The Scientific Revolution: Its Classical and Christian History

with Dr. Ted Davis

Lesson 2.2: Why History Matters: The Influence of the Conflict Thesis

Outline:

The influence of the conflict thesis

- "The Last Stand – Science versus Superstition," from Puck 19 in July 1899 – Library of Congress
- White was promoting a very liberal type of religion, almost entirely untethered from Christianity.
- Many took the book for gospel truth.
- Many Christians also found White's attack on orthodoxy to be persuasive.
    - White's narrative "smashed the whole idea of Biblical inerrancy for me." Fosdick found it "unanswerable," full of "shocking facts about the way the assumed infallibility of Scriptures had impeded research, deepened prolonged obscurantism, fed the mania of persecution, and help up the progress of mankind." He abandoned "the old stuff I had been taught" and "rose in indignant revolt against it."
- Even conservative Christian scholars who never embraced White's liberal beliefs endorsed White's account (Bernard Ramm, leading postwar evangelical authority on science, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture*).
- Thomas S. Kuhn was also taken in by White's aura of expertise.
    - In The Copernican Revolution, his bestselling work, Kuhn based his discussion of religious responses to Copernicus heavily on White.
    - White on Calvin:
        - Calvin took the lead, in his *Commentary on Genesis*, by condemning all who asserted that the earth is not at the center of the universe. He clinched the matter by the usual reference to the first verse of the ninety-third Psalm, and asked, "Who will venture to place the authority of Copernicus above that of the Holy Spirit?"
        - Calvin certainly believed that the Earth was in the center of the universe – like almost everyone else in the 16th century, but he never clearly denied the Copernican theory on biblical ground – and he never mentioned Copernicus by name anywhere in his writings.
    - The accounts of Calvin and Wesley function as canaries in White's coal mine, laying bare his raw ideological bias.

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- **Prior to the 1970s** few realized that White had created myths and superstitions that held back the progress of knowledge.
    - Robert K. Merton argued that the Puritan ethos had significantly aided the development of science in 17th century England (*Science, Technology, & Society in Seventeenth Century England*).
    - At first, scholars had found Merton's thesis "an improbably, not to say, absurd relation between religion and science. At least among those reared on such positivistic works" as Draper and White, "it was widely believed, as some still believe, that the prime historical relation between religion and science is bound to be one of conflict." Given that mindset, "it was only a short leap…to a belief in the logical and historical necessity for conflict," such that "a state of war between the two was constrained to be continuous and inevitable."
- **Beginning in the 1970s**, historians and other scholars began systematically to deconstruct the narrative of inevitable conflict between theology and science.
    - One can still find some historical episodes where scientific ideas did clash with certain theological ideas.
    - White and Draper's work have been rejected though.

Single biggest myth popularized by many proponents of the Conflict Thesis: Theologians rejected the Earth's spherical shape on the basis of scripture, and opposed Columbus' efforts to find funding for his voyages across the Atlantic.

- ***Columbus before the Queen*** (1841) Smithsonian American Art Museum, Peter Frederick Rothermel
- Contrary to what many people have been taught, the earth's spherical shape – and its approximate size – have been widely known since before the time of Christ, and that knowledge never disappeared in the Western world.
- But, you would never know this from reading Draper on the Earth's spherical shape: "as might be expected , it was received with disfavor by theologians" [in the era of Columbus] – p. 160
- Noting that Columbus couldn't get support for his idea to sail west to the Indies, Draper adds, "Its irreligious tendency was pointed out by the Spanish ecclesiastics, and condemned by the council of Salamanca," and "its orthodoxy was confuted" from passages in Scripture and the church fathers, despite the fact that there had been no such council and some of the fathers he named never criticized a round Earth" (pp. 160-61)
- Draper concluded that the decisive blow really came from Ferdinand Magellan's circumnavigation of the globe: "Henceforth the theological doctrine of the flatness of the earth was irretrievably overthrown."
- Assessing the available evidence after World War II, Harvard historian Samuel Eliot Morison dismissed the whole fable of Columbus and the flat Earth as "misleading and mischievous nonsense," yet it still found its way into schoolbooks for the rest of the twentieth century.
- The myth exposed: Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Inventing the Flat Earth* (1991):

    - Columbus' critics were right to advise against the voyage! He believe the earth is much smaller than it is, and that Asia is much larger than it is; hence, that it was roughly 3000 miles west from Spain to Japan. The issue was not the earth's *shape*, but its *size*!
    - Russell shows that Christian scholars simply did not believe in a flat earth – and they never had! Ancient measurements of the earth's circumference were well known and accepted.
    - As Russell says, "nearly unanimous scholarly opinion pronounced the earth spherical, and by the fifteenth century all doubt had disappeared." – p. 26
- Another important source of the Columbus myth was Washington Irving.
    - Irving mad a hero out of Columbus in a popular biography, by creating this legend and giving it an anti-Catholic spin.

Why is it that scholars for so long bought the garbage about medieval Christians not believing in a round earth?

- Examples from art depicting a spherical earth (coronation orbs and Christ in Majesty):
    - Coronation of Henry III, Holy Roman Emperor (mid-11th C), Staats – and Universitätsbibliothek Bremen, MS b. 21, fol. 3v
    - Charles II of Hungary, Chronicon pictum (1358–1370), Österreichische Nationalbibliothek
    - Panel, "Christ in Majesty with St Matthew" (15th C), Victoria and Albert Museum, London
- These images were placed in cathedrals and churches as a way of educating the ordinary person about the true story about salvation and sin, and they also convey to people that the earth was round.
- The idea that everybody believed the earth was flat was invented in the 18th and 19th century as an anti-Christian and an anti-Catholic myth.