

Walter H. Conser, Jr. *God and the Natural World: Religion and Science in Antebellum America* Columbia, South Carolina, University of South Carolina Press, 1993.

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By the early 1800's, Natural Science had pushed God to the explanatory margins. But the influence of religion on scientific theory and practice was far from negligible; the margins, after all, needed plenty of explaining. Before Darwin's "dangerous idea," there was still room in science not only for teleological explanation, but for a kind of genetic cosmology which took for granted that so beautifully designed a mechanism as the universe required an equally awe-inspiring designer. While the everyday workings of the natural world seemed to be sufficiently explained by scientific theory, its origin and purpose required extra- (although not anti-) scientific elaborations which religion was well placed to provide.

Walter Conser, Jr. has given us an extremely readable study detailing how this general spirit of reconciliation was specifically incorporated in the work of the scientist and religious thinkers of pre-darwinian America. In particular, he shows us how (religious) history and theology laid claims to status as science, while anthropology, biology and geology stressed their ultimate compatibility with religious faith. Without in any way underestimating the challenge which scientific theory posed to a religious account of the cosmos, Conser reveals the relation between science and religion to be much more complicated and interesting than the simple antagonisms of popular imaginings (as for instance the clash between Archbishop Ussher and the scientific authorities over the age of the Earth).

The book begins by reminding us just how severely religious and theological explanations of the natural order had been curtailed by scientific advances. The very remoteness suggested by the image of God as cosmic designer shows the degree to which the caring Shepherd of earlier times had been displaced by a widespread acceptance of a mechanistic nature. Further, developments in botany and historical geology challenged the predominant theological assumption that the natural order was hierarchical, stable and static; not only could the great diversity of organisms not be neatly fit into medieval classifications, but the fossil record indicated the existence of oceans where there was now dry land, and of species no longer known.(p.20-1) All this evidence pointed to a very ancient and slowly changing world. Likewise, a developing awareness of the ways in which one's particular historical context could determine one's communicative strategies and literary methods threw into question the validity of simple, literalistic interpretations of scripture. If universal truth was to be gleaned from the Bible, it would not be so simply as might have been thought.

If we notice mainly the seriousness of these challenges, the American scholars of Conser's story saw instead the opportunity for a more precise account of the proper place of both science and religion to a complete understanding of the universe. In the historical development of the social and natural order could be discerned purposes and ends; the scholar trained in history (and in Hegelian historiography) could see the necessity of this development of nature and human consciousness to the full and final realization of God's word. (p.44) In the same way, knowledge of language, history and paleoanthropology served the task of biblical exegesis. (p.79)

The posited ability of the scholar to apply a scientifically based hermeneutics to arrive at scriptural truths was critical to the whole project of reconciling science with religion, for the assertion of a methodological analogy between science and theology was central to that project. Theologians like Hodge and Thornwell emphasized the empirical and inductive underpinnings of theology, whereby general religious truths could be well grounded in scriptural facts, just as proper scientific theory was always an inductive generalization over observed natural facts.(p.70) This perceived continuity between theology and science gave one the purchase to criticize not just unscientific theological speculation, but also the speculative and deductive science most likely to run counter to religious doctrine. (p.77)

It is a fascinating and well told history (one which is more elaborate and detailed than can be reproduced here) and one wonders if a similar story could be told regarding our developing conceptions of and treatments for the human body. The book rules out of court any idea that we could properly explain this history as the slow defeat of religious superstition by the rational light of science. For not only did theology react to scientific challenges with remarkable sophistication, but science, too, particularly our understanding of its scope, authority and provisional status has been shaped by its encounter with theological and metaphysical concerns.(p.143) One might hope for a writer as clear as Conser to tackle this latter project, which would no doubt reveal an interrelation and reconciliation of scientific and religious views of the body and its proper care in which both sides were enriched.