When Science Meets Religion, by Ian Barbour; *Faith, Science, and Understanding*, by John Polkinghorne; and *Can A Darwinian Be a Christian?*, by Michael Ruse

Reviewed by Stephen J. Pope in the February 7, 2001 issue

Ian Barbour finds four major options in the current literature on science and religion: conflict, independence, dialogue and integration. Though he clearly prefers the latter two approaches, he explains well the attraction that some people feel for the former two. Each chapter of *When Science Meets Religion* applies the fourfold grid as a tool for helping the reader understand the various options within a particular area of inquiry, including astronomy, quantum physics, evolution, genetics and neuroscience.

Barbour himself is convinced of the usefulness of process theology, especially when it comes to the problem of evil. Process theology affirms a self-limiting God of compassion who, as divine friend, suffers with creatures but does not intervene to change the course of nature for the benefit of individual organisms. This view, Barbour argues, is more in line with the biblical God of love than is the concept of the impassive God of classical "monarchical" theism. Barbour argues that process concepts put theology in the best position to cohere with an evolutionary worldview, to acknowledge the role of contingency and unpredictability in the physical world, to understand the place of human freedom and creativity within time and space, to avoid making God responsible for evil and suffering, to balance masculine and feminine attributes of God and, finally, to promote interreligious dialogue. Barbour's statement of his theological position is representative of how many scientist-theologians have come to incorporate the insights of these two fields.

Like Barbour, John Polkinghorne regards science and Christianity as complementary sources of insight; both are expressions of the human quest for intelligibility and neither settles for commonsense conclusions. Reality is complex, argues Polkinghorne in *Faith, Science and Understanding*, and therefore no single method will provide the understanding for which we search. (Though Polkinghorne does not explicitly target E. O. Wilson's assumption, recently elaborated in great detail in *Consilience*, that some version of scientific method provides all that we need for understanding everything that is worth understanding, he does provide a convincing

alternative to it.) Since universities are concerned with knowledge, they must sponsor theological as well as scientific inquiry.

Theology, classically defined as "faith seeking understanding," must take more seriously the findings of science--especially when theology makes generalizations about the material world. And those who want their faith to have intellectual integrity must pay attention to science. Theology at its best, in other words, seeks "motivated belief" rather than blind submission to religious authority. Science is neither a more rational replacement for theology (à la Wilson) nor an enemy of theology (à la fundamentalism) but an equal though differentiated partner.

Yet what does science have to learn from either faith or theology? Religion can teach it nothing about its own subject matter; faith has nothing to say, for example, about the age of the earth or the constitution of quarks and enzymes. But scientists interested in all of reality do have a lot to learn from faith and theology. For one thing, faith recognizes that any credible account of reality that human beings hope to formulate has to recognize the difference between impersonal and personal beings. Faith takes a stance of love, worship, gratitude and obedience. It is intrinsically interpersonal and therefore construes the world as, most remarkably, a place that has given rise to persons, to consciousness, to human freedom and the like.

Science is adept at understanding some levels of reality, but theology is much better suited to identifying and comprehending other levels. Theology can learn from science about the structures of prepersonal levels of being, from quantum realities to the organic, yet it interprets these realities in light of their ability to give rise to persons, who are more than the sum of their physical, chemical and biological components.

Polkinghorne draws on recent information about the "fine tuning" of the universe to argue that the existence of people makes it reasonable to regard the entire natural process as guided by the mind of a creator. Nature itself is an "unfolding process bringing emergent novelty into being." It has been formed by a self-limiting God who allows creation the independence to evolve according to the laws of its own being, including those laws that inevitably lead all creatures to experience pain and, in some cases, suffering. As in his other writings, Polkinghorne argues that divine providence influences parts of creation through influencing the whole in a form of "top-down causality."

The most original of these three books is Ruse's *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?* Ruse is a philosopher of science, a defender of evolutionary theory against "creation science," and an outspoken defender of sociobiological modes of understanding human behavior. Since sociobiology has been hostile to religion, one would expect Ruse to have answered his own question with a resounding no. In fact, Ruse has taken the trouble to do some reading in theology and to talk with some theologians (he mentions four in his preface), and as a result has come to understand that the answer is not so simple.

Ruse has written the kind of book that every scientist ought to read carefully. It does not discuss "religion" (the book's subtitle, *The Relationship between Science and Religion*, equates Christianity with "religion;" Ruse knows better), yet it does show that what scientists have often assumed to be true of Christianity is in fact true only of certain versions of Christianity, especially fundamentalism. Theologians will be quite disappointed with the book if they expect it to show any knowledge of Christianity "from the inside."

For example, Ruse describes Christianity as a "world system"-- which is a way to draw Christianity and Darwinism into the same comparative framework. But it is very difficult to squeeze Christianity into this mold. Christians attempt to understand the "mystery of reality," not to explain it away. Christian beliefs can be understood properly only when seen as an intrinsic dimension of a way of life directed to discipleship in the Christian community. Ruse, like Richard Dawkins and E. O. Wilson, makes a basic mistake when he assumes that Christian beliefs constitute a metaphysical system on a par with the systems of Hegel, Leibniz and Whitehead.

Ruse's knowledge of historical details at times compensates for his misunderstanding of Christian faith. His book fully summarizes evolutionary theory and then takes a crack at characterizing Christianity, a noble but (expectedly) flawed effort. The book thus breezes through all sorts of critical issues--from Adam and Eve and original sin to predestination and the sacraments--that theologians would want to discuss at length.

Ruse does communicate the fact that Christian theology has a long, complex and varied tradition that cannot simply be equated with televangelists' sermons or "creation science" manifestos. Ruse understands, for example, that Christians have employed allegorical interpretations of scripture and have not been wed to a rigidly literalist interpretation of Genesis. In this alone Ruse's book is a vast improvement

over what Wilson, and especially Dawkins, has written about these matters.

The book's greatest value may be that it presents a whole array of questions that ought to be, and in some cases have already been, thought through systematically by Christian theologians. For example: What do we mean by "soul," and is it still a notion that sheds light on our humanity? Similarly, Ruse asks, "What do we mean by the notion of original sin, and is it any longer theologically credible?" (Patricia Williams has just written a book titled *Doing without Adam and Eve* [Fortress] that joins sociobiology and theology on this doctrine.) The range of theological questions posed by Ruse's book is considerable: from the nature of God, the status of miracles, and the resurrection, to intelligent design, the problem of evil, and extraterrestrials. But he works more as a surveyor tracking the lay of the land than as a settler attempting to stake out his own plot for habitation.

Ruse's main goal seems to be to dispel forms of ignorance about Christianity that lead some people to assume that Christianity and Darwinism simply cannot be mixed without distorting one or both. His treatment of sociobiology and Christian love is a case in point. Sociobiology shows that individuals who acted in altruistic ways, especially toward kin and reciprocators, were over the long run more successful in Darwinian terms than were their more stingy counterparts. Simply put, the altruists out-reproduced their competitors. In demanding altruism, Christianity can build on this evolutionary altruistic "wiring."

Ruse also argues that the Ten Commandments fit well with what sociobiology would say has to be required of any successful community--the promotion of reciprocity through the protection of lives, property, agreements and spouses. Christian ethics thus builds on the natural, while also extending our concern beyond conventional circles.

In making this argument Ruse disarms those sociobiological heirs of Freud who dismiss Christian love as imposing completely unattainable and hopelessly unrealistic moral demands. Yet Christians will immediately object that, in ignoring the radical demand to love the enemy, Ruse has simply domesticated *agape* to the level of everyday friendship and bourgeois "niceness." Indeed, sociobiology finds little basis for believing that people are capable of extending serious moral concern to those who are neither kith nor kin. For Christians, of course, that's just the point. We can't move from nature to grace on our own, but only through God.

A Darwinian, Ruse argues, can be a Christian, but it is not easy, especially if one has the courage to face the vast array of questions that Darwinism poses to Christianity. Ruse shows that these questions are questions for theology rather than for science as such. "Some areas require still a great deal of thoughtful work and discussion. The notion of original sin, and its origin in the light of Darwinian evolutionary theory, is an issue on which no final word has yet been spoken."

But there is no "final word" for any Christian doctrine, at least in the sense that there are no more questions to be asked, no more issues to be discussed, and nothing to ponder more deeply. Christian theology intends to increase rather than eliminate our awareness of the mystery whom we identify as "God." As Ruse himself puts it, "If nothing else, these reflections should give us a little modesty about what we can and cannot know, and a little humility before the unknown. Our limitations do not make Christianity mandatory or even plausible, but necessitate a tolerance and appreciation of those who would go beyond science, even if we ourselves cannot follow."