



Ronald L. Numbers (ed.) *Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths about Science and Religion*

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In this edited volume, twenty-five scholars make an effort to “puncture” twenty-five of the most widely held “myths” concerning religion and science. The key word in the title, ‘myth’, is used by the editor simply “to designate a claim that is false” (p. 7); the work is thus set up to ‘debunk’ false narratives instead of analyze the complex relationship between such ‘myths’ and the ways they operate in modern ideology. The other two key words (“science” and “religion”) in the catchy title have not been defined, but the thrust of the book suggests that what the authors were asked to do was to debunk a particular understanding of “religion”, “science” as well as “religion and science relationship”. This particular understanding is anchored in the history of Western civilization, and so—for all that it is interesting and indeed necessary to revise dominant narratives in the Western historiography of science and religion—its scope is incredibly limited. The book contains one ‘myth’ (“That Medieval Islamic Culture Was Inhospitable to Science”) that apparently belongs to Islamic culture, but since the question itself is unintelligible in Islamic civilization, being the fabrication of Western historians of science and respondent precisely to their own concerns and anxieties, its inclusion is not so incongruous.

The book is partially successful in “puncturing” some of the listed myths, even as it ends up naturalizing or creating “myths” (=false claims) of its own. These include the myth that “science” and “religion” are, in fact, two separate entities which somehow need to find a relationship that is external to both; that this relationship must fall into the spectrum defined by a linear line on which “harmony” is marked at the one end and “hostility” on the other; that the term “science” refers only to one particular tradition of exploring the natural world—a tradition that is now dominant but that is of decidedly recent historical provenance; that all other ways of exploring the natural world are defunct, offering nothing, and without any future chance of resurrection; that “religion”, likewise, means that particular understanding of the word which appeared in the Western civilization through its rupture with its own medieval past; that the most important aspect of the discourse which attempts to define the relationship between science and religion is that particular strand of the discourse which emerged in the United States of America in the mid-1990s—a discourse that was forged by one particular Christian fundamentalist donor, whose personal interest in finding a particular “awe” in science led him to bankroll this discourse through his personal philanthropic foundation

now headed by his son. That the book is another in a long series of publications funded by this particular foundation to advance a particular “myth” of science-religion discourse is obvious from the acknowledgement of the editor, who felt it necessary to state that even though the financial backing for the book came from this foundation, the authors were left free to “follow the evidence wherever it led” (p. xi). The particular agenda of the funding agency, without whose “moral support and financial backing” the “book would not have existed,” is to promote an understanding of science upon which a vague spirituality is evoked in order to “find God” in science and exclaim in awe: I found Him. If one were to formulate this notion in one phrase it would be “In science we trust”.

The funding foundation as well as the volume under review take for granted that the theory of evolution is a fact and, thus, everything else which does not take it as a fact is a “myth”. It is no wonder that Phillip E. Johnson, Michael Behe, William Dembski, and other proponents of the Intelligent Design (ID) bear the brunt of the ‘puncturing’ needles which turn into sweeping lashes in the now experienced hands of Michael Ruse, whose summary treatment of the ID movement makes mockery of all ID scientists and philosophers and encamps them in the tent of Creationists, thus creating a mini-myth in the process. Even though myth number 24 (“That Creationism is a uniquely American Phenomenon”) attempts to minimize the American obsession with the creationism-evolution debates, the fact that one-third of the book deals with debates concerning evolution (8 out of 25 myths) is self-evident proof of that obsession as well as of the basic premise of the funding agency which sees modern science as the criteria on which religions should be tested. Thus, since evolution is a scientific fact, religion must find ways to reinterpret itself to accommodate an evolutionary understanding of life and cosmos.

That Galileo was not imprisoned or tortured for advancing Copernicanism, but was rather put under house arrest in a palace, is nothing new; historians of science have known the first as a fact since 1774-1775—when the correspondence between Francesco Niccolini, the Tuscan ambassador to Rome, and the Tuscan secretary of state in Florence first surfaced—and the latter since 1867, when the trial proceedings were published. The author who attempts to “puncture” this myth, nevertheless, does an admirable job of restating the known facts and constructing a coherent narrative of the creation of this myth. Even as he succeeds, however, the book as a whole creates further myths of its own regarding the role of the medieval church, which is the other main obsession of the book, with ten articles devoted to various aspects of the relationship between the medieval Church, science, and scientists.

The most important of all the ‘myths’ that the book attempts to create is that which arises from the attempt to “puncture” myth 25 of the book: “That Modern Science has Secularized Western Culture”. This sparse account con-

founds categories, superimposes data arising out of mass surveys onto the individual beliefs of scientists, takes in one big historical and geographical sweep both nineteenth century India and twentieth century America, and makes statements such as the following which indicate a lack of understanding of anything higher than the horizontal dimension of existence: “In controlling natural forces, science-based technologies have certainly far surpassed the results of contemplation or supplication” (p. 226); “But new technologies may also facilitate religious observance; for example, in some Jewish communities pre-programmable elevators and ovens have been used to keep Sabbath injunctions”; “instead of seeing science as intrinsically and inextricably secular, it is more correct to see it as neutral with respect to questions concerning God’s existence” (p. 227).

While it is difficult to extract any real meaning out of such generalized statements as “in modern times, the expansion of secularism can be correlated with social, political, and economic transformations having little direct connection with science” (p. 230), one is utterly surprised to read that “undoubtedly science can be connected to secularization by definition”—on the basis of the etymology of the term ‘secular’. Claiming that the connection is “almost necessary” because “scientists do devote themselves to the study of the world, its history, and its mechanisms” (p. 231) in turn demonstrates a lack of analytic clarity in distinguishing the disparate though interwoven elements of ‘the secular’ (an epistemic category with a particular history), ‘secularism’ (properly a political program), and ‘secularization’ (an historical thesis with contested elements), as well as total disregard for the burgeoning critical literature on the relationship between the secular and the religious in late modernity.

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