A twisted road: science–religion conflicts

Flat Earths and Fake Footnotes: The strange tale of how the conflict of science and Christianity was written into history

Derrick Peterson

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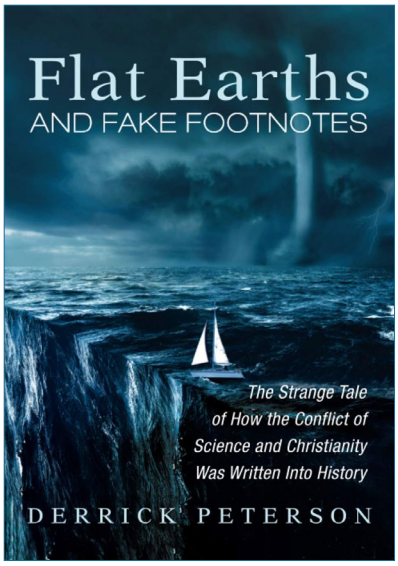

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Right from the start, author Derrick Peterson comes out and states that the conflict between science and religion has been greatly exaggerated. In fact, he sees it as largely a set of mythologies:

> "It was also seen that this collective mythology arose in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by historians involved in many sides of the debates over Darwin's discoveries, and from there latched onto the public imagination at large" (back cover).

What is behind all this? The author suggests the ultimate cause of this conflict:

> "We cannot make too much of anecdotes alone, but there does seem to be enough evidence to support the claim that beneath the so-called war of science and religion the true battle was against the traditional notions of hell, salvation and punishment" (p. 291).

The author provides useful biographical information. We learn that Newton was a Christian (p. 51), but that he did not believe in the Trinity (p. 54). We see that Darwin's theory did not cause him to doubt the existence of God: this doubt came about because of the later death of his father, and daughter Annie (p. 97).

Peterson is not sympathetic to creationists. He follows Ronald Numbers in suggesting that 20th century creationists held to extreme positions (namely the young earth and Flood geology) that were not held by most of those in the 19th century who considered themselves creationists. He also buys into the argument that ID (Intelligent Design) is just a dressed-up version of 20th-century creationism.

The author has an 'everything you believed is wrong' mindset. On one hand, Peterson seems practically to deny the existence of atheism. For instance, he sees Voltaire, John William Draper, Andrew Dickson White, and even Thomas Huxley as anti-clericalists rather than opponents of traditional theism. He sees the 'discrediting' of Paley's design argument as a relocation of God's creative activity into providential care, rather than an abolition of God entirely. On the other hand, he shows how many of the attacks on traditional theism were, and are, unfair, and that is the focus of my review.

Tertullian misquoted. Why so?

Peterson remarks:

> "'I believe, because it is absurd'—the most famous statement that the great theologian Tertullian of Carthage never said … . Sadly, it also embodies today what is a fairly standard opinion regarding the history of faith and science—namely that Christianity as a faith, or religion, is characterized by the embrace of the ridiculous precisely because it has no evidence" (p. 135).

However, Tertullian did say something similar. He argued that something believable is more likely to be accepted than something totally fantastic. To the Greeks and the Jews, a bodily resurrection was nonsense. Therefore, Tertullian argued, the apostles would not be arguing for the bodily Resurrection of Jesus Christ unless it really happened. Otherwise, the apostles would knowingly be discrediting themselves by repeating fantastic tales.

Demons were not a reductive explanation for illnesses among early Christians

It is commonly alleged that Christianity was, from the beginning, fraught with superstitions, and that demons and other supernatural causes were freely invoked for what was not understood. This is far from the truth. Peterson comments;

> "A close reading of the New Testament however demonstrates that only in three cases do illness and demonic possession even overlap. The majority of cases in Scripture readily distinguish Jesus' healing from exorcisms. There is, moreover, a remarkably naturalist description of the etiology (that is, the origin and cause) of disease. Even in cases of epilepsy—which is often used as a classic example of a natural illness

being mistaken for possession—the majority of cases were given purely physiological explanations by Christians … . And, yes, praying, laying on of hands, and anointing with oil should be utilized for the sick. But these were in concert with the practice of physicians, not in competition with them" (p. 239).

No dark ages

Against the view that the Middle Ages was a time of disinclination towards learning, Peterson tells the contrary. He reminds us that this period "held books and writing up with an almost totemic reverence" (p. 228).

Nor were the Middle Ages a time when there were virtually no inventions. Peterson corrects this misconception:

"A list of all innovations in the Middle Ages would take us far too long, and for our story is somewhat beside the point. This era post-Rome but pre-Renaissance often lumped as a thousand-year period where nothing happened (except perhaps bloodshed and disease) turns out to be rather, 'one of the great inventive eras of mankind' as machinery and technology were developed and more importantly put into use 'on a scale no civilization had previously known'" (p. 233).

The deeply entrenched flat-earth myth

The roundness of the earth has been known since the time of the pre-Christian Greeks, and belief in the flat earth was never a part of Christian thinking. Peterson unambiguously states:

"'We can state categorically', says British historian of science James Hannam, 'that the flat earth was at no time ever an element of Christian doctrine, and that no one was ever persecuted or pressured into believing it'" (p. 179).

Now, there was a sixth-century geographer named Cosmas Indicopleustas who advocated a flat earth. But he had essentially zero influence in medieval times and was only rediscovered and put in the limelight by 19th-century critics of Christianity (pp. 186–188). Before that, no one would have thought to have raised such an argument against Christianity. Peterson quips:

"None of the great eighteenth-century polemicists against Christianity—Edward Gibbon, David Hume, Denis Diderot, and others—ever accused the scholastics of believing in a flat earth" (p. 196).

A myth persists when it serves a purpose. Peterson identifies the purpose:

"The flat earth has been a convenient staple invoked in order to emphasize how humanity has advanced out of an age of superstition and religious ignorance for a while now. The historian of science Lawrence Principe records that over the course of a decade nearly 70 percent of his students—mainly American—were taught in grade school that Columbus set sail to prove that the world was round" (p. 178).

Note that the book cover shows a ship about to sail off the edge of a flat earth.

The flat earth was also applied retroactively to anyone who challenged Darwinism. Peterson comments:

"Far from being confined to the fictional imagination of Irving or the academic networks of Letronne, after the publications of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, the flat earth migrated into the polemical toolbox of evolutionists (some Darwinian, some otherwise) to use as a bludgeon against any who doubted the way the new evolutionary winds were blowing" (p. 198).

There is an irony to all this. Attempts were made to discourage Columbus from making his trip—not because the earth was flat, but because it was *round and too large* to circumnavigate without his men starving (p. 182). Columbus accepted the smallest proposed value for the earth's circumference, and made his historic trip. (We can add to this. If North and South America had not existed, Columbus would have been required to travel straight from Spain to China. His ships would long have run out of provisions, even on the presently sized Earth. Later, the starvation of many of Magellan's men showed that even the Pacific Ocean alone was barely manageable.)

The Spanish Inquisition in perspective

The alleged horrors of the Inquisition are tempered by Peterson, who remarks:

"In other words, like so many things in this story, 'The Inquisition' is an evolving mythology. Curiously, not only have the judgements of the Inquisition have [sic] been shown to be more tolerant than court decisions of the different states, using torture far less than state courts. Their methods of due process led directly into modern legal systems along with Church canon law. Indeed, the use of torture *declined* in the West, because inquisitors 'themselves were skeptical of the efficacy and validity of torture as a method of conviction'" (p. 241).

Did Luther inveigh against Copernicus?

Martin Luther is quoted as defending geocentrism by citing the Book of Joshua, wherein God stopped the earth and not the sun. However, this quote attributed to Luther is of dubious provenance, as pointed out by Peterson: "First of all, it was not recorded or authorized by Luther himself but by someone present at the Table Talk

who did not publish these remarks until after Luther's death" (p. 274).

In addition, Luther's purported statement can be interpreted in different ways. Luther is quoted as saying that Copernicus "wishes to turn the whole of astronomical science upside down." So perhaps this has less to do with defending geocentrism and more about Copernicus usurping a lot of attention.

Why Galileo? Why not Copernicus?

Galileo was 'persecuted' by the Church not for teaching heliocentrism, but for arrogantly proclaiming heliocentrism a proven fact, even though the science of his day did not justify such a conclusion. His 'persecution' consisted of house arrest.

The usual effort, to make Galileo a scientific martyr for his belief in heliocentrism, immediately encounters the following paradox, described by Peterson:

> "Nonetheless, a major question poses itself: why Galileo? Why condemn him? If, as it was just represented, the issue was truly about heliocentrism—the idea that the sun, and not the earth, was at the center of our solar system—why did the Church not persecute Copernicus, whose work *On the Revolution of the Spheres* clearly did challenge the Aristotelianism of many in the church, and by the time of Galileo's condemnation had been circulating for nearly ninety years?" (p. 255); (figure 1).

Some have tried to account for this paradox by claiming that Copernicus was not that well known, and so Galileo's ideas were the ones that impacted the church. This will not do. Peterson presents evidence that the work of Copernicus was in fact widely read (p. 267).

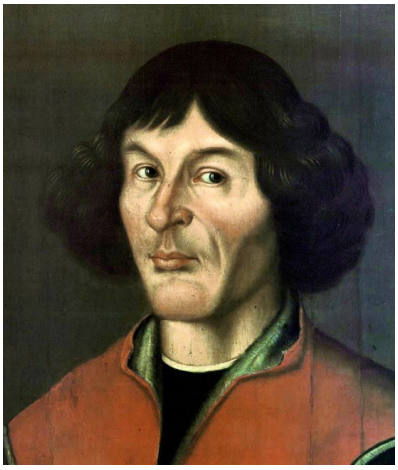

Figure 1. Toruń portrait of Nicolaus Copernicus (c. 1580). Galileo fell afoul of the Church for dogmatically claiming heliocentrism, even though the science of his day did not prove this. He could not have been 'persecuted' for his heliocentrism because Copernicus discovered and publicized heliocentrism for nearly a century before Galileo.

Galileo in proper perspective

The author treats the trial of Galileo as almost a non-event. He comments:

> "This was not 'science against the church', but rather a struggle of different understandings of 'science within the church'. Beyond the Jesuits, most Catholics considered it 'a local Italian imbroglio' and not only ignored the calls for censorship, but continued circulating both Copernicus *and* Galileo [emphasis in original]" (p. 268).

Giordano Bruno: a made-up martyr for science

Peterson writes:

> "Bruno wanted to die a martyr for his theologies, and the Church was more than happy to oblige … . The truth is that Bruno's was an almost forgotten case until nineteenth-century anti-clericalism found in it a parallel to Galileo and so another weapon with which to needle the Church by creating a mostly fabricated martyrology of science … 'the legend that Bruno was prosecuted as a philosophical [or scientific] thinker, [or] was burned for his daring views on innumerable worlds or the motion of the earth, can no longer stand'" (p. 258).

The Scopes Trial was not about banning the teaching of evolution

Against the caricature of fundamentalists fighting against enlightenment, one might be surprised to learn that the Tennessee law did not outlaw the teaching of evolution itself. It only banned teaching about human evolution. Peterson comments:

> "The Butler Act … far from outlawing the teaching of evolution generally, specified that the illegal teaching consisted in promoting opinions on *human* origins from lower animals … . As such, Scopes could have indeed taught evolution—even quite thoroughly—and not have violated the specific parameters that had been set as guards over Tennessee's youth [emphasis in original]" (p. 291).

Peterson adds that:

> "Even when Bryan was called to the stand to give his supposedly 'expert' testimony on Scripture and science, his objections to evolution were not based upon the idea of a young earth, or that evolution contradicted the so-called 'literal' meaning of Scripture. Rather … it remained clear that his concerns were steadfast in their resolve to target the broader naturalistic and anti-theistic interpretations that had become attached to evolution" (p. 299).

Finally, Peterson argues that the Scopes Trial had less to do with the Bible, and more with the nature of public schooling in the American South. He thus explains:

> "The conclusion that must be drawn from this is that the anti-evolution law and its supporters were attacking evolution not because of its

conflict with Scripture, but because of its allegiance with compulsory education and the broader philosophical and ethical divide this represented in Southern culture" (p. 293).

No noble savages

One common line of attack on Christianity revolves around the dominion mandate. We are told that it was a licence for humanity to ruthlessly exploit the earth. Furthermore, according to this anti-Christian narrative, humans lived in peace with each other, and in complete harmony with the earth, until they were exposed to this teaching.

Derrick Peterson points out that the word 'dominion' in the Bible, *rada* (Hebrew), far from calling for aggressive exploitation, was actually a soft expression. It was used, for example, to describe Solomon's benevolent rule. The word for 'subdue' is also an innocent one. It is the same one used in reference to working and tilling the earth. There is nothing harsh about doing that.

Finally, in no sense was pre-Christian man peaceful, nor solicitous of the natural environment. Peterson comments:

"Deforestation, massive brushfires to control animal migration, tribal warfare, even large-scale animal depopulation are all part and parcel of the various stories of Neolithic humanity recounted by the long memories of stone" (p. 250).

Conclusion

One can be astonished to learn how much received wisdom is not true. This is especially true of common statements against Christianity, especially of some (flat earth) that are remarkably persistent.