility that much easier to defend.

Between Boulder and a Hard Text: Reading the Bible at CU
Prof. E. Christian Kopff, University of Colorado, Boulder

For I. A. Richards, Homer's Iliad, Plato's Republic and the Bible are the books that "concern all who need to understand the culture" of the West, because they are the principal sources of that culture. In the spring semester of 2001, the Honors Program introduced its own Introduction to the Bible. Like other Honors courses, it has limited enrollment and concentrates on careful reading and discussion of selected texts. (It also helps satisfy the University of Colorado's Historical Context requirement.) The challenges of teaching works that have been influential for a long time involve helping students understand both what these works may have meant at the time of their first appearance and what they can still mean to us today. Students often struggle to see why the Iliad and Republic still matter today. The opposite is true for the Bible. Students understand or think they understand why the Bible is relevant, even if they disapprove of that relevance. The problem is to perceive it as fresh and new, to see Abraham as a wandering nomad or David as a politician, torn between power politics and sexual passion, to be shocked by Jesus knocking over the moneychangers' tables or be impressed by Paul's learned address to the Athenian Areopagus.

The contemporary state university offers additional challenges. Although it parades superficial diversity of gender and ethnicity, it discourages the open discussion of differences in politics and religion. Students often have little experience in seeing and participating in frank but fair discussions about what matters most to many people. Without practice, it is hard to subject a differing point of view to rigorous criticism while respecting the other person's sincerity. Teachers can be tempted just as easily as students by the twin temptations of a frivolous toleration of sincere illogic or an ad hominem attack that avoids the real intellectual issues.

There were surprises for everybody. Students were surprised at how few rules there were and how much of the Bible consists of stories and poetry. They were impressed at the bad behavior not just of minor characters and set villains like Jezebel, but important figures like Jacob and David. Their teacher was surprised to meet students for whom the importance of Biblical models and ideals for today's world is unproblematic. Of course, others kept asking, "How did such different attitudes and beliefs ever end up creating, or even contributing to, the world we live in today?"

Even more than for Homer and Plato, there are many Bibles. For some it is the book of the Ten Commandments. They are uneasy when Abraham argues with God about the exact number of just people whose absence would justify the destruction of Sodom. For others the Bible is the book of the Prophets, poetic outsiders condemning a wealthy elite that ignores its poor neighbors and values religious rites and ceremonies more than social justice. For still others it is a book of unforgettable scenes: Adam and Eve blaming anybody and anything but themselves for their disobedience; Abraham haggling with God over the fate of Sodom; the woman at the well trying to divert Jesus' attention from her family life with a theological debate; David's response to the news of his son's death, the one scene in the Western canon that can match King Lear's five "never's." A university course does not promote belief, it helps students to understand both important texts and themselves. Usually the teacher learns the most.

Please Note These Spring Events

- February 13** Professor Jeff Broome of Arapahoe Community College will be giving a talk on Christian Pluralism in Humanities 1B80 at 3:00pm. There will be refreshments and a discussion following the talk.
- February 20** Rev. C.W. Dawson will be giving two talks on Black Liberation Theology. The first at 3:00 in Humanities 1B80 and the second at 7:00 in Hellems 252. Each event will involve a discussion and refreshments.

How to Contact the Theology Forum or to Get on Our Email List

Check Out Our Website	www.colorado.edu/philosophy/TheoForum
Send Us an Email	theologyforum@netscape.net
Call Us	303-492-4578
Send a Fax	303-492-8386
U.S. Mail	University of Colorado Theology Forum Campus Box 232 Boulder, CO 80309

Or, just drop by the office:

We are located in Hellems Hall, Room 170. If you enter from the UMC side of the building, we are immediately across from the Philosophy Department office on the first floor. Parking is available at the Euclid Ave. parking deck on Euclid and Broadway.