Book Review


The basic thesis of *Flat Earth and Fake Footnotes* is straightforward. The idea that religion and science have been at ‘war’ is a historical narrative constructed by various philosophers, historians, scholars, public figures, often for anti-clerical purposes. Contrary to this idea, science was produced from Christianity and often by devout Christians, who often used experimentation as part of their theological enterprise. A key example is Isaac Newton, whose theological and alchemical writings far outweighed, and in fact incorporated, his writings on mathematics and natural science. Early scholarship was often poor, the ‘fake footnotes’ of the title. Contrary arguments were ignored or suppressed; for example, the revisionist scholarship of Pierre Duhem in the late nineteenth century was neglected for fifty years or so after publication. Controversies were ginned up often decades after the actual events occurred and then used to support what Peterson calls the ‘warfare thesis’, a prime example of which was the myth that Christians believed the Earth was flat. Theology has been written out of the history of science. What was occurring was a change in cultural identity, not a battle of Religion vs Science, whatever those terms mean as bounded units. According to Peterson, this change in cultural identity was part of the specialization and professionalization of a discipline; ‘scientists’ as a class of expert emerged through perceived warfare with religion and myth. The other side is the construction of secularization as an inevitable process of ‘civilization’. Christianity in particular, and religion and myth in general, become atavistic and retrograde. The naturalization of historical and political contingency results from this biased scholarship.

Peterson provides a good historiographical overview with a broad and thorough range of secondary and primary sources. He makes some important points about the way individual ‘genius’ has been lionized in a manner that occludes connections to social networks, religion, or the past in general. Individuals such as Galileo, Newton, or Darwin burst out as anomalous prodigies and drag society with them through their talent and gifts in standard textbook histories of science. This makes science seem a certain way—the individual work of Great Men (who are also not coincidentally white and English-speaking). In the process, the gradual, collaborative, and yes even religious nature of scientific work is ignored or purposefully hidden. Something called ‘Science’ is canonized in place of something called ‘Religion’, and the multiplicity and messiness of history is lost. History itself is periodized in stereotypical ways, in which the barbaric and science-free Medieval era is superseded by the glorious Scientific Revolution, powered by individual geniuses. Peterson ably takes apart the symbols of religion.
versus science, including Hypatia and the Library at Alexandria, with historical detail and rigor.

The reading of history that Peterson calls ‘the warfare thesis’ is not new to anyone engaged in the history of science or religion and science as academic disciplines. The wealth of secondary sources the author relies on shows that what he is describing has been at the forefront of scholarship long enough that it is the new paradigm. Peterson describes this scholarship with a rhetorical flourish that could either be engaging or off-putting, depending on reader taste. The florid prose also sometimes tips over into over attributing sentiment and psychological disposition to historical figures that Peterson would have no way of knowing in such detail. In places, the rhetoric goes so overboard that it reads almost like Christian apologetics. The quotations are dense and expansive, which can be overwhelming when the point of the book is so straightforward. There are also a few places where referencing becomes problematic. Dark green religion is mentioned but there is no reference to the work of Bron Taylor (p. 250). Tomoko Masuzawa is referenced only twice on one page and then, unlike nearly every other scholar cited, she is not referred to by name but as ‘one scholar’ and ‘the same scholar’ (p. 136). This points to another deficit, which is that this is a history of science and religion read through white, mostly male, European and American canonical sources. It is revealing that these are the sources which are still considered to constitute ‘History’ without any nuancing or qualification of whose history is being told.

This is not a book for advanced scholars but an overview text for beginners, especially students, who will find its revelations contradict what they may have been taught in high school history classes. It also goes against much of what certain New Atheists and promoters of science in public debates continue to claim, and that in itself is important and worth commending. The fact that an overview of this level is still required goes to show how much work scholars of religion and science still have to do to communicate their decades of research to the wider public.

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