

# **Liberal Protestantism and Science**

*Leslie A. Muray*

**Greenwood Press**

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# Liberal Protestantism and Science



LESLIE A. MURAY

Foreword by John B. Cobb, Jr.

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*Richard Olson, Series Editor*



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To my friends and colleagues  
Russ Pregeant  
David Fedo  
The late Joe Schneider  
Laura Hubbard  
and my alter ego  
J. Ron Engel



# Contents

<i>Foreword</i> by John B. Cobb, Jr.	ix
<i>Series Foreword</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xxi
Chapter 1. Introduction	1
Chapter 2. The Enlightenment and Romanticism	7
The Enlightenment	7
Romanticism	13
Chapter 3. The Darwinian Controversy and Liberal Protestantism	19
The Liberal Embrace of Darwinism	19
Social Darwinism	28
The Social Gospel	29
<i>Lux Mundi</i>	33
Chapter 4. Science, Liberal Protestantism, and the Twentieth Century: 1900–1960	39
The Convergence of Science and Religion	39
The Neo-Orthodox Interlude: The Independence of Science and Religion	54

Chapter 5. Science, Liberal Protestantism, and the Twentieth/Twenty-First Centuries: 1960–2006	63
The Dialogue Resumes	63
Process Theology	80
The Integration of Science and Religion	87
Chapter 6. Ecotheology: The Frontier between Science and Religion	105
Chapter 7. Conclusion	113
Primary Sources	115
John F. Haught, <i>Science and Religion: From Conflict to Conversation</i>	116
Lyman Abbott, <i>The Evolution of Christianity</i>	117
John Fiske, <i>The Idea of God as Affected by Modern Knowledge</i>	120
Rev. Aubrey Moore, “The Christian Doctrine of God.” In <i>Lux Mundi: A Series of Studies in the Religion of the Incarnation</i>	125
Arthur Peacocke, <i>Creation and the World of Science: The Re-Shaping of Belief</i>	127
Karl E. Peters, <i>Dancing with the Sacred: Evolution, Ecology, and God</i>	131
<i>Annotated Bibliography</i>	135
<i>Index</i>	151

## Foreword

Those of us who have been related to theological education in what used to be the mainline churches, Episcopal, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Disciples, and United Methodist, find it hard to understand the now widely held public image of Protestantism in the United States. The same is true of the majority of Lutherans and American Baptists. Nowhere in our theological seminaries is there even a question raised as to whether we should respect and admire science and historical scholarship and adjust our teaching to their reliable findings and results. If Creationism and Intelligent Design are discussed at all, it is usually as illustrations of the wrong way of relating to science. This has been true for generations. It is hard for us to understand that so many people ignore this whole development and think and write as if no significant body of Christians had ever developed a positive relationship with science.

Furthermore, this tradition of friendly relations with science is not something new. In the late Middle Ages Christians laid the foundations of modern science. They pursued science in order to understand God better, and this motivation persisted into the eighteenth century. The church never objected. Of course, the transition from Aristotelian science to the modern world view occasioned some controversy. Most of it was among scientists. But in a period when theological heretics and “witches” were being slaughtered by the church, no scientist was killed, or even severely punished, for propounding scientific theories that radically transformed the philosophical and worldview basis of Christian theology.

In England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, more science was done in the manse than in the university. As Muray points out, Darwin was a deist for most of his life, friend of clergy, and contributor to the church;

even after all the controversies his work engendered the Church of England bestowed on him its highest honor, burial in Westminster Cathedral. In the United States, when some Presbyterians rejected historical and scientific scholarship, they did not carry their denomination with them, but split off and founded another one. When some Protestants have tried to force their ideas on local school boards or state legislatures, the leaders of what were until recently the mainstream denominations could be counted on to oppose these efforts.

Those of us who have lived our entire lives in the church surrounded by Christians who are profoundly respectful of science find it hard to understand how people who seem otherwise well informed can ignore this mainstream history and identify Protestant Christianity only with what was until recently a fringe. I hope that Muray's brief sketch of the history of Liberal Protestantism's and its embrace of science will compel writers in the field to be at least a little more nuanced in their denunciation of "religion."

Perhaps some of these writers will recognize that among religious people there is always the danger of absolutizing present or past forms of their tradition and resisting all change. Perhaps they will recognize that similar tendencies exist among scientists and other scholars who often resist criticism of their assumptions and methods or even their cherished theories. Everyone recognizes that this kind of excess characterized Fascists and Communists and that many secular people give to their nations the sort of devotion that Christians believe should be given only to God. If we meet one another with the awareness that all of us need to be more critical of our traditions and ourselves, our discussions will be far more fruitful.

For me, as a participant in the "liberal" Protestant tradition that was until recently mainstream, such critical reflection about myself and my tradition is important. Clearly our invisibility today means that we have made some serious mistakes. Where did we go wrong? There is no consensus among us on this point, but I will express my personal views.

I believe that we went wrong by accepting the modern scientific worldview too uncritically. Prior to Darwin this meant accepting a dualistic view of a materialistic, mechanistic nature and a purely mental human soul. This is profoundly unbiblical, and in my view, profoundly wrong. It has intensified the anthropocentric tendencies already present in the Bible and the Christian tradition. It has destroyed the university created in the medieval period, centering in the humanistic liberal arts, and replaced it with multiple autonomous disciplines none of which relate effectively to the real issues now faced by humanity. And it bears considerable responsibility for the difficulties we still have in responding intelligently to the environmental crisis that threatens to destroy us all.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not questioning that the sciences made great advances making use of this worldview. But in the twentieth century we discovered that it also blocked the understanding of new discoveries in physics. The reader of this book will discover that many Liberal Protestants have joined a few scientists in calling for replacement of the mechanistic paradigm with an organic one. We should have argued for this sooner and with greater insistence. We should do so now. This is *not* an attack on science. But it *is* a proposal for revising many scientific formulations that are shaped not only by the evidence but by a seventeenth-century metaphysics.

The one great crisis in the relation between science and religion has proved itself difficult to resolve chiefly because of the materialistic mechanistic model of nature. Given this model, the inclusion of human beings fully within nature, an inclusion that is rightly called for by evolutionary theory, has horrendous results. It means that we are asked to view ourselves as machines. I cannot believe that the scientists who press this view on us, intentionally or not, really adopt it for themselves. It was bad enough for religious people to accept this view of other animals, and these have paid, and continue to pay, a high price for our acquiescence. But scientists have no right to demand that religious people, or any others, adopt this view of human beings. To insist that we, scientists and religious people alike, are more than matter in motion is not to oppose *science*. It *is* to oppose a metaphysics to which too many scientists are committed. If we liberal Christians had made this conviction clearer to the general public, or even within our own congregations, perhaps we could not be so easily ignored today.

I am grateful for this book that makes so accessible to the general reader the reality of a major Christian tradition. The fault of this tradition in relation to science is far better understood as too ready an acceptance of whatever the "experts" say than any resistance to the authority of science in its proper sphere. Perhaps the current crisis of Liberal Protestantism will press us into speaking our distinctive contribution to the discussion with a louder voice, even if that sometimes offends our friends in the sciences.

John B. Cobb, Jr.



## Series Foreword

For nearly 2,500 years, some conservative members of societies have expressed concern about the activities of those who sought to find a naturalistic explanation for natural phenomena. In 429 B.C.E., for example, the comic playwright, Aristophanes parodied Socrates as someone who studied the phenomena of the atmosphere, turning the awe-inspiring thunder which had seemed to express the wrath of Zeus into nothing but the farting of the clouds. Such actions, Aristophanes argued, were blasphemous and would undermine all tradition, law, and custom. Among early Christian spokespersons there were some, such as Tertullian, who also criticized those who sought to understand the natural world on the grounds that they “persist in applying their studies to a vain purpose, since they indulge their curiosity on natural objects, which they ought rather [direct] to their Creator and Governor.”<sup>1</sup>

In the twentieth century, though a general distrust of science persisted among some conservative groups, the most intense opposition was reserved for the theory of evolution by natural selection. Typical of extreme antievolution comments is the following opinion offered by Judge Braswell, Dean of the Georgia Court of Appeals: “This monkey mythology of Darwin is the cause of permissiveness, promiscuity, pills, prophylactics, perversions, pregnancies, abortions, pornography, pollution, poisoning, and proliferation of crimes of all types.”<sup>2</sup>

It can hardly be surprising that those committed to the study of natural phenomena responded to their denigrators in kind, accusing them of willful ignorance and of repressive behavior. Thus, when Galileo Galilei was warned against holding and teaching the Copernican system of astronomy as true, he wielded his brilliantly ironic pen and threw down a

gauntlet to religious authorities in an introductory letter "To the Discerning Reader" at the beginning of his great *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*:

Several years ago there was published in Rome a salutary edict which, in order to obviate the dangerous tendencies of our age, imposed a seasonable silence upon the Pythagorean [and Copernican] opinion that the earth moves. There were those who impudently asserted that this decree had its origin, not in judicious inquiry, but in passion none too well informed. Complaints were to be heard that advisors who were totally unskilled at astronomical observations ought not to clip the wings of reflective intellects by means of rash prohibitions.

Upon hearing such carping insolence, my zeal could not be contained.<sup>3</sup>

No contemporary discerning reader could have missed Galileo's anger and disdain for those he considered enemies of free scientific inquiry.

Even more bitter than Galileo was Thomas Henry Huxley, often known as "Darwin's bulldog." In 1860, after a famous confrontation with the Anglican Bishop Samuel Wilberforce, Huxley bemoaned the persecution suffered by many natural philosophers, but then he reflected that the scientists were exacting their revenge:

Extinguished theologians lie about the cradle of every science as the strangled snakes beside that of Hercules; and history records that whenever science and orthodoxy have been fairly opposed, the latter has been forced to retire from the lists, bleeding and crushed, if not annihilated; scotched if not slain.<sup>4</sup>

The impression left, considering these colorful complaints from both sides is that science and religion must continually be at war with one another. That view of the relation between science and religion was reinforced by Andrew Dickson White's *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*, which has seldom been out of print since it was published as a two volume work in 1896. White's views have shaped the lay understanding of science and religion interactions for more than a century, but recent and more careful scholarship has shown that confrontational stances do not represent the views of the overwhelming majority of either scientific investigators or religious figures throughout history.

One response among those who have wished to deny that conflict constitutes the most frequent relationship between science and religion is to claim that they cannot be in conflict because they address completely different human needs and therefore have nothing to do with one another. This was the position of Immanuel Kant who insisted that the world of natural phenomena, with its dependence on deterministic causality, is fundamentally disjoint from the noumenal world of human choice and

morality, which constitutes the domain of religion. Much more recently, it was the position taken by Stephen Jay Gould in *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (1999). Gould writes:

I . . . do not understand why the two enterprises should experience any conflict. Science tries to document the factual character of the natural world and to develop theories that coordinate and explain these facts. Religion, on the other hand, operates in the equally important, but utterly different realm of human purposes, meanings, and values.<sup>5</sup>

In order to capture the disjunction between science and religion, Gould enunciates a principle of “Non-overlapping magisterial,” which he identifies as “a principle of respectful noninterference.”<sup>6</sup>

In spite of the intense desire of those who wish to isolate science and religion from one another in order to protect the autonomy of one, the other, or both, there are many reasons to believe that theirs is ultimately an impossible task. One of the central questions addressed by many religions is what is the relationship between members of the human community and the natural world. This question is a central question addressed in “Genesis,” for example. Any attempt to relate human and natural existence depends heavily on the understanding of nature that exists within a culture. So where nature is studied through scientific methods, scientific knowledge is unavoidably incorporated into religious thought. The need to understand “Genesis” in terms of the dominant understandings of nature thus gave rise to a tradition of scientifically informed commentaries on the six days of creation which constituted a major genre of Christian literature from the early days of Christianity through the Renaissance.

It is also widely understood that in relatively simple cultures—even those of early urban centers—there is a low level of cultural specialization, so economic, religious, and knowledge producing specialties are highly integrated. In Bronze Age Mesopotamia, for example, agricultural activities were governed both by knowledge of the physical conditions necessary for successful farming and by religious rituals associated with plowing, planting, irrigating, and harvesting. Thus religious practices and natural knowledge interacted in establishing the character and timing of farming activities.

Even in very complex industrial societies with high levels of specialization and division of labor, the various cultural specialties are never completely isolated from one another and they share many common values and assumptions. Given the linked nature of virtually all institutions in any culture it is the case that when either religious or scientific institutions change substantially, those changes are likely to produce pressures for change in the other. It was probably true, for example, that the attempts of

pre-Socratic investigators of nature, with their emphasis on uniformities in the natural world and apparent examples of events systematically directed toward particular ends, made it difficult to sustain beliefs in the old pantheon of human-like and fundamentally capricious Olympian gods. But it is equally true that the attempts to understand nature promoted a new notion of the divine—a notion that was both monotheistic and transcendent, rather than polytheistic and immanent—and a notion that focused on both justice and intellect rather than power and passion. Thus early Greek natural philosophy undoubtedly played a role not simply in challenging, but also in transforming Greek religious sensibilities.

Transforming pressures do not always run from scientific to religious domains, moreover. During the Renaissance, there was a dramatic change among Christian intellectuals from one that focused on the contemplation of God's works to one that focused on the responsibility of the Christian for caring for his fellow humans. The active life of service to humankind, rather than the contemplative life of reflection on Gods character and works, now became the Christian ideal for many. As a consequence of this new focus on the active life, Renaissance intellectuals turned away from the then dominant Aristotelian view of science that saw the inability of theoretical sciences to change the world as a positive virtue. They replaced this understanding with a new view of natural knowledge, promoted in the writings of men such as Johann Andreae in Germany and Francis Bacon in England that viewed natural knowledge as significant only because it gave humankind the ability to manipulate the world to improve the quality of life. Natural knowledge would henceforth be prized by many because it conferred power over the natural world. Modern science thus took on a distinctly utilitarian shape at least in part in response to religious changes.

Neither the conflict model nor the claim of disjunction, then, accurately reflect the often intense and frequently supportive interactions between religious institutions, practices, ideas, and attitudes on the one hand, and scientific institutions, practices, ideas, and attitudes on the other. Without denying the existence of tensions, the primary goal of the volumes of this series is to explore the vast domain of mutually supportive and/or transformative interactions between scientific institutions, practices, and knowledge and religious institutions, practices, and beliefs. A second goal is to offer the opportunity to make comparisons across space, time, and cultural configuration. The series will cover the entire globe, most major faith traditions, hunter-gatherer societies in Africa and Oceania as well as advanced industrial societies in the West, and the span of time from classical antiquity to the present. Each volume will focus on a particular cultural tradition, a particular faith community, a particular time period, or a particular scientific domain, so that each reader can enter the fascinating story of science and religion interactions from a familiar perspective.

Furthermore, each volume will include not only a substantial narrative or interpretive core, but also a set of primary documents which will allow the reader to explore relevant evidence, an extensive annotated bibliography to lead the curious to reliable scholarship on the topic, and a chronology of events to help the reader keep track of the sequence of events involved and to relate them to major social and political occurrences.

So far I have used the words “science” and “religion” as if everyone knows and agrees about their meaning and as if they were equally appropriately applied across place and time. Neither of these assumptions is true. Science and religion are modern terms that reflect the way that we in the industrialized West organize our conceptual lives. Even in the modern West, what we mean by science and religion is likely to depend on our political orientation, our scholarly background, and the faith community that we belong to. Thus, for example, Marxists and Socialists tend to focus on the application of natural knowledge as the key element in defining science. According to the British Marxist scholar, Benjamin Farrington, “Science is the system of behavior by which man has acquired mastery of his environment. It has its origins in techniques . . . in various activities by which man keeps body and soul together. Its source is experience, its aims, practical, its *only* test, that it works.”<sup>7</sup> Many of those who study natural knowledge in preindustrial societies are also primarily interested in knowledge as it is used and are relatively open regarding the kind of entities posited by the developers of culturally specific natural knowledge systems or “local sciences.” Thus, in his *Zapotec Science: Farming and Food in the Northern Sierra of Oaxaca*, Roberto González insists that

Zapotec farmers . . . certainly practice science, as does any society whose members engage in subsistence activities. They hypothesize, they model problems, they experiment, they measure results, and they distribute knowledge among peers and to younger generations. But they typically proceed from markedly different premises—that is, from different conceptual bases—than their counterparts in industrialized societies.<sup>8</sup>

Among the “different premises” is the presumption of Zapotec scientists that unobservable spirit entities play a significant role in natural phenomena.

Those more committed to liberal pluralist society and to what anthropologists like González are inclined to identify as “cosmopolitan science,” tend to focus on science as a source of objective or disinterested knowledge, disconnected from its uses. Moreover they generally reject the positing of unobservable entities, which they characterize as “supernatural.” Thus, in an *Amicus Curiae* brief filed in connection with the 1986 supreme court case which tested Louisiana’s law requiring the teaching of creation science

along with evolution, for example, seventy-two Nobel Laureates, seventeen state academies of science and seven other scientific organizations argued that

[s]cience is devoted to formulating and testing naturalistic explanations for natural phenomena. It is a process for systematically collecting and recording data about the physical world, then categorizing and studying the collected data in an effort to infer the principles of nature that best explain the observed phenomena. Science is not equipped to evaluate supernatural explanations for our observations; without passing judgement on the truth or falsity of supernatural explanations, science leaves their consideration to the domain of religious faith.<sup>9</sup>

No reference whatsoever to uses appears in this definition. And its specific unwillingness to admit speculation regarding supernatural entities into science reflects a society in which cultural specialization has proceeded much farther than in the village farming communities of southern Mexico.

In a similar way, secular anthropologists and sociologists are inclined to define the key features of religion in a very different way than members of modern Christian faith communities. Anthropologists and sociologists focus on communal rituals and practices which accompany major collective and individual events—plowing, planting, harvesting, threshing, hunting, preparation for war (or peace), birth, the achievement of manhood or womanhood, marriage (in many cultures), childbirth, and death. Moreover, they tend to see the major consequence of religious practices as the intensification of social cohesion. Many Christians, on the other hand, view the primary goal of their religion as personal salvation, viewing society as at best a supportive structure and at worst, a distraction from their own private spiritual quest.

Thus, science and religion are far from uniformly understood. Moreover, they are modern Western constructs or categories whose applicability to the temporal and spatial “other” must always be justified and must always be understood as the imposition of modern ways of structuring institutions, behaviors, and beliefs on a context in which they could not have been categories understood by the actors involved. Nonetheless it does seem to us not simply permissible, but probably necessary to use these categories at the start of any attempt to understand how actors from other times and places interacted with the natural world and with their fellow humans. It may ultimately be possible for historians and anthropologists to understand the practices of persons distant in time and/or space in terms that those persons might use. But that process must begin by likening the actions of others to those that we understand from our own experience, even if the likenesses are inexact and in need of qualification.

The editors of this series have not imposed any particular definition of science or of religion on the authors, expecting that each author will develop either explicit or implicit definitions that are appropriate to their own scholarly approaches and to the topics that they have been assigned to cover.

Richard Olson

## NOTES

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9. 72 Nobel Laureates, 17 State Academies of Science and Seven Other Scientific Organizations. *Amicus Curiae* Brief in support of Appelles Don Aguilard et al. vs. Edwin Edwards in his official capacity as Governor of Louisiana et al. (1986), p. 24.