



The Scientific Revolution: Its Classical and Christian History with Dr. Ted Davis

Lesson 2.1 Why History Matters: The Conflict Thesis

Outline:

The “Conflict” Thesis of Science and Religion

- A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom, by Andrew D. White, first president of Cornell University

What was the “Conflict” Thesis about?

- Some influential Christians deny scientific conclusions.
- Some prominent secular scientists enlist science in support of an aggressively anti-religious agenda.
- In fact, Christianity and science have been engaged in creative mutual interaction ever since the first few centuries after Christ.
 - Theology has shaped conceptions of scientific knowledge and its larger cultural implications.
 - Scientific advances have led to fundamental developments in Christian beliefs.
- Andrew Dickson White (1832-1918), historian, co-founder and first president of Cornell University, spoke on “The Battle-Fields of Science” in December 1869).
 - White gave his audience “an outline of the sacred struggles for the liberty of Science – a struggle which has been going on for so many centuries.” The “war” had been longer, “with battles fiercer, with siege more persistent, with strategy more vigorous” than any other.
 - “In all modern history, interference with Science in the supposed interest of religion – no matter how conscientious such interference may have been – has resulted in the direst evils, both to Religion and Science, and *invariably*.” “I say *invariably* – I mean exactly that. It is a rule to which history allows not one exception.”
 - White entertained New Yorkers with outlandish historical “facts” and exaggerated tales. They learned that **Ferdinand Magellan** somehow “proved the earth to be round,” yet every educated European of the 15th & 16th centuries already knew it.
 - They heard that **Nicolaus Copernicus** “had escaped persecution only by death,” even though for forty years the Roman Catholic Church had been urging him to discuss openly his novel astronomical ideas.



- They were told that prior to the world of **Andreas Vesalius** at Padua in the 1540s, “dissection of the human body was thought akin to sacrilege,” yet the Italian anatomists had carried out dissections without theological censure for two centuries before his birth and the practice had spread to other parts of Europe.
- He called for a new “Warfare of Science” one in which religion and science shall stand together as allies, rather than enemies.
- White went on the warpath against dogmatic theology as a way of taking revenge against political opponents in the New York state assembly.
- An important factor (for White) was his personal and political struggle to take control of funds provided by the [Justin] Morill Land-Grant Act of 1862, passed by Congress in the midst of the Civil War. The new law gave federal land to the states, to be used to finance colleges to teach practical subjects such as agriculture and engineering.
- In addition to that political story, a religious story also lies behind the creation of Cornell University: it resulted from a shared commitment to a progressive, non-dogmatic form of religion on the part of its founders.
- Both White and Cornell despised traditional Christian theology, while embracing its central moral attitudes of love for God and one’s neighbor.
- In Cornell’s opinion, the Christian gospel as typically presented “tries to shield the deformities of the dead and putrid carcass of ‘the Church’ from the penetrating eye of advancing science and enlightened humanity.”
- “The steam engine, the railroad and the electric telegraph are the great engines of reformation,” and he looked with hope for the arrival of “a new era in religion and humanity” in the next century.
- White considered Christian churches within specific creeds to be “sects,” and he thought denominational colleges were obsolete. “Perhaps no one thing has done more to dwarf the system of higher education in this land than the sectarian principle,” which as “an evil germ.” Thus, White and Cornell sought to create and explicitly non-sectarian university.
- “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 traditional faith and human interest on the other.” – from the preface of *The History of The Conflict between Religion and Science*, by John William Draper
- Each (White and Draper) used his own version of the history of science as a weapon in a culture war against Christianity.