

The Warfare Between Christianity and Science or Christopher Columbus and the Flat Earth Myth

“And they were seeking to arrest him but feared the people, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them” (Mk. 12:12)

Jesus had just told the parable of the Vineyard and the Tenants. The parable is a retelling of the history of Israel, a retelling that challenged the corruptions of Jesus’ generation and subverted many of the common assumptions that people held. We frequently miss what he is doing in his parables because we are not as familiar with the images and motifs of the Old Testament as we should be.

The chief priests, the scribes, and the elders “perceived that he had told the parable against them.” How did they know this? The imagery of Israel as God’s vineyard comes from the Old Testament (Ps. 80:8-9; Isa. 5:7).

The religious establishment in Jesus’ day saw him as a threat because of the stories he told; and his stories were seen as a threat because they presented an alternative to the story *they* were telling.

The story they were telling was that they were the guardians of the truth, the faithful expositors of the Law and the Prophets; they were the shepherds of Israel. But Jesus came and told a different story. The chief priests and scribes and Pharisees were still characters in the story, but their roles were quite different.

Everyone understands the world in terms of story. Everyone has a story he is telling himself—a story of the way the world is. And everyone sees himself as a character in this story.

This really is the essence of a worldview. There has been a lot of talk in recent years in Christian circles about worldview issues, and rightly so. We must learn to think in terms of the big picture. We must understand that the antithesis between Christianity and the secular world is not over isolated individual issues that are

unrelated to each other. It is not the case that we just happen to disagree over certain moral issues, like abortion and homosexual marriage, human cloning, and embryonic stem-cell research. We disagree over these things because we have fundamentally different ideas about the way the world is. As Christians we rightly understand ourselves as living in a world which is made and governed by God. They see themselves as living in a world in which God does not exist, or if he does exist, his existence is irrelevant.

In short, their story is very different from ours. Their story runs something like this. Many billions of years ago all matter and energy in the entire cosmos was concentrated in one single infinitesimal point, until one Tuesday afternoon, when for no apparent reason, it exploded, and all energy and matter began to be scattered throughout space. After hundreds of millions of years, some of it collected in clusters that formed into galaxies, one of which, and so far as we know, only one, formed a solar system which would produce a planet that in time would happen to end up with just the right conditions for the spontaneous generation of life. After many more millions of years, when the planet cooled, it just so happened that there was the right combination of elements existing together in a slime pit that was jolted by some source of energy, perhaps a lightning strike, and the first simple life form came into existence; and from this meager single-celled organism emerging from the primordial goo, all life evolved.

Everything, ultimately, is purposeless and void of meaning. There is no particular reason why life emerged. There is no particular reason why the universe itself exists. There is no particular reason why there was matter and energy in the first place. There just was, and things just happened. That's it. No rhyme or reason for the universe. No reason for man. As Bertrand Russell, perhaps the most famous atheist of the 20th century, said,

Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving... [H]is origin, his growth, his

hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms.¹

Nothing exists as the result of any divine purpose. Nothing has any cosmic significance. Everything is an accident, merely the result of time and chance.

Neither is there any particular destination toward which human history is moving. There is no ultimate goal. No objective to be achieved. Again, Russell,

All the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and ...the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins.²

This is the outline of their story—the one grand secular myth.

Their story is obviously very different from *THE* story—the true story. And assuming the truth of their story will quite naturally lead one to adopt very different conclusions concerning everything that is on the table for discussion.

My purpose is not to criticize story-telling. Story-telling is inescapable. Besides this, God is the greatest of all story-tellers; he tells us the true story of the way the world is. The issue is not story-telling versus *not* story-telling, but *faithful* story-telling versus *unfaithful* story-telling.

I have given you the outline of this grand secular story. But there are many subplots to this story, stories within the story. And these sub-stories are told for the purpose of supporting the one grand story. Today, and over the course of the next few weeks, Lord willing, we will consider some of these secular myths and expose them for what they are. This is necessary because even many Christians have come to believe them, and we have done

¹ Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am NOT a Christian*, p. 107

² Idem

so because we have heard these stories told so many times we have assumed they must be true. A lie told often enough begins to sound like it's the truth.

And so we begin today a brief series on secular revisionist history, or secular myth-making.

One of the dominate subplots of the grand secular myth goes like this: Through the use of observation and reason the ancient Greeks made many useful discoveries in a wide variety of areas especially in science, but the triumph of Christianity led to the advent of the Dark Ages in which free inquiry was discouraged, science was impeded, progress came to a standstill, and the culture of western civilization stagnated. While Christianity prevailed, we are told, ignorance and superstition reigned supreme. It was not until the time of the Renaissance that men began to question basic religious assumptions and regain confidence in reason and real scientific learning began to regain the upper hand.

The very term "Dark Ages" is intended to suggest that it was a time of ignorance and superstition. Carl Sagan spoke of the period as a time when "classical learning dwindled." According to Sagan, it was a period of time that saw the "triumph of superstition."³

And not only this, as the story goes Christians continue to impede scientific discovery. Their ability to do so has been weakened since the Middle Ages, but the residual effects of the ignorance and moral dogmatism of Christianity's influence in today's culture hinder unfettered scientific discovery. Bertrand Russell put the matter very succinctly when he said Christians are "opponents of all intellectual and moral progress."⁴

We may call this the secular myth of the warfare between Christianity and science.

³ Philip J. Sampson, *6 Modern Myths About Christianity and Western Civilization* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 14

⁴ Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am NOT a Christian*, p. 26

The cast of characters includes, on the one side, highly intelligent, well-trained, white-coated scientists, objectively looking at the natural world and impartially recording their findings from which they deduce indubitable scientific laws, which every reasonable mind recognizes as true. On the other side are the ignorant churchmen who refuse even to consider, let alone to accept anything that challenges their blind moral dogmatism.

One of the more prominent secular tale-tellers in this respect is Daniel Boorstin, a former librarian of Congress.

In his 1983 bestselling book *The Discoverers*, he wrote, "A Europe-wide phenomenon of scholarly amnesia...afflicted the continent from AD 300 to at least 1300. During those centuries Christian faith and dogma suppressed the useful image of the world that had been so slowly, so painfully, and so scrupulously drawn by ancient geographers."

He calls this period the "Great Interruption."⁵ Boorstin was specifically referring to the shape of the earth. He blasts Christians during the Middle Ages for impeding discovery and exploration by insisting the earth was flat. Surely you have heard it many times, that people in Medieval Europe believed this, and that if a ship sailed too far from land it would fall off the edge of the world? Furthermore, this belief was supposedly derived from Scripture; and supposedly this widespread belief is why Christopher Columbus had such a difficult time finding someone to bankroll his voyage west across the Atlantic to India. Columbus, as the enlightened hero of scientific progress and rationality, stood against the ignorance of the church. He knew what the ignorant churchmen did not. He knew the earth was round. They insisted it was flat. This is why he had trouble finding someone to fund his voyage of discovery. Columbus, we are told, stood virtually alone in disproving the ignorant Christian belief, based upon a fictitious Bible, of a flat earth.

⁵ Daniel Boorstin, in *The Discoverers*, as quoted by Jeffrey Burton Russell in *Inventing the Flat Earth*, as quoted by Tom Bethell, in *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Science* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2005), p. 182

Makes for an exciting story: one brave man convinced he's right taking on the establishment. There's only one thing wrong with it. It's not true.

The fact of the matter is that virtually no educated person in the Middle Ages believed the earth was flat. And even fewer, if any, did at the time of Columbus.

The debate in Columbus' time was not whether the earth was flat or round. That had been settled long before. The view that the earth is a sphere goes all the way back to classical antiquity, at least to the time of Pythagoras in the 6th century BC. Pythagoras postulated a spherical earth for aesthetic reasons. Aristotle, however, in the 4th century BC supported the idea by such arguments from observation as the circular form of the earth's shadow on the moon during an eclipse, and the change of position of the sun and stars observed when one travels from north to south. Eratosthenes was the first to estimate the size of the earth. He observed that when in southern Egypt the sun was vertically overhead at noon during the summer solstice, it deviated by about 7 degrees at Alexandria in northern Egypt. From this information he calculated the size of the earth to be about 18,000 miles in circumference. He was off by more than 6,000 miles, which figures into the true story about Columbus.

The debate in Columbus' day was not the *shape* of the earth, but the *size* of the earth. All educated people knew the earth was a sphere...yes! even the leaders of the church. Augustine (AD 354-430), in his commentary on Genesis, referred to the earth as a "massive watery sphere,"⁶ and he speculated on whether or not there were people who lived on the opposite of the earth.⁷ The Venerable Bede (673-735), known as the Father of English history, maintained the earth was "an orb placed in the center of the universe."⁸ Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) also, at the very beginning of his *Summa Theologica*, refers to the earth as being round.⁹

⁶ Augustine, *Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 30, 33

⁷ *De Civitate Dei*, Book XVI, Chapter 9 — *Whether We are to Believe in the Antipodes*

⁸ <http://www.americanvision.org/articlearchive/10-04-04.asp>

⁹ *Summa Theologica*, Question 1, Article 1

The truth of the matter is that with hardly an exception, Christian leaders from the beginning accepted the notion of a spherical earth.

Again, the debate in Columbus' day was not the *shape* of the earth, but its *size*. Columbus accepted Eratosthenes' estimate for the size of the earth—18,000 miles—and this, combined with his estimate that Asia extended much further east than it actually does, led Columbus to conclude that he had to travel only 3,000 miles west across the Atlantic in order to reach India. As it turns out, the distance he would have had to travel (assuming there was no land mass blocking the way) was 10,600 miles! Fortunately for him the Americas stood in his way! He never would have survived otherwise. The distance otherwise was far too great to pack enough provisions.

Columbus had grossly underestimated the size of the earth. This was the reason he had trouble finding someone to fund his voyage. The consensus of scholarly opinion was that the earth was about 24,000 miles in circumference—6,000 miles longer than what Columbus believed. As Columbus went around seeking patronage for his voyage, the various heads of state he talked to would consult with their advisers who told him that Columbus was on a fool's errand. Why? Because the earth was flat and he'd fall off the edge? No. Because the earth was much larger than Columbus calculated, and the trip, if it could succeed at all would be much too costly to make.

Virtually everyone at the time, scholar, churchman, tradesman, king and commoner knew the earth was round. Were there some uneducated people who believed otherwise? Not doubt there were. But everyone who had even a modest education knew the earth was round. It was not the case that Columbus stood alone against the leaders of the church. C. S. Lewis, an expert on Renaissance literature wrote, "physically considered, the earth is a globe; all the authors of the high Middle Ages are agreed on this... The implications of a spherical earth were fully grasped."¹⁰

¹⁰ Cited in Tom Bethell, *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Science*, p. 183

How, then, did the story come to be so widely accepted that Columbus had to fight the doctors of the church who held to a flat earth? The story is based on the three volume *History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* written in 1828 by Washington Irving, who is better known for his "Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "Rip Van Winkle." Irving wrote of a confrontation between Columbus and the church that never took place. He later admitted to embellishing the few facts he knew he could find with his own imagination. The whole flat earth myth appears to owe its origin to Irving.

The whole concept of a war between Christianity on the one hand and science and discovery on the other, is itself a myth, used as a weapon against us. This is just one small sub-story within the grand myth. The fact of the matter is that many notable philosophers and scientists of the past were deeply committed, devout Christians. We would have to include in this list men like Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, Boyle, Pascal, Descartes, Newton, Mendel, Faraday, and Maxwell. Descartes said he sought to discover the "laws that God has put into nature. Newton declared that the regulation of the solar system presupposed the "dominion of an intelligent and powerful being." Kepler maintained that he was thinking God's thoughts after him.¹¹

Ian H. Hutchinson, head of the Department of Nuclear Energy at MIT, asks a very important question.

Why did modern science grow up almost entirely in the West, where Christian thinking held sway? There were civilizations of comparable stability, prosperity, and in many cases technology, in China, Japan, and India. Why did they not develop science? It is acknowledged that Arabic [*sic*] countries around the end of the first millennium [*sic*] were more advanced in mathematics, and their libraries kept safe eventually for Christendom much of the Greek wisdom of the ancients. Why did not their learning blossom into the science we now know?

A case that has been made...that far from being an atmosphere stifling to science, the Christian world view of the West was the fertile cultural and philosophical soil in which science grew and

¹¹ See Tom Bethell, *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Science*, p. 197

flourished... [I]t was precisely the *theology* of Christianity which created that fertile intellectual environment. The teaching that the world is the free but contingent creation of a rational Creator, worthy of study on its own merits because it is “good”, and the belief that because our rationality is in the image of the creator, we are capable of understanding the creation: these are theological encouragements to the work of empirical science. Intermingled with the desire to benefit humankind for Christian charity’s sake, and enabled by the printing press to record and communicate results for posterity, the work of science became a force that gathered momentum...

So I suggest that there is a deeper reason why scientists are puzzled about how one might pursue a Christian Science distinguished from what has been the approach developed over the past half millennium [*sic*]. It is that modern science is *already* in a very serious sense Christian. It germinated in and was nurtured by the Christian philosophy of creation, it was developed and established through the work of largely Christian pioneers, and it continues to draw Christians to its endeavours today.¹²

But, someone will say, isn’t the Bible a rather unscientific book, and doesn’t it make a number of statements that are contrary to the clear findings of science? Doesn’t it in fact speak as if the earth is flat? No, actually, not at all.

Those who accuse the Bible of teaching a flat earth point to passages that speak of the “four corners of the earth” (*e.g.*, Isa. 11:2; Rev. 7:1; 20:8) or the “four winds” (*e.g.*, Jer. 49:36; Dan. 7:2; Matt. 24:31). But there is nothing unscientific about these things, nor do they imply a flat earth. We commonly speak from a linear perspective when we speak of the four points of the compass, even though we know the earth is a sphere. We use flat maps that have four corners, but this doesn’t mean we believe in a flat earth. The Bible does not attempt to set out a scientific description of the earth. This is not to suggest that its statements are *unscientific* or, in other words, *contrary* to science, only that it speaks from a phenomenological viewpoint, meaning that it speaks as things appear to us rather than

¹² <http://www.tektonics.org/scim/sciencemoney.htm#app1>

according to precise scientific definitions. This should not be thought strange. We today often speak of the sun rising and setting, as if the sun revolves around the earth. For example, if sunrise this morning occurred at 6:30 a.m. We speak this way—of the sun rising and setting—even though we know that the earth rotates on its axis and only gives the *appearance* of the sun rising and setting. We speak in terms of appearances, not with precise scientific definitions, which can be rather cumbersome. For instance, if we were to speak with greater scientific precision we would have to say something like, “the eastern horizon of the earth dropped to reveal the upper edge of the disk of the sun at precisely 6:30 a.m. on November 26, 2006, as viewed from 98.7 degrees west longitude and 37.6 degrees north latitude.” This is perhaps more precise, but it is no more accurate. It is just as meaningful to say the sun rose at 6:30.

Critics often do not allow the Bible to speak in ways in which the critics themselves speak.

Even allowing for the fact that the Scriptures normally speak this way—phenomenologically, or according to appearances—there are nevertheless some surprisingly precise statements that ought to impress even the most demanding precisionist. Consider this one,

It is he who sits above the circle of the earth (Isa. 40:22)

And again,

He stretches out the north over the void
and hangs the earth on nothing (Job 26:7)

Isaiah lived more than 700 years before Christ, and Job was written perhaps a thousand or more years before Christ—both long before Pythagoras and Aristotle—and already they were speaking of the earth as a sphere and hanging in space. What were other cultures and religions saying at the time?

One theory was that the world sits on the back of four giant elephants balancing on a turtle swimming in a sea of milk! Another ancient theory of the universe was that the world

was held up by an angel standing on a bowl of rubies supported by a cow standing on a fish swimming in the sea with sand at the bottom. The most famous depiction of mythological cosmology is that of Atlas supporting the heavens and the earth on his back.¹³

Did Job and Isaiah come to these conclusions by scientific investigation? No. Then how did they know? Peter tells us. These holy men of old spoke from God as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21). They spoke by divine revelation, as is true with all the Biblical writers.

There is nothing in the Bible to be embarrassed about, nothing for which we have to apologize, and certainly nothing in it that we have to fear will be disproved by science. The warfare between Christianity and science is a myth. There is indeed a warfare between Christianity and naturalism, a philosophy which many scientists have embraced—a philosophy which *a priori* rules out even the possibility of *supra*-natural realm. The war is not with science, but with a false philosophy, which some scientists have confused with science.

May God be pleased to raise up some of our sons and daughters to serve him in scientific endeavors, and see themselves, as Kepler did, as thinking God's thoughts after him.

¹³ Gary DeMar and Fred Douglas Young, *A New World in View* (Atlanta, GA: American Vision, 1996), pp. 76-77