

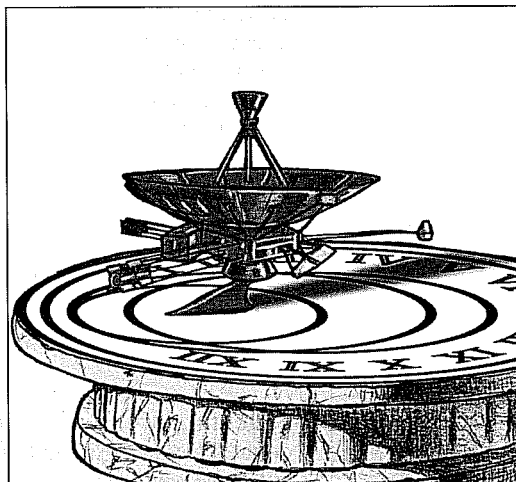
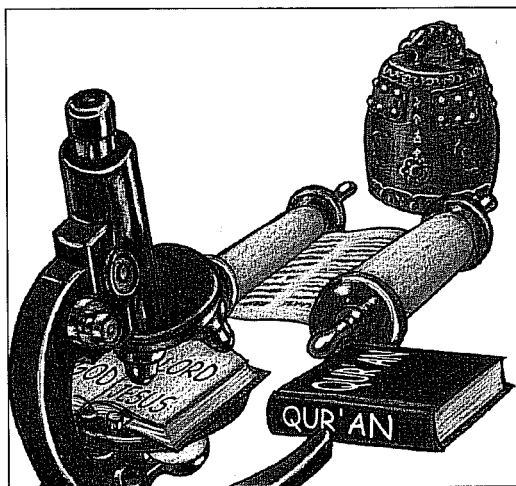
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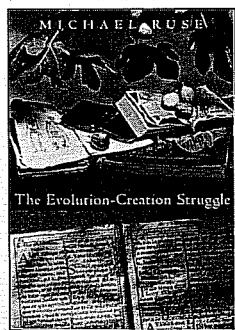
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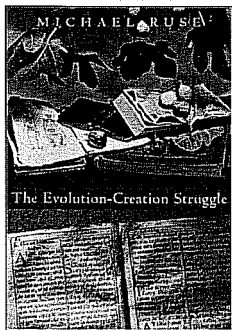
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## SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST



Nick Matzke

*The Evolution-Creation Struggle*, by Michael Ruse (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005, ISBN 0-674-01687-4) 336 pp. Cloth \$25.95.

Ernst Mayr had a saying: “Most scientific problems are better understood by examining their history than their logic.” This is even more true for unscientific problems like creationism, where the core issues underlying the problem are not scientific at all. The difficulty, however, is that history is extremely complex and broad—even getting your head around the important figures and movements can be a challenge, let alone the relative importance and interrelationships of each.

Worse, modern assumptions, modern language, and the like are quite likely to lead the nonspecialist astray—to pick a Darwinian example, in modern usage, the term *gradual* has taken on the connotation of smooth change at a slow-but-constant rate. However, in Darwin’s writing, *gradual* refers to *stepwise*, i.e., incremental, change. Paleontologist Kevin Padian likes to point out that, on the *Beagle* voyage, Darwin observed an earthquake that suddenly raised a piece of South American coastline twenty feet out of the ocean, and he described that change as gradual! The original meaning of *gradual* can still be found in many words that stemmed from the same root, as in college *graduations* and the intervals marked on *graduated* cylinders. How much strife might have been spared in the debate over punctuated equilibria versus gradualism if this term had been better understood?

For these sorts of reasons, the scientist or science fan who wants to do his

intellectual duty and attempt to actually understand where seemingly bizarre phenomena like twenty-first-century creationism come from does not face an easy task.

While it is easy enough to find generic histories of Christianity or science, the topics are so immense that it is difficult to figure out what the relevant connections are between the broad historical scene and obscure particulars like creationism. We need a guide. Thanks to Ronald Numbers’s book, *The Creationists*, we have an excellent survey of the development of scientific creationism as a modern movement, tracing back to the founder of the Seventh-day Adventists, Ellen G. White. But the Seventh-day Adventists are just one part of Christian evangelicalism, and evangelicalism in general is the fertile soil in which creationism took root and flourished, and which nurtures it to this day. The evangelical churches and a huge network of allied bookstores, cable channels, and radio stations provide the market for creationism and faithfully pass it on from generation to generation. Ruse’s task in the evolution-creation struggle is to help us understand why this group is so vehemently antievolution.

Ruse’s first chapter contains a very useful short summary of the complex religious context in Europe in which both evangelicalism and modern science arose. Most of us know something vague about the Catholic Church, the Reformation led by men like Luther and Calvin, and the ruckus that followed, but it has always been difficult to find a concise summary of the relevance of these ancient events to creationism. The short version is this: Protestantism favored

“... the scientist or science fan who wants to do his intellectual duty and attempt to actually understand where seemingly bizarre phenomena like twenty-first-century creationism come from does not face an easy task.”

personal reading and interpretation of the Bible over church tradition, and this led to many people coming up with their own interpretations of the Scriptures, resulting in the bewildering proliferation of Christian denominations seen today. At one end, there was skepticism of the literal reading of the Bible, which fit well with the advancements of science and what was later called “higher criticism” of the Bible. On the other hand were many religious sects then considered radical—Methodists and Baptists, for example—that split from other Protestant sects. These “evangelicals” tended to emphasize faith and emotional commitment rather than reason or, particularly, state churches, and, because of this, they were often oppressed by the establishment.

Oppression favored two important developments: emigration to the American Colonies and a particular apocalyptic reading of Revelation, premillennialism. Under premillennialism, Christ will soon return, overthrow the oppressors, and rule for a thousand years. A different Protestant interpretation, postmillennialism, was equally religious but more compatible with the establishment, and stated that Christ would come *after* the thousand years of good times. According to this interpretation, Christians were to help bring about and prepare for the good times to come. Ruse uses the premillennial/postmillennial divide as the central organizing thesis of the book.

Chapters 2 through 6 summarize the origins of the science of evolution and the progressive philosophy of evolutionism. Ruse argues rather compellingly that the philosophy came first historical-

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ly; useful evolutionary science only began in 1859 with Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, and did not really mature until the 1930s with the modern synthesis. On the other hand, progressive evolutionism got going in the 1700s, inspired by dramatic cultural change and technological advancement. Ruse argues that it was cultural evolution that inspired naturalists to explore the question of biological evolution. The progressive view got a big boost with the success of *The Origin of Species* and the evermore dramatic technological and social progress of the late 1800s and early 1900s, reaching a high-water mark with social Darwinism and eugenics, both of which claimed that the science of biological evolution justified particular schemes for social policy.

In chapters 7 and 8, Ruse reviews the religious responses to these developments. Basically, the postmillennialist denominations that were well-established in Europe, such as the Church of England, and the amillennialist Catholics, came to terms with evolution after some wrangling over details. Their American representatives followed suit. However, American evangelicalism grew dramatically after the American Revolution, during the Second Great Awakening, and much of it became even more disenchanted with progressivism and the Northern establishment after the Civil War. By the early twentieth century, the insults of modernism were many, and this led to many evangelicals adopting fundamentalism in reaction. In the 1920s, William Jennings Bryan crisscrossed the country, convincing evangelicals that evolution was the root of all of the other evils, and this is substantially the situation that remains today. The creationists were ridiculed during the Scopes trial in 1925, but Bryan-inspired bans on teaching evolution were not ruled unconstitutional until 1968, and, as a direct continuation, we have seen three successive antievolution legal strategies: creation science, Intelligent Design, and so-called critical analysis of evolution.

Ruse returns to the postmillennialist side of the story with the modern synthesis of genetics and natural selection in population genetics. Ruse's major point here is that even though a professional science of evolution became well-developed at this point, and purged itself of

progressivist speculations, progressive evolutionism was still promoted by evolutionary biologists at the popular level, and frankly shared some of the characteristics of a secular religion. This line is traced straight through to the modern sociobiologists, who think that evolution can explain away religion and provide us with a secular creation myth.

Ruse's history leaves us with two questions: is he right, and if so, what is to be done? There is much to be said for the premillennialist-vs.-postmillennialist thesis. Although it is, of course, an oversimplification, and Ruse points out the many figures and events that don't fit the pattern exactly, it is extremely useful to be able to organize complex history within a general framework. Catholics, who are traditionally amillennialist, prove somewhat resistant to Ruse's scheme, but despite Michael Behe and a few other Catholics in the ID movement, modern creationism remains predominantly the domain of conservative Protestants. Despite some recent propaganda from the Discovery Institute, there is little indication that the Catholic Church is going to fall for twenty-first-century Paleyism, particularly after the ID movement's roots were exposed during the recent *Kitzmiller v. Dover* case as a literal re-belling of creation science in reaction to a 1987 Supreme Court ruling.

Regarding the question of what is to be done, Ruse emphasizes that foes of creationism should be careful to distinguish between evolution and evolutionism, and not hide their metaphysics in the guise of science. Ruse also calls for greater understanding on both sides. These are both excellent suggestions, and, with his concise summary of the pertinent history, Ruse's book definitely helps in this project.

However, some of Ruse's other methods of improving understanding have been criticized of late. Ruse recently coedited an anthology of essays pro and con ID with William Dembski. This book was published by Cambridge University Press, presumably on Ruse's reputation, and has been gleefully cited by ID advocates ever since, in court and elsewhere, as evidence that they are academically serious. In another arena, Ruse started a rather vicious e-mail argument with Daniel C. Dennett, who, along with Richard Dawkins and William Provine,

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illegitimately mixes the promotion of evolution with the promotion of atheism. Criticizing Dennett et al. is fine, but Ruse then forwarded the dispute, cursing and all, to Dembski, who posted the exchange on his blog.

Ruse has vigorously opposed the creationists for his entire academic life, and his devotion to good science is unquestionable, but just maybe he has gotten a bit too chummy with the ID advocates and is putting too high a priority on feuding with atheists. At least the atheists know their science. ID is crank science, on the same level as Bigfoot and UFOs, and should be exposed as such as often as possible. If atheists, who, by the way, have as much right to promote their views on religion as anyone else, were to disappear tomorrow, the creationists would simply invent similar opponents out of thin air in order to justify their guerrilla war on science. They already accuse all evolutionists of being effectively atheistic, even in the face of prominent counterexamples.

Progress more likely lies in looking at other sciences that were once religiously controversial: heliocentrism, atomism, meteorology, etc. The Bible repeatedly states that God controls the weather, and evangelicals once protested the use of lightning rods as thwarting God's will. Atomism was famously associated with materialism. But these simply are no longer significant issues for either theists or atheists. The exploration of how peace was achieved in these cases would be a worthwhile topic for Ruse to explore in the future. ■■