What Every Minister, Theologian, and Philosopher Should Know about the History of the Faith and Science Conversation

A talk by Ted Davis for the ASA

SUMMARY:

What should ministers, theologians, and philosophers know about the history of the science/faith conversation?

(1) For a long time, most scholars and many other people believed that Christian theology has always held back scientific progress, and it always will. Therefore, it's best to either to keep them entirely separated, and/or to discard traditional Christian beliefs in the name of science.

This is the "conflict" thesis, a claim about the history of science and faith that has obvious implications about present and future interactions. The idea originates in 17th and 18th century Europe, but it was widely popularized by two 19th-century Americans, Andrew Dickson White and John William Draper. They wanted a new type of religion allegedly based on science, not traditional Christianity. As White stated, science was fully harmonious with "the recognition of 'a Power in the universe, not ourselves, which makes for righteousness,' and in the love of God and of our neighbor." They also believed that traditional Christian affirmations, such as those found in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, were obsolete "dogmas" that had to be discarded, if the progress of science was not to be held back.

The History of Science Society and its two academic journals, *Isis* and *Osiris*, was started early in the twentieth century by George Sarton, who regarded positivistic philosopher August Comte as the real founder of the new academic discipline. In the first issue of *Isis*, Sarton named White as the source of a central idea in Sarton's vision for the history of science. In the late twentieth century, the "conflict" thesis was embraced by the New Atheists and other religious sceptics.

(2) Beginning in the 1970s, historians began systematically to deconstruct White's narrative of inevitable conflict between theology and science. Almost all historians now reject the works of White and Draper as woefully unreliable, ideologically motivated garbage. They tell us far more about White and Draper as historical actors themselves than about the history they purported to relate.

As David Lindberg and Ronald Numbers observed about forty years ago, "For more than a century historians of Christianity and science like White have wasted their time and dissipated their energies attempting to identify villains and victims, often with polemical or apologetic intent and always within a framework heavily laden with values." So far, no single conceptual alternative has yet emerged among historians to replace the decisively refuted conflict thesis, but what many are now calling the "complexity thesis" is probably the best candidate. According to John Hedley Brooke, "Serious scholarship in the history of science has revealed so extraordinarily rich and complex a relationship between science and religion in the past that general theses are difficult to sustain. The real lesson turns out to be the complexity." Historical scholarship about science and religion not based on the "conflict" thesis is now commonplace. Although there are some exceptions, in general this new historical understanding more accurately assesses the role of Christian beliefs in the development of science and in the lives and work of individual scientists. The resulting picture, still emerging, is much friendlier to people of faith. Nevertheless, many scientists and journalists continue to assume the validity of the "conflict" thesis, despite the fact that historians have debunked it.

(3) Very recently, we have begun to recognize more fully that the classical "conflict" thesis of White and Draper was not really a claim about "religion" in general, and it wasn't advanced by authors who wanted to eliminate religion—although today's New Atheists do seek to vanquish all types of religion, except their own religion of science. Rather, the classical notion focused more narrowly on the alleged danger to scientific progress posed by traditional Christian theology, while seeking to advance a non-sectarian, non-doctrinal form of religion that they believed was fully harmonious with science.

This implies that some of the most influential figures in the modern "dialogue" of science and religion have unknowingly assumed the truth of the conflict thesis as White and Draper formulated it. Those who engage in wholesale doctrinal "reformulation" in the name of science do precisely what White and Draper wanted: discarding core Christian beliefs in order to avoid perceived conflict with science. For many in the modern "dialogue" of science and religion, God did not create the world *e nihilo*, Jesus was not raised bodily from the grave, and immortality means only that memories of us persist in the mind of God. Given that these thinkers typically spoke against the "conflict" model, this is ironic: they did not really know what they were saying. Their intellectual predecessors, the "modernist" theologians and scientists of the early twentieth century, actually understood what White wanted: they knowingly embraced the classical "conflict" thesis. At least they knew what they were doing.

For more on the new historical understanding, see:

Stephen Snobelen and Edward B. Davis, "New Atheists and the 'Conflict' between Science and Religion," especially the final section, "Liberal Protestants and the Conflict Thesis."

Ted Davis, "Christianity and Science in Historical Perspective"

James C. Ungureanu, "Science, Religion, and the Protestant Tradition."