
THE STATUS OF Theology

Revisiting Andrew Dickson White's "Warfare" Thesis at 100 Years

by Karl E. Johnson

The incompatibility of science and religion has been the subject of an age-old debate among scholars. Andrew Dickson White, the first president of Cornell University, speaks of this conflict in terms of "warfare," wherein the religious constraints of Christianity hinder the scientific quest for truth. Karl E. Johnson examines the legacy of White's century-old thesis in modern philosophical terms, arguing that White's Enlightenment epistemology bears more similarity to Evangelical faith than previously believed.

In 1849, a young man was sent to Geneva College, an Episcopal school, against his will. Sixteen years (and a few degrees) later, he co-founded Cornell University—the first major American university without a mandatory chapel attendance requirement. Later, in 1896, after retiring from service as Cornell's first president, he published a massive two-volume work entitled *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*.¹

The story of Andrew Dickson White is relevant because, as the social constructivists have taught us, scholarship is not conducted in a vacuum. Not only was White sent to a religious school against his will, he also lived during the decades between the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* and the Scopes "Monkey Trial," years

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during which the debate over the relationship between science and religion was most fierce in America. As we now better understand, the very lines of inquiry one pursues and interpretations and conclusions one arrives at are influenced by social and historical context, as well as one's life experiences.²

White would have scoffed at such a suggestion. To White, a child of the Enlightenment, the quest for knowledge was a "disinterested" quest for objective and certain truth. Herein lie the twin ironies of White's work and legacy. First, White criticized theological beliefs as contradictory to scientific understanding when in fact most Christians of his day largely shared his analytical and objectivist approach to knowledge. Second, although White's "warfare thesis" has been dismissed by conservative Christians, many of these same religious critics have adopted his Enlightenment presuppositions, atrophying the very faith they defend.

Enlightenment Epistemology

Impatient readers will not enjoy White's book; his point is simple but his supporting evidence is tortuously drawn out. Two volumes and nearly one thousand pages are spent describing and documenting all kinds of religious beliefs and practices, from "diabolical agency in storms" to "theological ideas of lunacy." These examples and hundreds of others are offered by White to support his thesis that the knowledge that stems from faith is in almost every circumstance contrary to what modern scholars learn to be true by the scientific method. Inspired by what he perceived to be "the antagonism between the theological and scientific view of the universe," White described his aim as replacing "outworn creeds and noxious dogmas" with "historical truth."³

Warfare was received with much controversy. To be certain, White

never considered himself an enemy of religion. The struggle was not between science and religion, but between science and theology. Although these terms are never clearly defined, he essentially equated religion with universal morality, and theology with sectarian dogma. His defense of "rational religion" was nevertheless a polemic against "historic Christianity," and it predictably ruffled more than a few feathers among the devout.²

While much of the debate over White's book (and his university) has been *ad hominem* in nature—focusing on whether he himself was a believer or an infidel—the epistemological assumptions behind his thesis are rightly debatable. White distinguishes between two kinds of truth—the Bible is true, he wrote, "not as a record of outward fact, but as a mirror of the evolving heart, mind, and soul of man."³ White thus adopted the "myth approach" to biblical interpretation typical of liberal theology. He conceded that the Bible is "true" in its description of religious experiences that are enlightening and universal, but that the Bible is not *literally true*.

In response to White's charge, some conservative Evangelicals (later called fundamentalists) asserted that the Bible was indeed true—not in some mythical sense but factually and literally. Although White's allegation that the methods of theology were incompatible with those of science was misleading, the warfare metaphor became self-fulfilling in a sociological sense as fundamentalists and evolutionists engaged in a battle over school curriculum.⁴ To conservatives, speaking of the Bible as "true fiction" was worse than nonsense, it was heresy. Fundamentalists and many Evangelicals continue to defend the veracity of Scripture and the Christian faith on the basis that it is "objective historical fact."

It was not until the 1920s that fundamentalists became disillusioned with the scientific establishment and the incompatibility of science and re-

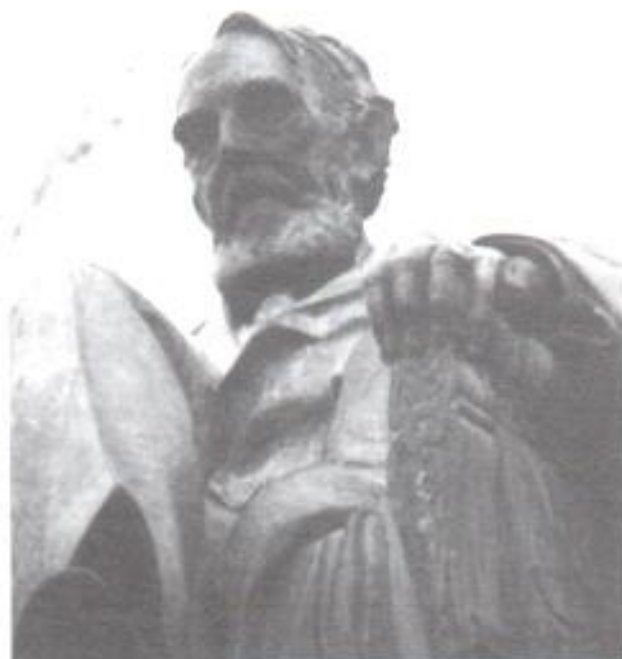
ligion became a widely held belief. This alleged incompatibility was actually difficult to establish precisely because White and the conservative Evangelicals of his day shared so much in common; they disagreed about what constituted truth, but both invoked the language of "objective facts" and "certain truth." In this sense White was not unlike William Jennings Bryan—both were fundamentalists of a sort.

A Postliberal Perspective

The science vs. religion debate has progressed in recent decades. Positivism has yielded to a more humble understanding of the scientific project, scientists now recognize their task as an attempt to understand the external world as objectively as possible while acknowledging the significance of human influence. This approach is often called "critical" or "practical" realism, as opposed to the former "naive" realism.⁵ Evangelical scholars have also become more sophisticated than their early twentieth-century predecessors, having progressed from an "academic dark age of conservative evangelical scholarship" to "a minor renaissance."⁶ Many recent journals publish what may best be described as self-conscious and self-critical Christian scholarship, at once drawing unabashedly from non-Christian sources while remaining distinctively Christian.⁷ One consequence of these developments in the philosophy of science and religion is

that the methods of science and the methods of religion are now understood to have significant similarities, such as the function of intersubjective testability among a community of scholars.¹⁰

Even more significant is the post-modern insight that conflicting modern philosophies often share many of the same presuppositions. The liberal and conservative approaches to biblical interpretation are a case in point. While liberals (in the tradition of White) consider Scripture, "fiction," and conservatives (in the tradition of Bryan) consider Scripture, "fact," both begin with the epistemological assumption that one must oppose fact to fiction, and then search for the "true meaning" of Scripture within the subtext. Moreover, while the truth of Scripture is considered by liberals to be an authentic religious experience, and by conservatives to be a temporal-spatial event, both make claims in the language of objectivity, universality, and certainty.



A.D. White sits eternal in front of Goldwin Smith Hall. Photo by Boris Grinkot.

This is a critique commonly made by "post-liberal" theologians such as Duke University's Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon. Appropriating the post-modernist skepticism toward epistemological certainty and the alleged universality of "metanarratives," post-liberals find the truth of Scripture in its particularity. In contrast to the liberal effort to extract from the Bible evidence for a universal religious experience, post-liberals argue that Christianity is a subculture with its own *story* or *narrative* that provides the believer with a unique way of viewing the world. In short, post-liberals fault liberals for reducing theology to anthropology.¹¹

But post-liberalism is a critique of the Enlightenment in the broadest sense, and so rejects most forms of conservatism as mere variations of liberalism. The evangelical emphasis on the rationality of faith is thus seen as a corollary of the Enlightenment emphasis on the rationality of science. And as Willimon observes, the habit among Evangelicals to defend their faith as "objective and absolute truth" is to talk about truth in a manner more similar to Enlightenment philosophers than to Jesus. Whereas the Bible reverses the conventional "seeing is believing" as "believing is seeing," suggesting that conversion is a precondition of clear vision, the language of "objective truth" implies that belief is simply a function of rational inquiry. The necessity of a personal encounter with an external power (e.g., Jesus) is lost.

Post-liberals believe the language of "objective truth" is reductivist. Noting that Jesus is nowhere recorded as having asked for cognitive assent to logical propositions, Willimon writes

that Christian discipleship involves the whole self, not just the mind: "Jesus never asks us to agree; he asks us to join up, to *follow*."¹² One explanation as to why this 'holistic' faith has been reduced to the language of disembodied intellect is that it is comfortable; assenting to truth is easier than abiding by it. But according to Willimon, the best explanation is historical:

Talk of objective truth suggests that the truth is something that any fool can walk in off the street and get without cost or pain. It is a bad legacy of the Enlightenment, which hoped to devise systems of knowledge and morals that would be immediately available to anyone who could think rationally about such matters.¹³

In short, Willimon argues that American Christians are often farsighted; while quick to criticize the "syncretism" of Christian faith with pagan cultures, American Christians fail to perceive the syncretism of that same faith with Western traditions such as Enlightenment epistemology.

C.S. Lewis' Literary Criticism: The Marriage of Fact and Fiction

Understandably, post-liberals such as Willimon are a thorn in the side of conservative Evangelicals. On the one hand, post-liberals confess the authority of Scripture is prior to the authority of human reason, and so are closer kin to Evangelicals than liberals. On the other hand, the post-liberal criticism of literal historicity leaves many Evangelicals wondering whether post-liberals believe the "stories" of Scripture are true in actual fact or varia-

tions of the "myth approach" to theology.

The core question is: How should Christians approach the Bible as a text? Is the Bible history or story? Fact or fiction? Particular or universal? Propositional or imaginative?

Whereas post-liberals focus on the literary integrity and meaning of Scripture, most Evangelicals prefer the kind of apologetics found in C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*, a truly brilliant rationalistic defense of the Christian faith. The popularity of *Mere Christianity* is nevertheless an irony, for not only was Lewis a literary critic by trade, but his favorite book among his own writings was *Till We Have Faces*, a reinterpretation of the pagan myth of Cupid and Psyche.¹⁴ That Christians generally prefer propositional truth to myth or imaginative literature is but further evidence of their thoroughgoing modernism.¹⁵

As if anticipating the evangelical post-liberal debate decades before it surfaced, Lewis wrote that the very challenge of human thought was balancing two kinds of knowledge that we are tempted to compartmentalize—the abstract and the particular. He writes:

Human intellect is incurably abstract, yet the only realities we experience are concrete—this pain, this pleasure, this dog, this man . . . This is our dilemma—either to taste and not to know or to know and not to taste, or more strictly, to lack one kind of knowledge because we are in an experience or to lack another kind because we are outside it.

Explaining why he preferred imaginative to propositional literature, Lewis made this interesting distinc-

"To be certain, White never considered himself an enemy of religion, but his defense of 'rational religion' was nevertheless a polemic against 'historic Christianity.'"



A woman kisses the Virgin Mary in Zagorsk. Photograph by Cornell Capa in *Photographs* (1992).

tion between truth and reality:

What flows into you from the myth is not truth but reality (truth is always about something, but reality is that about which truth is) ... Myth is the isthmus which connects the peninsular world of thought with the vast continent we really belong to. It is not, like truth, abstract; nor is it, like direct experience, bound to the particular.¹⁶

Myth thus serves as a "partial solution" to the dilemma of dichotomized thought.

Lewis, sounding more like a postliberal than most Evangelicals

would like to admit, goes on to say that the Incarnation of Christ is itself a myth. Unlike the post-liberals, however, he takes care to emphasize that it is also a historical fact. "The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact," he continues, "the old myth of the Dying God, *without ceasing to be myth*, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It *happens*—at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences."¹⁷ The incarnation thus transcends myth, meaning that Christianity is both particular (as the post-liberals assert) and universal (as the Evangelicals assert).

It is both fiction *and* fact, both story *and* history.

Lewis makes it clear, however, that the more common error among Christians is to read the Bible too literally. While critical of those who read the Bible as literature, "without attending to the main thing it is about," Lewis emphasizes that "there is a saner sense in which the Bible, since it is after all literature, cannot properly be read except as literature."¹⁸ Referring again to the Incarnation, Lewis writes that Christians need to be reminded "that what became Fact was a Myth," and Christians must therefore "not be ashamed of the mythical radiance resting on [their] theology."¹⁹ The Incarnation may be an objectively true fact, but it is not a *mere* fact.

The Real Warfare

C.S. Lewis and A.D. White may indeed have had little in common but the passage of history has brought them together. Despite Lewis' celebrity status among American Evangelicals who use his rationalist apologetics to criticize those of a more "scientismic" worldview, their obsession with objective and absolute truth locates them more closely to the pedigree of "scientismists" such as White.

White's use of the warfare metaphor was deliberately provocative. In the words of religious historian George Marsden, White fancied himself a prophet of "a new age in which the scientific quest for truth would finally be freed from religious constraint."²⁰ The "war," White believed, was between the objective methodology of modern science and the outdated superstitious traditions of religious faith. However, Marsden shows White's diagnosis missed the mark. Not only did nineteenth-century Evangelicals have no quarrel with the scientific method, they actually had a long-standing "love affair with Enlightenment science."²¹ The continued defense of Christianity as "objective and absolute truth" is itself evidence of the evangelical fondness for Enlighten-

ment epistemology.

The real warfare between science and religion in America, which White did more to promote than to diagnose, is the conflict between the narrow Enlightenment standards of objectivity, certainty, and universality, and the understanding that there is another kind of knowledge which is more relational, experiential, and particular.²² The cost to conservative Christians in adopting Enlightenment epistemology is an atrophied appreciation of wonder, delight, mystery, imagination, fantasy, and existential experience. Evidence for this can be seen both in academia, where far more Christians pursue the natural sciences than the humanities, and in the Church, where charismatics have been marginalized to the evangelical fringe because of their fascination with "subjective experience."

In the words of Roger Olsen, editor of the *Christian Scholar's Review*, post-liberalism deserves a hearing among Evangelicals.²³ Rather than reacting to the likes of White by defending their faith as "objective and absolute truth," Evangelicals would do well, he suggests, to attend to the argument that they have unknowingly adopted many Enlightenment presuppositions in their theology and apologetics. Historical facts and universal principles have their place, but so do relationships, imagination, and experience. As the post-liberals like to say, Jesus did not speak about truth propositionally but personally; he did not say "You must believe certain doctrines about me," but rather "I am the way, the truth, and the life." ■

ENDNOTES

¹ Andrew Dickson White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (New York: D. Appleton, 1896).

² For a discussion of social constructivism and recent developments in the philosophy of science, see Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: Norton,

1994).

³ White vi-viii.

⁴ See, e.g., Thomas Hughes, "Dr. White on the Warfare of Science with Theology," *The American Ecclesiastical Review* June 1897.

⁵ White 23.

⁶ Calling White's book a "dubious" and "heavy-handed" reconstruction of the past, historian George Marsden observes that early twentieth-century fundamentalists had no quarrel with scientific knowledge *per se*. They rather defended their faith as factually true and consistent with scientific knowledge while criticizing the intellectual establishment as being "unscientific." Their very premises were nevertheless incompatible with the naturalistic premises of the new positivism, and so explicitly biblical scholarship was eventually dismissed out of hand. See George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 122-152. See also, George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford, 1980) 212-221.

⁷ Appleby 247. For another excellent discussion of critical realism, see Ian Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1966) 168-174.

⁸ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, 148.

⁹ *The Christian Scholar's Review*, founded in 1971, is one of the older publications of this genre. See also *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*; *Books and Culture: A Christian Review*; *Regeneration Quarterly*; and *Mars Hill Tapes: A bi-monthly audio magazine of contemporary culture and Christian conviction*.

¹⁰ Barbour 168-174.

¹¹ Post-liberalism, also known as the "New Yale Theology," is based largely on the works of Yale Divinity's Hans Frei and George Lindbeck. For a British perspective, see the works of Leslie Newbigin,

especially *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). For an evangelical review of post-liberalism see Roger E. Olsen, "Back to the Bible (Almost): Why Yale's Post-liberal Theologians Deserve an Evangelical Hearing," *Christianity Today*, 20 May 1996.

¹² William Willimon, "Jesus, Peculiar Truth," *Christianity Today* 4 March 1996: 21.

¹³ Willimon 21.

¹⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Collier Books, 1943); *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1956).

¹⁵ Of course, one may object to this illustration on the grounds that *The Chronicles of Narnia* remain perennial classics, especially among Christians. Yet it was a great disappointment to Lewis that the *Chronicles* were received as "children's stories." He preferred to call them fairy tales. Paradoxically, Lewis was enamored with fairy tales precisely because of their "inflexible hostility to all analysis, digression, reflections, and gas." C.S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966) 36-37.

¹⁶ C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 65-66.

¹⁷ Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 66.

¹⁸ C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1958) 3.

¹⁹ Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 66-67.

²⁰ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 140.

²¹ "The Evangelical Love Affair with Enlightenment Science" is a chapter title in Marsden's *Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*.

²² These epistemologies are not coterminous with "science" and "religion," as the former view is held by fundamentalists and empiricists alike, while the latter view is shared by post-liberals and secular post-modernists alike.

²³ Olsen, "Back to the Bible."