

Science, Religion, and the Rise of Biblical Criticism

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SYMPOSIUM ON SCIENCE, RELIGION, AND THE RISE OF BIBLICAL CRITICISM

by James C. Ungureanu

Abstract. This is an introduction to the Symposium on "Science, Religion, and the Rise of Biblical Criticism," which has been designed as a thematic section for *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*. The Symposium demonstrates the importance of and need for greater interdisciplinary collaboration between philosophers, theologians, scholars of religion, and historians in tracing the origins and development of the "conflict thesis" between science and religion. Often neglected is the role biblical criticism played in guiding and constructing narratives of conflict. This series of articles thus attempts to redress this gap in the scholarship by explicitly focusing on the advent of historical-critical scholarship of the Bible and how it changed perceptions about "science" and "religion."

Keywords: Duke of Argyll; biblical criticism; conflict thesis; John Locke; science and religion; Victoria Institute; Andrew D. White

In 1941, German theologian and biblical scholar Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) delivered a lecture at the Alpirsbach conference of the *Gesellschaft für Evangelische Theologie*. His paper, entitled "Neues Testament und Mythologie," attempted to bridge what he perceived to be the growing divide between Christianity and the modern age. The task before

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theologians, Bultmann proposed, is the “demythologization” of the New Testament. For much of what the New Testament has to say is “incredible” to “modern man,” who thinks “scientifically.” Because natural science has shown us that the universe is governed by the “laws of nature,” we can no longer accept the mythology of the New Testament. As Bultmann declared: “We cannot use electric lights and radios and, in the event of illness, avail ourselves of modern medical and clinical means and at the same time believe in the spirit and wonder world of the New Testament.” Thus, according to Bultmann, no rational person of the modern era could credit such tales of supernatural intervention in the New Testament. Therefore, the task of modern Christian theologians is to “demythologize” the Gospels, purging them of the miraculous in order to make Christianity more palatable to the modern mind (Bultmann 1989, 1–44).

Bultmann had come to believe that modern science was incompatible with belief in the supernatural. He had studied theology at Tübingen, Berlin, and Marburg. As is well known, biblical critics in Germany were some of the earliest to challenge traditional views of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, the single authorship of Isaiah and Daniel, and eventually the eyewitness accounts of Jesus in the Gospels. Less well known is how the rise of historical-critical scholarship played a significant role in the nineteenth-century science-religion debate. While much has been written on the moral critique of Christian orthodoxy during the so-called Victorian “crisis of faith” (Helmstadter and Lightman 1990), or more recently the question of “scientific naturalism” among Victorian agnostics (Stanley 2015), few have examined the complex relationship between biblical criticism and the Victorian conflict between science and religion.

Peculiarly, historians of science and religion have mostly ignored the role of biblical criticism in addressing the origins of the “conflict thesis,” the idea that science and religion are fundamentally and irrevocably at war (but cf. Brooke 1991, 357–73). In doing so, however, they have failed to note the central importance of biblical criticism on such thinkers as Thomas H. Huxley, John W. Draper, and Andrew D. White, among many others. But these alleged “cofounders” of the conflict thesis were profoundly impressed by biblical criticism. Evolutionary naturalist Charles Darwin, for instance, listed biblical criticism as one of the main sources for his religious doubts (Darwin 1958, 85–86). His friend and strident defender, Huxley, structured his whole critique of Victorian Christianity on the conclusions of biblical critics (Desmond 1997, 571; Larsen 2011, 196–218). Similarly, Draper confessed that early in life he had sincerely believed the “miraculous acts of Jesus Christ, those of his disciples and followers, as well as those of the prophets and patriarchs,” but when he became “familiar with what the great German writers had done,” he could no longer trust the biblical miracles (Ungureanu 2019, 61).

The essays in this Symposium attempt to redress this gap in scholarship by highlighting how the rise of modern biblical criticism played a decisive role in the minds of those thinkers who attempted to address the growing perception that faith and reason, or science and religion, are in conflict. It should be noted at the outset that early biblical criticism was not antireligious in nature. In fact, many of the founders of the discipline saw themselves as reformers of religion rather than its opponents. The crucial point, of course, is how these reformers of religion defined “religion.” Thus, each article in this section offers new interpretations of defining figures and events, all of which display the interplay between the history of science, religion, and biblical criticism. What we collectively emphasize here is that historical-critical scholarship played a central role in how all of these thinkers redefined “religion,” which in turn defined their understanding of the relationship between science and religion. Paul Lim begins this collection by comparing approaches to nature, science, and religion taken by Robert Boyle and the subsequent participants of the Boyle Lectures, especially Richard Bentley, John Harris, and William Whiston, and their rapprochement of science and Christianity. Diego Lucci then offers us a detailed look at John Locke’s consciousness-based theory of personal identity, which, perhaps surprisingly, emerged from his biblical theology. Jon Thompson analyzes the complex relationship between Reformed theology and rationalism. His article discusses new accounts of the notion of revealed “mysteries” across the seventeenth century—especially in Locke and the Cambridge Platonists.

Subsequently, my article brings us to the nineteenth century, and particularly to that alleged cofounder of the conflict thesis, Andrew D. White. Often forgotten or ignored, however, White traced the development of the “scientific interpretation” of the Bible in his magnum opus. By examining White’s narrative, we get a clearer picture of where the conflict really lies. Also often ignored is the voice of the eighth Duke of Argyll, George Douglas Campbell, within the science–religion debate at the end of the nineteenth century. Thus in his contribution to this collection, Nathan Bossoh shows how Argyll steered a middle course between naturalists and supernaturalists in interpreting miracles and biblical revelation. Stuart Mathieson next draws our attention to the Victoria Institute, or Philosophical Society of Great Britain, who are frequently accused of being early “creationists.” But according to Mathieson, they were less concerned with Darwin and more with the rise of biblical criticism. Indeed, the Victoria Institute spent nearly half a century denouncing biblical criticism as unscientific! It was this approach and perspective that were later taken up by the authors of the *Fundamentals* (1910–15). Samuel Loncar concludes this section by offering us the *longue durée* view of the historicist turn to the history of philosophy and its connections to theology and Scripture. He takes us on a tour de force of how science and religion,

as historians' categories, derive from philosophy's tensions with theology in the transformation of the medieval university into a major research institution.

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