

**ROCKS OF AGES: SCIENCE AND RELIGION IN THE FULLNESS OF LIFE** by Stephen Jay Gould *Jonathan Cape, London, 2001. Pp. 247, £14.99 pbk.*

The last quarter of the twentieth century saw a major revival of the debate about the philosophical, moral and religious implications of evolutionary theory. It is worth asking why this should have been so. After all, it was in the previous century that Darwin's theory of random mutation and natural selection had been presented. It was the Victorians who first sensed that its implications for the origins of human kind seemed to refute the Judaeo-Christian doctrine of special creation, and to shatter the vast structure of thought built upon this. Yet, within a surprisingly short time most educated people, including religious believers (other than biblical fundamentalists), had come to some accommodation with the theory of evolution.

That they were able to do so was due to two factors. First, the perennial capacity to compartmentalise: to confine acceptance to some propositions (such as that man may be descended from apes or common ancestors) while losing sight of their implications (that we may not, after all, be 'set apart'). Second, the influence of dualism, for which mind or soul is distinct from body; so that whatever may be the genesis of human animals, their souls may yet be regarded as specially created. The first, a fact of psychology, took succour from the second, a philosophical possibility: so Darwinianism became liveable with, if unloved.

What has changed is that with the decline of orthodox religion the idea of the soul has lost currency, while at the same time evolution has shifted from being a speculative theory of human origins to becoming a resource for explaining all aspects of human life. *The Origin of Species* speculated about our history; sociobiology hypothesises about our values, emotions and motives. And so the evolutionary theory debate has revived as it seems that science threatens to reduce meaning to molecules, or to eliminate it altogether.

Against this background Stephen Jay Gould has stepped forward with an irenic proposal abbreviated by the acronym NOMA: 'non-overlapping magisteria'. Science is master of its domain which is the composition and operation of the world; and religion is sovereign in its sphere which is the prescription of moral values and the declaration of existential import.

There is indeed something appealing in the idea that science investigates the matter of the world while religion addresses its meaning; but for all the easy charm with which Gould presents this conciliatory proposal it is wishful thinking to suppose that matters can be resolved so easily. Admittedly cosmology is neutral between the hypothesis that the universe was created and the idea that it 'just exists', but that is because such speculation is extra-scientific. Not so, however, the theses advanced by sociobiologists in explanation of our concern with the true and the good. Here there is conflict, and there cannot be resolution without defeat. If it really is the case that religious, moral and philosophical doctrines are so much effluvia cast off by genes in their

quest for survival, then we can have no confidence in the belief that they represent truths arrived at by reflection on the nature of reality.

The philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe who died in January was a leading associate of Wittgenstein, sometime Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge and an uncompromising advocate of Catholic orthodoxy. Famously in 1948 she debated with C.S. Lewis the question whether if our thought processes were the result of neurophysiological causes they could yet be rational. The denial of this was the main platform of Lewis's Christian apologetics in his widely read book *Miracles*. Anscombe countered that causes and reasons are not the same, and that whether an inference is justified is independent of the issue of what brought it about. The fact remains, however, that if someone could show that what you believe, including everything of religious and philosophical significance, is entirely explicable as the expression of a genetic survival strategy, then there really is a question whether it is rational to suppose as before that one believes it because there is good reason to do so.

When Gould considers religious challenges to science he typically cites Biblical fundamentalists of the sort who seek to have US schools teach 'creation science', including the hypothesis that the world is but a few thousand years old. These people are as ignorant of the relationship between Scripture and tradition as they are of the canons of scientific enquiry. But in taking them as examples of those opposed to irenic reconciliation Gould has chosen to battle with straw men, and he leaves untouched the really serious questions of whether mainstream, orthodox Christianity, Judaism or Islam can be maintained with reasonable good faith by anyone who accepts at face value the claims of socio-biology.

It is held throughout this lively and easy read that when scientists pronounce on matters moral (and Gould tends to equate religion with morality) they overstep their magisterium. But that misses the point. The most profound 'scientific' challenge to morals and meaning comes not from those scientists who agree about these matters, but from those who contend that all thought is but the vapour given off by biochemistry as genes jostle for survival. C.S. Lewis was on to a truth, even if his presentation was flawed. Science has its apologists; religion is in desperate need of its advocates or defenders.

JOHN HALDANE

**CARDINAL RATZINGER. THE VATICAN'S ENFORCER OF THE FAITH**  
by John L. Allen Jr. *Continuum International Publishing, New York and London, 2000. Pp. xii+340, £16.99 hbk.*

The author of this book contacted me some while before its publication to seek a 'telephone interview'. He was writing a life of Cardinal Ratzinger, so perhaps, as one who had gone into print at book-length on the topic of Ratzinger's theology, I could be of assistance. One likes to be helpful when one can. But I somehow felt that a staff member of the *National Catholic Reporter*—an abrasive American weekly with a splenetically anti-Roman editorial stance—might not be the best person to write a balanced