

Spring 1986

On Theological Ignorance

Donald W. Viney

Pittsburg State University, dviney@pittstate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/phil_faculty



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Viney, Donald W., "On Theological Ignorance" (1986). *Faculty Submissions*. Paper 6.
http://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/phil_faculty/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Submissions by an authorized administrator of Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dlwhite@pittstate.edu.

The Practice Of History And Social Science

A Publication of
The Departments of History
and Social Science
Pittsburg State University

James B. M. Schick, Editor

Number Nineteen
Spring, 1986



Among the consequences of church-state separation for American society, DONALD VINEY contends, has been theological ignorance. Unaware of the vast literature produced by scholars of Biblical history and religious philosophy, students make assumptions about the Bible's teachings and fall victim to woefully inadequate explanations of nature, God, and man. Viney, Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Pittsburg State University, published Charles Hartshorne and the Existence of God, from the State University of New York Press, in 1985. He is nearing completion of a manuscript, "The God of Process," which addresses a non-academic audience on recent developments in philosophical theology.

ON THEOLOGICAL IGNORANCE

Donald Wayne Viney

Education is, in part, the instruction in how to think critically and responsibly on difficult matters. The educational system fails if (1) students are not taught to think, or (2) students are taught not to think. A good case can be made that American education fails on the first point where questions of religious belief are concerned. Students are then easy prey for those who would teach them not to think. The result is theological ignorance--persons deprived of what the greatest minds both past and present have said concerning religious belief. One of my students, a college sophomore, was astonished to learn that a certain theologian did not believe St. Paul wrote all of the letters normally ascribed to him. Said the student, "She doesn't know her Bible very well." The irony of this statement--that it was the student's, not the theologian's, knowledge that was deficient--is an indictment against his educational training. Theological ignorance is nowhere more apparent than in the attempt by certain groups to have "creation-science" taught alongside evolutionary theories. The demand for "equal time" is usually viewed as a challenge to science education. This paper will discuss creation-science as a product of theological ignorance, and by implication, as a challenge to theological education.

The scientific community has been stirred to action by those demanding equal time in public schools for the teaching of evolution and creation-science. Scientists claim, and so far the courts agree, that creation-science is a thinly veiled religious doctrine based on texts written by persons whose scientific knowledge was vastly inferior to our own. Harry

Emerson Fosdick, the great American educator and Baptist minister, long ago demonstrated the absurdity of taking one's science from the Bible. According to scripture,

The earth was flat and was founded on an underlying sea (Psalm 136:6; 24:1-2; Genesis 7:11); it was stationary (Psalm 93:1; 104:5); the heavens, like an upturned bowl, "strong as a molten mirror" (Job 37:18; Genesis 1:6-8; Isaiah 40:22; Psalm 104:2), rested on the earth beneath (Amos 9:6; Job 26:11); the sun, moon, and stars moved within the firmament of special purpose to illumine man (Genesis 1:14-19); there was a sea above the sky, "the waters which were above the firmament" (Genesis 1:7; Psalm 148:4) and through "the windows of heaven" the rain came down (Genesis 7:11; Psalm 78:23); beneath the earth was mysterious Sheol² where dwelt the shadowy dead (Isaiah 14:9-11).² Job 26:5-8

In another age, Fosdick's summary of Biblical cosmology might have been used against the "heretics" who advocated a heliocentric model of the solar system. Indeed, Martin Luther referred to Copernicus as a "fool" and "an upstart astrogologer" whose teachings are contradicted by scripture. When creationists speak of evolution as the product of "warped thinking" they stand in the imprudent tradition of Luther.

Creationists realize that some passages in scripture run contrary to established scientific truth. These passages, the creationists claim, are poetic and not to be interpreted in a literal sense. Since Genesis is not poetry and is written in the style of a historical narrative, it is to be understood in a literal sense. (Paradoxically, the creationists use the poetry of the Psalms to support their literal reading of Genesis.) What creationists don't realize is that even the

so-called historical narratives cannot be given literal meaning without conflicting with science. For instance, the men of Korah were swallowed up by the earth and "went alive down to Sheol" (Numbers 16:33). Sheol has no place in modern geology. The more important point is that one distorts the theological significance of Biblical narratives by interpreting them in strictly literal fashion. It makes sense on a literal reading of Genesis to ask whether the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was deciduous or evergreen (Genesis 2:9). But the question is frivolous and entirely misses the symbolic significance of the story of human disobedience to God. Similarly, it is sheer anachronism to interpret "the water above the firmament" (Genesis 1:7) as the hydrosphere. The separation of the waters⁸ in Genesis is symbolic of God's dominion over chaos.

The moral to draw from this discussion is not that the Bible teaches bad science but that the Bible is misused if taken as a guide to scientific truth. The problem is not scientific; it is theological. Once they saw the significance of evolutionary theory, theologians understood that it posed no threat to religious belief. On the contrary, evolutionary principles were incorporated into theological thinking. Eric C. Rust of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary says,

Once the Christian Church had, somewhat belatedly, made its peace with "evolution" as a creative process, the category entered theological thought at the levels of Biblical study and systematic theological thinking. No intelligent man [or woman], whether Christian or non-Christian, can avoid this current way of thought.

According to this criterion, creationists are not intelligent men and women. However, such judgments are too harsh. Many of them sport degrees from major

10 It is not that they are unintelligent; universities, they are theologically illiterate.

Creationist's near-complete ignorance of developments in modern theology is illustrated in a book entitled Scientific Creationism. The book was intended as a textbook for high school and college classrooms and was prepared by the technical staff and consultants of the Institute for Creation Research and edited by Henry M. Morris, the Institute's director. In the final chapter, Morris and his colleagues attempt to place the scientific evidence for creationism in its proper Biblical and theological context.¹¹ One soon discovers that the chapter has virtually nothing to do with theology. The names of prominent twentieth-century theologians such as Tillich, Barth, Brunner, Bultmann, Rahner, Moltmann or Pannenberg never appear. Theology, as understood by the members of the Institute for Creation Research, is little more than a hackneyed Biblical literalism. The reader is told that the opening lines of Genesis must have literally been written by God since¹² no human was around to witness the events of creation. This line of reasoning embodies at least three untenable assumptions, (1) there is nothing to be learned from the careful textual and historical analyses of Genesis, (2) knowledge of origins is impossible apart from divine revelation, and (3) God communicates to humans in direct written form, analogous to writing a letter. None of these assumptions finds support in the writings of recognized authorities in theology such as those already mentioned.

The suspicion that the creationists have no familiarity with theology is reinforced when one comes to their page-and-a-half discussion of "theistic evolution." Creationists are fond of presenting belief in God and belief in evolution as mutually inconsistent. Thus, one would expect creationists to address the arguments

of those who believe otherwise. However, no attempt is made to accurately represent the view of major theistic evolutionists such as Alexander, Boodin, Brightman, Peirce, Hartshorne, Teilhard, Tennant, Whitehead, or Wieman. Indeed, no theistic evolutionist is mentioned! Not surprisingly, the rebuttal of theistic evolution takes no account of the obvious replies that would be made by its defenders. For example, Morris and company claim that an all-powerful God is capable of creating the universe in an instant and would not have to "stretch it out over aeons of time."¹⁴ The point of an evolutionary theory of creation, however, is that it provides a more exalted concept of divine power by refusing to confine God's creative activity to the remote past. The authors of the textbook show no evidence of being aware of the actual teachings of theistic evolutionists.

For all of their theological ignorance, the creationists make a natural mistake. Since the Bible is, in some sense, about God's activity in history, the creationists suppose that a careful study of scripture yields a fully developed theology. However, the Bible is no more a treatise on theology than it is a book on science. There is no systematic account of the concept of God in scripture such as would interest a theologian. For instance, God is all-powerful (Job 42:2; Matthew 19:26), yet divine power could be stopped by iron chariots (Judges 1:19); God cannot be seen (Exodus 33:20; 1 Timothy 6:16), yet God used to speak to Moses "face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Exodus 33:11); God never changes or repents (Numbers 23:19; James 1:17), yet more than once God has a change of heart (Genesis 6:6; Exodus 32:14; 1 Samuel 15:11); God is the source of good and evil (Isaiah 45:7), yet God is good (Psalm 100:5; 107:1). Theologians recognize these statements as imperfect and unmethodical attempts to express divine truth. An important part of the theologian's job is to separate

insight from error and, using scripture, tradition, experience and reason, give a coherent rendering of the concept of God.

It is important to understand that theology does not replace the Bible. Indeed, it is part of theology's task to teach the difference between use and abuse of scripture. The Bible, as a resource for guidance, comfort, and strength to the faithful, has no equal in the voluminous libraries of theology. As C. S. Lewis comments, one learns from the Bible not by using it as "an encyclopedia or encyclical but by steeping ourselves in its tone or temper and so learning its overall message."¹⁵ Part of the overall message of the Bible is that God acts in history. One learns this much from scripture. However, to meet its own intellectual and spiritual challenges, each generation must come to its own understanding of the divine element in things. There is a good case to be made that this is precisely what the writers of Genesis were doing. The creation story of Genesis 1:1-2:3 is actually the incorporation of Babylonian mythology into a Hebraic context where God is conceived as Lord of all creation. No more than the ancient Hebrews can modern men and women ignore, without peril, the creative genius of contemporary science and theology. This is not a denial of the Bible; it is following the example set by the scriptural writers themselves.

Resistance to theological education is based, in large measure, on the fear that modern theology is incurably infected by secular humanistic principles whose end result is the rejection of religious belief. The element of truth in this view is that it was in modern theology (in the works of Hamilton, Altizer, and Rubenstein) that the "death of God" movement took root. Nevertheless, the movement was short lived and was never representative of the majority of theologians. Contrary to what creationists would lead one to

believe, theology is not fatally diseased by secular humanism. It is quite healthy and capable of defending religious belief against the charges of irrationalism and superstition without resorting to the contrived dichotomy of the Bible versus evolution. Moreover, there is no dearth of excellent elementary treatments of recent theological developments. Ronald Nash's The Concept of God (Zondervan, 1983) and John B. Cobb and David Ray Griffin's Process Theology, An Introductory Exposition (Westminster, 1976) are good places to begin.

The resources for combating theological ignorance are not lacking. What is necessary is to educate students as to the existence and importance of these resources—an education creationists sadly missed. Perhaps the more difficult task is to overcome the programming not to think theologically. Too often the call to faith is a call to abandon reason. We must learn that there is no virtue in slavish ignorance, even when it is (incorrectly) labeled faith. Religious leaders and educators would be wise to heed the words of Whitehead: "Reason is the safeguard of the objectivity of religion: it seizes for it the general coherence denied to hysteria."¹⁶ The Bible is even more succinct, "Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord" (Isaiah 1:18).

NOTES

¹ Laurie R. Godfrey, ed., Scientists Confront Creationism (New York: Norton, 1983); Ashley Montagu, ed., Science and Creationism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); the most damaging case against creationism is Phillip Kitcher's Abusing Science, The Case Against Creationism (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983).

- 2 Harry Emerson Fosdick, "A Reply to Mr. Bryan in the Name of Religion," New York Times, March 12, 1922, reprinted in Gail Kennedy, ed., Evolution and Religion (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1957), 32. The same quotation is found in Fosdick's The Meaning of Faith (New York: Association Press, 1950), 174.
- 3 Andrew D. White, A History of the Warfare of Science With Theology (New York: George Braziller, 1955), 126.
- 4 Henry M. Morris, ed., Scientific Creationism (general edition) (San Diego, CA: Creation Life Publishers, 1974), 214.
- 5 Ibid., 244.
- 6 Ibid., 245.
- 7 Ibid., 208.
- 8 See Russell Bowler's exposition of Genesis in The Interpreter's Bible, vol. 1 (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1952), 472.
- 9 Eric C. Rust, Evolutionary Philosophies and Contemporary Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 15.
- 10 "21 Scientists Who Believe in Creation," a pamphlet published by Creation-Life Publishers (San Diego, CA, 1977).
- 11 Morris, Scientific Creationism, iv.
- 12 Ibid., tit and 206.
- 13 W. Gunter Plaut, commentary on Genesis in The Torah, A Modern Commentary (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981).
- 14 Morris, Scientific Creationism, 219.
- 15 C. S. Lewis, Reflections on the Psalms (New York: Harvest, 1958), 112.
- 16 Theodore Runyon, "The Human Being as a Theological Animal: A Biblical Argument Against Creationism," Images of Man, vol. 1, J. William Angell and E. Pendleton Banks, eds. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), 82-91.
- 17 Other useful sources include Rust's Evolutionary Philosophies mentioned above; Steven T. Davis, Logic and the Nature of God (London: Macmillan, 1983); Charles Hartshorne, Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1984). Books that deal specifically with the creationist controversy are Roland Mushat Frye, ed., Is God a Creationist? The Religious Case Against Creation-Science (New York: Scribner, 1983); Ernan McMullin, ed., Evolution and Creation (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986).
- 18 Alfred North Whitehead, Religion in the Making (New York: Meridian, 1971; originally published 1926), 63.