

Protestant Modernism, the Warfare Thesis, and the Religion of Science

Edward B. Davis

Abstract

In the early 20th century, the “Chicago school” of Protestant modernist theologians uncritically adopted A.D. White’s “warfare” view of religion and science. Like White, they held that traditional theology was utterly incapable of a positive, fruitful conversation with modern science. They rejected the moderate approach of the prominent theistic evolutionist Asa Gray, who had separated theology from science and who held that evolution and the Nicene Creed were fully “compatible.” Instead, they reshaped theology along “scientific” lines, discarding divine transcendence and defining “religion” in functional rather than doctrinal terms. This has important parallels with the emerging “religion of science,” which has its roots in Comtean thought.

Two Americans gave early, alternative definitions of the “religion of science,” in books using that title. One, the libertarian publisher Calvin Blanchard, sought to advance popular irreligion and “free love.”

The other was Paul Carus, editor of *The Open Court* magazine. Carus was influenced by Charles Carroll Bonney, a Swedenborgian who served as president of the World Parliament of Religions. Carus went on to develop a “religion of science,” involving a view of God he called “Entheism.” Like the Chicago theologians, Carus uncritically accepted the warfare thesis.

Biography

Edward B. Davis (PhD, History and Philosophy of Science, Indiana University) is Distinguished Professor of the History of Science at Messiah College (Grantham, PA). Mainly known for his work on early modern science, Dr. Davis edited (with Michael Hunter) The Works of Robert Boyle, 14 vols. (Pickering & Chatto, 1999-2000), and Robert Boyle, A Free Enquiry into the Vulgarly Received Notion of Nature (Cambridge University Press, 1996). However he has written several articles and reviews on the history of religion and science in America, including historical comments presented at a public forum on evolution and the schools sponsored by the AAAS in September 2000. He is also editor of The Antievolution Pamphlets of Harry Rimmer (Garland Publishing, 1995). Rimmer was the leading opponent of evolution after Bryan died in 1925. In August 2000, the BBC radio program “Making History” featured his study of modern Jonah stories, published in Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith (December 1991) and available on-line at <http://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/1991/PSCF12-91Davis.html>. With support from the National Science Foundation and the John M. Templeton Foundation, he is currently writing a book about the religious beliefs of prominent American scientists in the 1920s. Additional information is found at <http://www.messiah.edu/hpages/facstaff/tdavis/home.htm>.

TO THE READER: This is the text of a powerpoint talk that I gave at the international workshop on “Science and Religion: The Book of Nature and the Book of Scripture,” Ettore Majorana Foundation and Centre for Scientific Culture, Erice-Sicily, July 2003. It is taken from a very lengthy introductory chapter for a book I am now writing about the religious beliefs of leading American scientists from the 1920s, whose working title is *Science and Religion, Chicago Style: Religious Pamphlets by Leading American Scientists, 1922-1931*. I proposed to the conference organizers that I provide this highly detailed outline in lieu of writing a separate paper. For many readers, I think this will be sufficient to get the sense of my ideas. If this is not satisfactory, please contact me (tdavis@messiah.edu) and I will gladly send you an electronic copy of the whole chapter from which this paper is taken.

Background: A Brief History of Concordism

Who were the concordists?

- Benjamin Silliman (1779-1864), first professor of chemistry & natural history at Yale
- Edward Hitchcock (1793-1864), professor of chemistry & natural history at Amherst College
- James Dwight Dana (1813-1895), first Silliman Professor of Natural History at Yale

What did the concordists believe?

Essentially, that the “book of nature” and the “book of scripture” were telling the same story.

“Examples of the concordist attitude:

- Silliman (1839): “The order of the physical events, discovered by geology, is substantially the same as that recorded by the sacred historian.”
- Dana (1874): “The record in the Bible is profoundly philosophical in the scheme of creation it presents.” Since the Bible is “both true and divine,” there is no “real conflict between the two Books of the GREAT AUTHOR. Both are revelations made by Him to Man.”
- Charles Hodge (1863): “We only interpret the Word of God by the Word of God when we interpret the Bible by science.”

The most important modern example: Baptist theologian Bernard Ramm (1916-92), who influenced a generation of evangelical thinkers to consider “progressive creation.”

What has happened to concordism?

“Intelligent Design” may be a kind of covert concordism

- Although advocates of “intelligent design” typically avoid talking publicly about the Bible, most ID proponents probably accept some type of concordism themselves.
- They simply prefer to postpone the conversation about specific biblical issues until after they have successfully inserted their ideas about “design” into the secular establishment.

Creationists, however, reject concordism. John C. Whitcomb, Jr., author with Henry Morris of *The Genesis Flood* (1961), rejects the whole concordist approach, which he calls “the double-revelation

theory,” because it “fails to give due recognition to the tremendous limitations which inhibit the scientific method when applied to the study of origins.” –*The Origin of the Solar System* (1963)

Most theistic evolutionists also reject concordism. They see Genesis as a *theological* book, not as a source of *scientific* or *historical* information about the world and human beings. The hexameron, in their view, is a powerful polemic against pantheism and polytheism, but not an historical or scientific account of how the world was created.

Next, we consider two important varieties of theistic evolution

- Orthodoxy: traditional theology is largely “compatible” with modern science and is to be valued as a dialogue partner; God is still seen as genuinely transcendent as well as immanent.
- Modernism: “religion” as a way of life, not a system of doctrine; this kind of religion is fully harmonious with modern science. Doctrinal reformulation is widespread. Some who take this approach hold to religious naturalism, in which divine transcendence is effectively discarded.

Orthodoxy: Harvard botanist Asa Gray (1810-1888) rejected Dana’s concordism (1863):

[It]is merely a summary of the views of [Princeton geologist Arnold] Guyot, looking to a harmony of the Mosaic cosmogony with modern science, –views which Professor Dana has adopted and maintained elsewhere more in detail, and which, under the circumstances, are naturally enough here reproduced. We regard them with curious interest, but without much sympathy for the anxious feeling which demands such harmonies. We have faith in revelation, and faith in science, in each after its kind; but, as respects cosmogony, we are not called upon to yield an implicit assent to any proposed reconciliation of the two.

Rather than speaking of a “harmony” of science and revelation, Gray spoke of the “compatibility” of evolution and a very traditional type of Christian theism. He identified “the essential contents of that Christianity which is in my view as compatible with my evolutionary conceptions as with former scientific beliefs,” as being “briefly summed up” in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. “I accept Christianity on its own evidence ... and I am yet to learn how physical or any other science conflicts with it any more than it conflicts with simple theism. I take it that religion is based on the idea of a Divine Mind revealing himself to intelligent creatures for moral ends.”

A modern orthodox theistic evolutionist: Sir John Polkinghorne (b. 1930)

Main Story: Modernism and Modern Science

“Chicago school” modernists and science:

- The modernist theologians of the “Chicago school” rejected both concordism and Gray’s orthodox variety of theistic evolution.
- For the modernists, “science” meant that tradition and authority can have no role in a theology that is to be truly “modern.”
- “Science” also meant that the “modern” person can no longer believe in a transcendent God.

Shailer Mathews (1863-1941) and the meaning of “science”

- “Laboratory science did something more than lead to research. It undermined habits of thought and substituted the tentativeness of experiment for authoritative formulas.”

- “True, there were some scientists like Asa Gray who championed Darwinian evolution while holding to the Nicene Creed; John Fiske used evolution in setting forth a cosmic philosophy which included theism and belief in immortality...” But Mathews rejects this approach!
- “Scientific method had not touched religious thought. It was only when educational processes had ceased to be controlled by the study of classical literature and grew more contemporary, that orthodox theology was felt to be incompatible with intellectual integrity.”

Mathews’ theology, like that of most other modernists, was based on a radical understanding of divine immanence that essentially stripped God utterly of transcendence—that is, if it is even appropriate to speak of Mathews’ “God” as anything more than a social construction. What mainly distinguished his religion from that of the materialists, was his unshakable belief in human freedom:

“As long as there are personalities resulting from evolution, there must be that within the process itself which is capable of producing it. It is quite impossible for any man to think that personality comes out from impersonality. The thorough-going mechanistic interpretation of evolution and nature itself simply denies the presence of anything approaching free will.” (1923)

Chicago theologian Gerald Birney Smith (1868-1929) also rejected concordism (1915)

- “But as the evidence grew in favor of the evolutionary conception, theologians began to recognize the facts without giving up their belief in the divine authority of scripture. For a time the favorite method employed was that of ‘harmonizing’ the statements of Genesis with the statements of science.”
- “Such a harmony was made possible by a frankly allegorical interpretation of the statements of the Bible, according to which the literal meaning of the text was transformed into something more in accord with the demands of scientific accuracy. But such a makeshift could not long be satisfactory to anybody.”

Smith’s rejection of orthodoxy:

- “The immanent God in [Lyman]Abbott’s evolutionary cosmos retains in the main the precise characteristics of the transcendent God of the pre-evolutionary theology. The essentials of the familiar ‘plan of salvation’ remain, modified where necessary by the logic of the evolutionary conception. Abbott’s work is edifying and practical; but it moves easily in the literary realm of imaginative exposition rather than in the more exact pathways of accurate science.”

Smith reserved praise for Francis H. Johnson’s *God in Evolution* (1911)

- Johnson “does not try to fit the picture of a transcendent God into the framework of an immanent process.”
- Consistent with evolution, Johnson’s God “is not the omnipotent Absolute familiar to us in the treatises on theology. God is definitely limited in his activity by certain circumstances which we must recognize. God is thus like ourselves in that he has to make his way against obstacles. Religion thus means that God and man are working together for spiritual ends. In fact, the essence of religion may be put in the Pauline formula, ‘Work out your own salvation; for it is God which worketh in you.’”

A modern “modernist” theistic evolutionist: Arthur Peacocke (b. 1924)

Modernist theologians and the “warfare” thesis

Perhaps the greatest irony about the modern religion/science dialogue is the following fact: despite their own strong denials that science and theology conflict, many liberal Protestant thinkers implicitly accept the “warfare” thesis of A.D. White—that is, they agree with White that traditional theology has proved unable to engage science in fruitful conversation.

John William Draper, *A History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1874):

“The history of science is not a mere record of isolated discoveries; it is a narrative of the conflict of two contending powers, the expansive force of the human intellect on one side, and the compression arising from traditionary faith and human interests on the other.”

Andrew Dickson White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896):

My book is ready for the printer, and as I begin this preface my eye lights upon the crowd of Russian peasants at work on the Neva under my windows. With pick and shovel they are letting the rays of the April sun into the great ice barrier which binds together the modern quays and the old granite fortress where lie the bones of the Romanoff Czars.

This barrier is already weakened; it is widely decayed, in many places thin, and everywhere treacherous; but it is, as a whole, so broad, so crystallized about old boulders, so imbedded in shallows, so wedged into crannies on either shore, that it is a great danger. The waters from thousands of swollen streamlets above are pressing behind it; every one knows that it must yield.

But there is a danger that it may resist the pressure too long and break suddenly, wrenching even the granite quays from their foundations, bringing desolation to a vast population, and leaving, after the subsidence of the flood, a widespread residue of slime, a fertile breeding-bed for the germs of disease.

But the patient *mujiks* are doing the right thing. The barrier, exposed more and more to the warmth of spring by the scores of channels they are making, will break away gradually, and the river will flow on beneficent and beautiful.

My work in this book is like that of the Russian *mujik* on the Neva. I simply try to aid in letting the light of historical truth into that decaying mass of outworn thought which attaches the modern world to mediaeval conceptions of Christianity, and which still lingers among us—a most serious barrier to religion and morals, and a menace to the whole normal evolution of society.

Gerald Birney Smith on AD White (1915): White’s book is “a most readable and striking account of the gradual substitution of the empirical method for the method of conformity to authorized doctrine in various realms of thought. It reflects the scientific man’s impatience with the traditional theological ideal.”

The “conflict” mindset influenced the modernists in two main ways:

- It led them to assume that the history of religion and science was typified by “dogmatism,” which they used as a synonym for obscurantism, on the part of theologians, always to be contrasted with an open-minded search for truth on the part of scientists.
- It led them to assume that there has never been a constructive conversation involving theology

and science, and that there will never be one in the future--at least not until theology has been purged of its "dogmatic" content, that is, of its claim to be able to state from higher authority some truths about ultimate reality. If Christian morality could somehow be shorn of its association with what White called "out-worn creeds and noxious dogmas," then it might have a better chance to survive in the modern world.

The Religion of Science

As with the modernist theologians, advocates of "the religion of science" also accepted the "warfare" thesis and made science the basis for a new religion. The term "religion of science" has an interesting history in the United States.

Calvin Blanchard, *The Religion of Science; Or, the Art of Actualizing Liberty, and of Perfecting and Satisfactorily Prolonging Happiness: Being a Practical Answer to the Great Question,--"If you take away my religion, what will you give me in its stead?"* (New York, 1860)

Blanchard (1808-1868) was a New York publisher and bookseller specializing in American editions of radical religious, feminist, political, and antinomian literature from Europe. He saw "the religion of science" as undergirding his advocacy of "free love." His "religion of science" was undoubtedly his own form of Comte's "religion of humanity." As for Comte, the bottom line for Blanchard was political, but where Comte's solution was conservative--a new religion to replace Christianity and provide a basis for social and political order in the wake of the various European revolutions of the 1840s--Blanchard's solution was radically anarchical. He urged the reader throughout to follow "nature's laws" and "natural" desires as freely as possible--above all, one senses, to fornicate--without fear of ecclesiastical or legal "despotism," including even the type of social control associated with democracy

Religious Naturalism: Paul Carus (1852-1919), *The Religion of Science* (1893):

"The religion of science is not Atheistic, but Theistic."

"The religion of science does not accept Pantheism."

"The eternal of nature is only God. Those features alone are divine which serve us as authority for conduct. We do not look up with reverence to the forces of nature which we utilise, but only to that power which moulds worlds, which fashions our being, and which moves onward in the progress of evolution. This view we call Entheism."

Carus' expression of "the religion of science" was influenced by Charles Carroll Bonney, a prominent Chicago legal authority and Swedenborgian who served as president of the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, part of the Columbian Exposition of 1893. Carus later made Bonney his own secretary at The Open Court Publishing Company.

Carus saw in the interfaith Parliament the utopian vision of a purer, truly universal form of religion, saying that it represented how "the narrow Christianity will disappear, for its errors have become palpable." He soon adopted a new identifying phrase for his magazine: "Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea."

Bonney, who described himself as "deeply interested in what is now known as the Science of Comparative Religions," believed that the Enlightenment religion of Swedenborg held the key to solving the problem of religious pluralism. Following Swedenborg, he seems to have thought that only a religion

capable of seeing all humanly grasped truths as mere appearances would do for the modern age. Swedenborgianism was apparently Bonney's ideal of "the religion of science."

Carus' own idea of *The Religion of Science* (1893): "the religion of science is that religion wherein man aspires to find the truth by the most reliable and truly scientific methods." The religion of science "accepts no special revelation" and "has no creed or dogma, yet it has a clearly defined faith"—the moral attitude "that truth can be found, and that truth is the sole redeemer." Carus actually thought this new religion "opposes not the faith of the churches, not their moral spirit, not their Christianity, but their dogmatism, their trust in rituals and their paganism." "The religion of science," he noted, "is not and cannot be the Christianity of those who call themselves orthodox Christians, but it is and will remain the Christianity of Christ."

The Religion of Science and the "Warfare" Thesis

Carus clearly believed in the essence of the "warfare" view—namely, that science has dethroned theology. Going right to the heart of the matter, he applied this to the soul. In doing so, he drew on a standard myth about Copernicus that has always been an integral part of the "warfare" thesis.

"Our conception of the nature of the human soul," he wrote, "has been as thoroughly altered through the results of modern scientific research as our view of the universe since the times of Copernicus." "Copernicus abandoned the geocentric, and psychology the egocentric standpoint; and future religious development will be influenced in no less a degree by the latter than it has been by the former."

CONCLUSION: Is science religiously neutral? Has "science" made traditional religious belief impossible? Both the modernists and advocates of the new "religion of science" relied heavily on the truth of a false historiography—that of Draper and White. Would their religious conclusions have been different, if a more neutral (perhaps even positive?) and more accurate picture of the larger history of religion and science had been available to them?

We will never know—there is no way to repeat what has already taken place. But it does seem appropriate to raise a similar question for our own time: has "science" made traditional religious belief impossible?

Or, to put it another way: Which bird is more likely to survive: a Peacocks or a Polkinghorne?

Acknowledgments: Support from the National Science Foundation and the John M. Templeton Foundation is gratefully acknowledged.