

Introduction

The intersection of biology and religion has spawned an exciting academic area, attracting scholars, generating research projects, and gaining notice in general culture. Topics dealing with the relation of biology and religion are inherently interdisciplinary, making philosophy – which is also inherently interdisciplinary – essential for clarifying the issues, identifying key assumptions, and evaluating alternative positions. Therefore, in this book we develop a philosophical discussion of the major topics shaping this field of inquiry, acquainting the reader along the way with the major voices and viewpoints that have contributed to its advance.

The Table of Contents projects a panorama of important issues pertaining to biology and religion. Of course, the issues covered are located within the broader scholarship on the relationship of science and religion, which is both historical and philosophical, a relation that has been conceived in multiple ways, as we shall see. Furthermore, the biosciences are special in that they pertain to life – to the whole organic world – leading us early on to consider their relation to the sciences of the inorganic world. The subject of life – its origin, organization, and development – is a deeply vested interest for both biology and religion, raising questions about creation, evolution, design, and purpose that we must work through.

A number of other issues then readily arise. Since biology seems to reveal pervasive predation and death in the natural world, the perennial problem of evil occurs and challenges religion to square the troublesome data with ideas of a good and purposeful divine being or divine realm. Questions about progress and purpose also arise in regard to the evolutionary story – which tells of the rise of life over vast amounts of time, from humble beginnings to *Homo sapiens* – requiring response from religious perspectives. Sometimes the challenges occur more obviously within the field of biology itself, as in the curious facts

of love and altruism in a Darwinian world. Biology typically characterizes all life as caught in a self-interested struggle for existence, whereas all major religions teach love, kindness, and even self-sacrifice. Particularly among humans, whose capacity for ostensible other-regarding behavior seems greater than that of all other animals, the encounter of biology and religion raises the question of whether genuine altruism and love are possible.

Some issues that we treat in the book arise because an evolutionary account of key phenomena can seem incompatible with a religious explanation. Traditionally, religious accounts maintain that ethics is a form of objective knowledge based on universal moral truths, given by deity, that people are obligated to obey. However, some thinkers have construed the evolutionary shaping of human moral beliefs and emotions to imply that ethics has no objective status, religious or otherwise. Similarly, most major religions see themselves as connected to a divine source and as teaching true beliefs and right ways of living. However, biological theories of religion claim to explain religion in evolutionary terms and thus to preempt any question of a higher or supernatural dimension. Another issue on which evolutionary and religious perspectives interface is the environment. Part of our ever-increasing evolutionary knowledge is greater understanding of ecology, of how organisms are related in interconnected systems with which we humans interact. Increased knowledge of ecology has prompted considerable religious reflection on the environment.

As an introductory text, this book is composed of chapters on topics that themselves could generate multiple more specialized monographs. However, since we present a broad treatment – covering many topics that are somewhat eclectic, engaging the relevant but diverse biological subdisciplines, and seeking to weave various religions into the discussion – we cannot delve deeply into any topic in technical detail. Instead, we offer a narrative that exposes the reader to a fascinating array of biological and religious questions in interaction, while providing historical, scientific, and theological context as preliminary to philosophical appraisal. Among the readers this volume targets are upper-division undergraduates, graduate students, scholars wanting a survey of the issues, and interested persons in the general public. While the issues addressed are of intrinsic interest within the fields of biology, religion, and philosophy, these issues also have social importance because they continue to influence our human self-understanding and even affect some matters of public policy.

Courses in which this book would be an ideal core text, or even an ancillary text, include introductory philosophy of biology courses and philosophy of religion courses; it would also fit well with religious studies, theology of nature, or theological anthropology courses. For purposes of learning or for teaching, this book unfolds an expansive conversation that presents difficult issues in understandable terms, endeavors to be fair and balanced to all sides, and yet indicates at certain points the direction in which a more likely solution might be sought. Throughout our discussion, we show how, in many cases, it is so often the philosophical interpretation of biological facts or religious claims that is really at stake. The philosophical clarity we aim at will help the reader adopt a proper reflective posture toward the issues, transcending their complexities in order to navigate them intelligently.