

The War of the
JESUS and
DARWIN
Fishes

Religion and Science
in the Postmodern World

John C. Caiazza

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Dedication

To the memory of my parents, Nicholas A. and Marion C. Caiazza,
“Nick and Marion”



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Introduction: The War of the Jesus and Darwin Fishes

A variety of stickers and plaques stuck onto the rear ends of automobiles is a constant feature of driving in America. Everyone has an opinion, it seems, and the driver just ahead of you seems compelled to advertise it on the back end of his or her personal transportation. Besides the political bumper stickers and the brand marks for auto dealerships, you will sometimes see the outline image of a fish. If you are attentive to the fishes as they occasionally appear on the car ahead, you will discover that they come in two distinct varieties, one which is a bare outline of a fish or the outline with a cross or the name “JESUS” inscribed within, the other variety has little legs attached to the underside with the name “DARWIN” or the term “EVOLUTION” inscribed within. It is a noteworthy phenomenon that has attracted the attention of serious commentators and social scientists and is an indicator of a new phase in an old cultural conflict. It is a conflict which extends back at least to Victorian times 150 years ago, but to the historically minded it extends back to the time of the Enlightenment. Perhaps even beyond that, for the Jesus and Darwin fishes are a symbol that the “war” between religion and science is still alive in Western culture.¹

The war between the Jesus and Darwin fishes started when contemporary Christians began advertising their belief by means of the simple fish outline. The fish in ancient times was used as a symbol of Christian belief especially during persecution as a means of Christians recognizing one another without giving themselves away. (The word “fish” in Greek is an acronym for “Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior.”) On the rear of an automobile the fish outline serves the same function, but the renewed popularity of the Jesus fish in itself did not constitute a conflict. The conflict began when advocates of a scientific point of view, or people who were simply put off by public affirmations of religious affiliation, responded to the Jesus fish with the Darwinian version as a public statement of their own persuasion. When first observed, the phenomenon of dueling fish symbols seemed to have a humorous aspect and no more significance than the bumper stickers that say “my child was student of the month” countered by “my kid beat up your student of the month.” Sociologists might perceive deep meanings consistent with class or

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income differentials, but the Jesus and Darwin fishes combat could be perceived as nothing more than an expression of healthy, rough American humor. However, the Darwin fishes are not intended as gentle mockery but as direct opposition to the Jesus fishes and the duel has a rather nasty aspect, as if the Darwinian fishes are in mortal combat against perceived intrusions of bigotry and theocracy signified by the appearance of the Jesus fishes. In short, the war between the two fish symbols has an underlying aspect that is quite serious. But if the Darwin fishes were in response to the Jesus fishes, then what was the cause of the appearance of the Jesus fishes in the first place?

The cause of a social phenomenon such as the Jesus fishes is not always readily discernible, much like fashions come and go and are often not related to anything but themselves (long skirts, baggy shorts, etc.). The Jesus fishes do have a discernible cause, however, namely the sense that many traditional minded Christians and believers of virtually all other religions in the United States have that the ambient culture has become so materialistic and degraded as to bear comparison with no other time in American history than the debauched times of the end of the Roman Empire. (One of the important causes of Muslim anger with Western culture, that provokes disdain and fear, is the blatant sexualization of our popular culture and our lax sexual morality.) Traditional minded religious believers are further aware that the culture has become explicitly anti-Christian and antireligious. At a time when public policy in the areas of abortion and marriage have contradicted traditional norms, many Christians have begun to feel that they are aliens in their own culture. Like the Christians of ancient Rome, they feel they are subject to a persecution that, if it does not make them criminals on a cultural level, attempts to suppress the full expression of their faith by means of ridicule and contempt. Thus, the appearance of the Jesus fishes on the rear ends of automobiles.

As already indicated, the appearance of the Darwin fishes is also a fear based phenomenon, namely, the fear that a potent combination of right-wing political organization and evangelical religious sentiment now constitutes a danger to the separation of church and state. More exactly, the fear is that antiprogressive forces from the southern and middle west of the nation (the "bible belt" and flyover country which are the parts of the nation largely unsympathetic to Liberalism) will reverse the recent advances in the rights of women, gays, and ethnic minorities since the new "religious right" has (as it always has had) the will and now the political power to "turn back the clock." This new religious movement

cannot be ignored, and its power now makes it obligatory to face down its proponents. As it happens, the issue of evolution is a major flash point; the advocates of a new theocratic order are using new versions of the antiquated argument from design for the existence of God to force school boards to vote that “intelligent design” be taught in public schools alongside the theory of evolution. Thus, the need to oppose any public display of a Christian symbol, even a seemingly inoffensive one such as the wordless Jesus fish outline on the rear of automobiles.

Since the original debates over evolution were carried out between Anglican divines and Victorian naturalists in learned articles and large tomes of intricate argumentations, the war between the Jesus and the Darwin fishes seems to suggest the ability of American culture to vulgarize anything it engages. Yet the bumper sticker war has a social subtext of some intensity and signifies a serious contemporary divide in American culture on two levels. On the political level, the argument reflects in broad terms the present conflict in American politics between “red states” and “blue states”—rival political alignments. And on an intellectual level, the war reflects the ideological tension at the basis of modern Western culture since the Enlightenment—the conflict between religion and science. It is on this point that the most fundamental aspect of the war between the Jesus and the Darwin fishes takes place and serves as an introduction into an old controversy which now has taken on a new form.

The evolution controversy is the best known and currently most compelling aspect of the conflict between religion and science, but, as indicated, the evolution controversy itself has an older provenance extending back to the time of the Enlightenment (or according to another account we will meet later, back to the third century A.D.). The Galileo case may be used, however, as the point at which the conflict arises because it was at that time that the Medieval worldview (expressed in art and popular culture as much as in the grand philosophical and theological systems of the time) was rent asunder by the intrusion of new empirical discoveries and a new scientific method of discerning ultimate truths about the universe.² From that point forward in Western history it has seemed as if the serious, educated person had to choose between a rational and testable but emotionally and spiritually vacant understanding of the universe, or a humanistic and spiritual understanding which was rationally indefensible. The religion/science conflict has gone many rounds since then, from the French Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, to the positivism of Comte in the nineteenth, to the positivism of the Vienna Circle in the twentieth, to the reductive accounts of religious beliefs and

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the assertive scientific materialism of contemporary commentators such as Dennett and Dawkins.

The bumper sticker war of the Jesus and Darwin fishes serves to bring to mind that the conflict between science and religion now takes place in a new cultural environment. For better or for worse, I will call this new cultural environment “postmodern” rather than “global,” “international,” or “cosmopolitan.” While these other terms have the advantage of referring to the reality that the human race is now in the process of erecting a new culture which extends worldwide, they also evade the more ideological and intellectual consequences of the culture now in the process of being formed. This understanding that a new culture is being formed brings a new perspective and complexity not seen in prior iterations of the debate between religion and science, for postmodern culture has downgraded the importance of both religion and science. Precisely because both science and religion were necessary parts of western culture they are both attacked, ignored, and often dismissed, but in this book I will argue that both are necessary if the evidently unsatisfactory and destructive aspects of the postmodern world are to be overcome.

Notes

1. Websites where the Jesus and Darwin fish stickers are advertised are, respectively, www.planeticthus.com which sells Christian auto accessories and www.prankplace.com which sells “pranks, gags ... and practical jokes.”
2. Ian G. Barbour, *Religion and Science* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1997), 3–17.

Part I

Religion and Science in the Postmodern World



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The Postmodern World

Postmodernism is a True Worldview

To speak of a “postmodern world” is to relate how an explicitly drawn philosophy reflects the way the world currently is, and the world today is now more than ever one world as distinctions between nations and among peoples, histories, and traditions are breached with constancy and regularity. The usual forces are acknowledged here; the transport of goods, commerce, travel, communication, finance, education, and even labor markets have become internationalized. In this international environment, the “noosphere” of which Teilhard wrote in mystical and poetic terms, is realized by means of electronic communication via digital technology and satellite. So that, for example, a ferry disaster in Bangladesh takes place in real time on our full color HDTV sets as we watch the bodies floating up on shore and hear the weeping of the relatives of the victims, or the decision of a Japanese investor is made actual so that hundreds of thousands of dollars are transferred virtually instantaneously from a bank in Tokyo to the New York Stock Exchange by means of several keystrokes on a laptop. The ubiquity and efficiency of current electronic communication allows us to directly perceive all the many cultures throughout the world, Eastern and Western (although it is getting harder to tell them apart), modern and primitive (although the distinction is usually left unstated), contiguous with one another as they appear on television, computer, and ipod screens. Thus, there is the theme of multiculturalism in the postmodern word in which each culture commands respect equally without distinction, the constant succession of cultural images acting as a spur to tolerance.

In this international environment, the personal belief systems of the participants become irrelevant, if not to the individuals involved certainly to the processes of international intercourse. It does not matter whether an individual believes that Jesus rose from the dead, that Mohammed was the last of the prophets, or that there is no deity at all; whether she believes that illness is caused by wicked spirits, an unhealthy frame of mind, or by viruses. The fact is that the virtues involved in living in an internationalized environment are not those which promote personal or

interior virtues but ones which exclusively refer to how we as persons relate to each other in this new environment. Here the virtues are those of tolerance and mutual recognition of the commonality of mankind, which in turn promote the acceptance of all the representatives of the human race and the suppression of any sense of differentness that may appear when we meet others. As in the days of the Roman Empire serious and reflective people understand that there is a new world thing, not a new world order exactly, but a commonality that can be observed and described in moral terms. Martha Nussbaum and Anthony Appiah discourse in the same manner, therefore, as did the Cynics of ancient Greece and the Stoics of ancient Rome, about persons being citizens not of their nations but of the world; nothing human is alien to them, they might as well say as did the Roman philosopher.¹ The new Stoics quote the writings of the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius and promote a philosophy of cosmopolitanism that is a vision of the universal city of man, or, in the gender neutral language of cosmopolitanism, the human city.

In this environment, assertions that a particular tradition or “narrative” holds a special place (i.e., is *true* in the sense that whatever competing accounts may state that contradict it are false) are not merely discouraged but put out of consideration as a matter of principle—a point made by the postmodern theorist Derrida.² The argument does not take place on the question of what evidence, for example, there is that Jesus rose from the dead as that implies an assertion that the Christian religion is true and that Islam and Hinduism are false. Such assertions are simply not to be considered by moral people in the postmodern environment. Likewise, open debate about the superiority of scientific method over faith, superstition, intuition, etc. are discouraged; one result of which is the equalization of medical treatment so that the incantations of shamans, the homeopathic use of herbs, or acupuncture therapy are serious options for medical treatment. The scientific basis of Western medical knowledge has been transmogrified from a guarantor of its effectiveness to the belief that scientific medicine is itself a form of mockery of non-Western cultures and non-European peoples, as argued by the postmodern historian/philosopher Foucault.³

The postmodern worldview does not tend to assert the equality of all races, genders, cultures, and histories, but to favor those that have been the victim of oppression including people of color, women, homosexuals, and non-Western cultures such as Eastern and American Indian. It also tends to elevate the histories of anything other than that of male political leadership, i.e., the histories of women, workers, and peoples formerly