

# A Critical Assessment of the 'Conflict Thesis.'

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'As to the issue of the coming conflict, can any one doubt? Whatever is resting on fiction and fraud will be overthrown. Institutions that spread delusions must show what right they have to exist. Faith must render an account of herself to Reason. Mysteries must give place to facts. Religion must relinquish that imperious, that domineering position which she has so long maintained against Science.'<sup>1</sup>

Such a declaration of war is characteristic of the collection of opinions about the relationship between science and religion that have been drawn together under the heading of a "conflict thesis," or a warfare motif. Another nineteenth century commentator on the war he perceived between science and religion noted:

'Even more uncompromising was another of the leading authorities at the same university' the Rev. Dr. Duffield. He declared war not only against Darwin but even against men like Asa Gray, Le Conte, and others, who had attempted to reconcile the new theory with the Bible: he insisted that 'evolutionism and the scriptural account of the origin of man are irreconcilable' that the Darwinian theory is "in direct conflict with the teaching [of the divine inspiration of the Bible]."<sup>2</sup>

The conflict metaphor is used widely in society, especially in the media's portrayal of the science-religion relationship, and is endemic in the minds of many of the public. The main continuum of warfare scenarios ranges from, on one pole, the "Biblical Creationists" (who see a war with religion as the only victor), to the other extreme of scientific naturalism (or "scientism," perceiving a battle where the clear winner is science), with many intermediate views. The strong version of the thesis claims that not only have science and religion come into conflict at times in the past, they are actually continually in a relationship of *necessary* conflict because of severe philosophical contradictions. The conflict thesis often opposes science with all religions as a whole by implication, even though virtually all examples are drawn from the Christian tradition or misconceptions of it. Thus Richard Dawkins and others might condemn all types of 'myth and superstition' when talking about Christianity "some confusion results from multiple and overlapping definitions of science and of religion, as with all attempts to relate the two.

The optimum method by which to demonstrate the conflict thesis is in giving an exemplar situation of its use. One of the best known examples used to promote the warfare model is the "Galileo affair" here is how Andrew White described the events leading up to the trial in 1633:

'On this new champion, Galileo, the whole war was at last concentrated. Against him the war was long and bitter and at last two popes dealt with him, and, as was supposed, silenced his impious doctrine forever. The war on the Copernican theory, which up to that time had been carried on quietly, now flamed forth. It was declared that the doctrine was proved false. But the little telescope of Galileo still swept the heavens. For the final assault upon him a park of heavy artillery was at last wheeled into place'<sup>3</sup>

Draper continues the account:

'He was ordered to renounce that heresy, on pain of being imprisoned. [At the trial] he was then committed to prison [and] treated with remorseless severity during the remaining ten years of his life'<sup>4</sup>

Despite slight overreactions such as Sir Bertram Windle's condemnation of Draper's work as an 'ancient dust-heap of inaccuracies and falsehoods,'<sup>5</sup> there has been a majority movement against Draper and White's historical analyses. Less polemical histories give the Galileo affair a much more ambiguous, far more complex interpretation.

The conflict thesis needs a 'science versus religion' element for its core, but it is doubtful that any of the many disagreements central to the Galileo affair can be so easily pigeonholed. Casting Galileo as the scientist battling religious naivete and intolerance does not hold, since Galileo was a devout Catholic all his life, and in no way saw his campaign as being against the Church.

There were also many social complications involved in the situation which confuse a simplistic diagnosis. Galileo's campaign seems to have been waged against the scholastic framework adopted by the Church - he would have seen any 'war' as between rival natural philosophical frameworks. Also, there was a difference of opinion amongst scholars at the time as to how astronomy, and the set of astronomical observations, was to be regarded. Division between the two groups (who we would now call instrumentalists and realists) meant that Copernicus and Galileo were criticised for claiming that their system described how the planets really were, as opposed to being only an accurate model.

Other characters involved in the situation muddied the waters still further. Cardinal Bellarmine, Galileo's main opponent, had his own anti-heresy motives for quashing the heliocentric theory. Galileo's friend who later became Pope Urban VIII, the Medici family and others were involved in the system of court patronage that was desirable at the time and may have influenced Galileo's actions and treatment for better or for worse - protection of Galileo and bonds of alignment and allegiance were part of the reason Galileo's trial turned out as it did. We must also remember that the above accounts of Galileo's trial and sentence were grossly over-exaggerated - he was not treated with remorseless severity at all; even his imprisonment was a comfortable house arrest in episcopal palaces and Italian villas. Galileo's own conception of the relationship between his mechanics and his religious beliefs is important - he held a type of Baconian two-book model of the interaction of the Bible and Creation, and took both seriously; he recognised each type of knowledge was gained from some degree of interpretation.

In sum, it would be a great distortion and oversimplification of the reliable historical accounts to claim that the Galileo case was a type lending support to the conflict thesis. Undoubtedly, there were great disagreements, but not between two camps we could identify as 'science' and 'religion.'

The second major historical weapon wielded by the conflict metaphor users is the set of controversies resulting from evolutionary theories and most notably Darwin's *Origin of Species*. The territorial war that was born out of the theory of evolution has been interpreted as a reflection of the more general conflict. If evolution explains where life comes from without needing to resort to God, why do we need to keep him in the picture? Likewise, surely if science can explain the rest of the systems of the natural world, there is no room for God? These kinds of questions were being asked at the time and caused social divisions.

But here also, the picture is not so simple. Investigations into the dangerous science of the nineteenth century and its reception reveal that the post-Darwinian controversies cannot be easily made to fit the conflict metaphor. Firstly, Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection was not received positively by all scientists and rejected by all clergymen. Many commentators have written along the lines that 'the truth is nearer to the exact opposite: it was a few theologians and many scientists who dismissed Darwin and evolution.'<sup>6</sup> Certainly some prominent clergymen (Bishop Wilberforce, to name one) publicly attacked evolution, but over the 140 years since the publication of Darwin's *magnum opus*, Christians of equal piety have been both for and against Darwin's views. Knowing that not only practising Christian scientists such as Stokes, Kelvin and Agassiz rejected the theory, but also many non-Christian scientists, we are forced to remember that no scientific theory is born without some scientific friction, however small. The theory of evolution by natural selection was after all a scientific theory, and where it challenged scientists' assumptions, it was made subject to testing and rebuttal.

Furthermore, much of the debate about evolution and religion resulted from the rejoinders to attacks on Christianity by a minority of scientists campaigning for a professionalisation of science and separation from Church control, especially in regard to the Catholic church. These attacks became more crippling for preserving any positive relationship between science and Christianity after the demise of natural theology, whose success was waning considerably by the 1860s. The theory was used as a weapon against the Church, so unsurprisingly, apologists countered by attacking the theory and retreating behind a more conservative interpretation of Genesis, from which was born the modern "Creationist"™ movement. In fact, promotion of atheism from Darwin was just as problematic as the other causes evolution was used to promote "racism, sexism, ageism, socialism, conservatism, hygiene, eugenics, and more" many of which were mutually contradictory. Ambiguity in the *Origin* was used by many groups to further their causes, and the apparent conflict between science and religion was only one of many social offspring.

If we are to trace clearly the philosophical foundations of the conflict thesis, we must also trace some of its historical roots. Draper, White and Huxley are three key proponents of the war whose motives we must examine. Andrew White, in the introduction to his work, described John Draper's™ account as definitive on the subject, before he described the difference (in his opinion) between that and his own:

*'[Draper] published his book on The Conflict between Science and Religion, a work of great ability, which, as I then thought, ended the matter, so far as my giving it further attention was concerned' [but] much as I admired Draper's™ treatment of the questions involved, his point of view and mode of looking at history were different from mine. He regarded the struggle as one between Science and Religion. I believed then, and am convinced now, that it was a struggle between Science and Dogmatic Theology. More and more I saw that it was the conflict between two epochs in the evolution of human thought " the theological and the scientific.'*<sup>7</sup>

Draper, in fact, was more specific in his warfare scenario than positing it as between Science and Religion; when he refers to Religion as being in opposition to Science, he does specifically mean Roman Catholicism. Draper feared the power wielded by the Church of Rome, and had seen its negative side when his sister married badly to a Catholic; the 1870 declaration of Papal infallibility worried him greatly.<sup>8</sup>

White's™ warfare, on the other hand, was 'between the liberality of the scientific outlook and the constraints imposed by sectarian dogmatic theology.'<sup>9</sup> What is more, although Draper's™ book was a publishing success, selling many more copies, White had the deeper impact and longer significance.

White, as President of Cornell University, was more highly respected than Draper as a technically more competent historian,<sup>10</sup> but his work has been criticised for its selectivity and strongly held premise of necessary antagonism between science and religion that reinforced his selectivity of historical examples. Despite criticising others for 'thrusting still deeper into the minds of thousands of men that most mistaken of all mistaken ideas: the conviction that religion and science are enemies',<sup>11</sup> he appears to have succeeded beyond any other single book to have fostered and developed the image of warfare and relentless conflict. Both Draper's™ book and White's™ were received gratefully and favourably by the scientific naturalists in England and America; they provoked an even greater stream of similar tracts and books to the presses, and the conflict metaphor received a firm foundation.<sup>12</sup>

Thomas Henry Huxley is perhaps the single figure to whom 'must go most credit (or blame) for the conduct of the war.'<sup>13</sup> Huxley's™ disagreements were not with the church as such " he once wrote to the Anglican clergyman Charles Kingsley, saying how he should be very sorry to witness the decline of the Church of England, and how he desired men such as Kingsley to save it from such a future.<sup>14</sup> However, that was how the conflict he deliberately constructed often appeared. But " 'in actuality it was a conflict in defence of scientists, not science, and a sustained battle for the cultural supremacy of the scientific community in late Victorian Britain.'<sup>15</sup>

Huxley was attempting to develop science as a profession, and to combat public apathy and ignorance about science. A political struggle for hegemony meant that he had to wrest power from aristocrats,

including churchmen, to take it for scientists; his promotion of scientific naturalism meant that he had to work to secularise society. Huxley styled himself as not only a "bishop-eater" as he debated; he also undermined his opponents by imitating their styles: in his sacralisation of science, he dressed science as a religion in order to invade religious territory still further. Huxley referred to the "church scientific"; he called his lectures "lay sermons"; he referred to himself as a Bishop; and he founded a Sunday Lecture Society in order to compete with Sunday schools run by the church.<sup>16</sup> The campaign Huxley waged was a deliberate construction of a conflict thesis born not out of historical undeniability, but of political opportunity.

There are other problems that proponents of the conflict thesis face other than the lack of historical justification for their position. One major complication is the large number of scientists with strong religious beliefs. To construct a list would be an unending task, as the number in the past and the present is considerable. Conflict thesis historians must account for the correlation between scientific and religious interest; if not, the existence of so many individuals in whom "science" and "religion" coexist rather than war refutes the thesis. Another issue involves the degree to which "science" and "religion" can be viewed as entirely distinct entities for which we must posit some kind of relationship. Late eighteenth century scholars would most likely be puzzled about the possibility of a conflict, in the same way that Galileo affirmed that 'two truths cannot contradict one another.'<sup>17</sup>

In terms of philosophy of knowledge, the position of necessary conflict rejects the possibility of multi-level explanations. Neither the scientific nor the religious worldview are complete accounts in themselves: while they may offer explanations that account for all the phenomena under question, they may not satisfy a questioner "consider mechanical explanations as opposed to functional or "purpose" explanations. Bacon's concept of the two Books of Scripture and Nature, the words and the works of God, was a form of this concept of explanations possessing interest relativity.

In conclusion, I perceive the conflict thesis of the relationship between science and religion to be fatally flawed, and have aimed to portray it as such in my analysis here. Although there have been instances of conflict between particular members of the scientific and religious communities, these are often not as simple as first we may believe, and often are really debates about religious *or* scientific issues. Such instances are by no means sufficient to generate an overarching thesis of necessary conflict between the two disciplines. The warfare metaphor is an unhelpful and unhistorical meta-narrative cultivated by nineteenth century turf wars between a nascent scientist profession and those who stood in their way as they tried to wrest intellectual territory and cultural power from those who held it.

## **Footnotes**

1. J. W. Draper (1875), *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science*, (London:Watts & Co.), p. 306
2. A. D. White (1896), *A History of the Warfare with Theology in Christendom*, (London: MacMillan), I: iv
3. *Ibid.*, III: iii
4. Draper, pp. 146-147
5. B. C. A. Windle (1924), *The Church and Science*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (London: Catholic Trust Society), p. 13
6. James Moore, quoted in M. Poole (1990), *A Guide To Science and Belief* (Oxford: Lion)
7. White, introduction, pp. 11-12
8. For further information on Draper's motivation to write his book, especially from Catholicism, see also J. R. Moore (1979), *The Post-Darwinian Controversies* (Cambridge: CUP), pp. 19-24 and D. Fleming (1950), *John William Draper and the Religion of Science*, (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania), esp. ch. XI; or my own more detailed study, *John William Draper and "Conflict" in an Anti-Catholic context* (August 1999, also on my website [www.dimery.com](http://www.dimery.com))
9. White, I:ix
10. Russell, p. 10
11. White, XII: ii

12. See Moore, pp. 38-49
13. C. A. Russell (1989), *The Conflict Metaphor and its Social Origins*, in *Science and Christian Belief* Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 3-26, April 1989 (Exeter: Paternoster), p. 9
14. L. Huxley, ed. (1908), *Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley*, 2<sup>nd</sup> (London: Macmillan) vol. 1, p. 320
15. Russell, p. 9
16. *Ibid.* p. 25
17. See his *Letter to the Grand Duchess Christian*, quoted in M. A. Finocchiaro (1989), *The Galileo Affair: A Documentary History*, (University of California Press)

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