

The Disparate Synthesis

An Evaluation of the Gosse Synthesis and the Reconciliation Between Science and Religion

In 1857 Phillip Gosse published his life's defining work: *Omphalos: An Attempt to Untie the Geological Knot* (Roizen). Unfortunately for Gosse, his controversial attempt at a synthesis between the scientific evidence of the world's age and the assertions of religious texts proved unpopular in both scientific and religious circles. What Gosse perhaps thought would bring the feuding sides together only seemed to unite them in their rejection of his theory. As science continues examine the claims of religion, it becomes increasingly likely that to reconcile conflicting beliefs their epistemological domains must be separated. If science and religion seek to answer fundamentally different questions, then perhaps this disparate synthesis can find acceptance in both communities.

In *Omphalos*, Gosse hypothesizes that God created the world exactly as is stated in the Bible, but made it look as if it were created millions of years ago, as science suggests. This synthesis creates what some call a "false history," where everything appears (from a scientific standpoint) to have a history that it did not have (Slifkin 164). Gosse's theory was not received well by either the scientific or religious community.

For the scientists, the Gosse synthesis poses an ideological problem. First and foremost, science is empirical, testing hypotheses and relying on observable data. The Gosse synthesis essentially undermines this scientific method. Since God only made things *appear* how they are, how can any scientific finding be trusted? If science somehow proved the Big Bang Theory through a compelling piece of evidence, this result would just be delegitimized by the Gosse argument that God made it to seem that way. Thus, any attempt by science to discover about the history of the earth would be made obsolete.

Furthermore, the Gosse hypothesis creates two logical contradictions. In his theory, Gosse asserts an artificial history for the world. If this premise is taken down to the specific example of God's creation of Adam, the argument becomes inconsistent. Gosse contends that Adam, although not naturally born, would still have a navel to appear as though he had experienced regular past growth. But to what extent would this false history be complete: would Adam have memories? What about scars? These things are evidence of a past, which for Adam did not take place. Therefore, Adam's false history will necessarily be incomplete, making it questionable why God created it at all (Slifkin 164).

The second of these logical contradictions is that raised by Bertrand Russell. Russell contends that if we accept Gosse's hypothesis, a world created 6,000 years ago could not be differentiated from one created 20 minutes ago. The idea one's life experiences may be false was a concept that humanity viscerally rejected, which hindered the acceptance of the Gosse theory (Russell 70) Ultimately, these logical weaknesses, combined with the inability to empirically test the Gosse synthesis, led science to reject the theory.

The scientific community was not alone in opposing *Omphalos*. The Church, too, was not receptive to Gosse's ideas. Much of the religious community took Gosse's synthesis as implying a manipulative and deceptive God (Roizen). Why, if God created the world in 4,004 B.C., would he trick humanity into thinking it was older? For the Church it was not just that God's deception was logically problematic, but that the image Gosse's synthesis painted of God was inconsistent with the God Christianity conceived. Certainly, the benevolent God of scripture would not deliberately deceive humans to such an extent.

Another problem the Church had with Gosse's theory was that it accentuated inconsistencies in the Bible. Jorge Borges asserts how *Omphalos*, by sticking strictly to the

Biblical text, incidentally highlighted some of the absurdities in Genesis (Roizen). For example, contradictory statements in Genesis (such as those about the age of Abraham's father, Terah) are compromising when taking a literal reading as Gosse suggests (Thomas).

The final, and perhaps most compelling reason that the Church rejected the Gosse synthesis is that it too radically changed current beliefs. Although consistent with the Bible, Gosse's ideas were far from the accepted Christian beliefs of the time. Like major scientific discoveries (such as the heliocentric universe), Gosse's theory required a fundamental revision of Christian thought which Christians were unwilling to accept.

The rejection of the Gosse hypothesis is simple; creating a more acceptable one (especially to both sides) is more complicated. Historically, science and religion have overlapped in the phenomena they attempt to explain: the shape and age of the earth, the beginning of humanity, the nature of stars, just to name a few. As science has progressed and evidence has been accumulated for scientific answers to these questions, religion has been forced to adapt. In light of overwhelming scientific evidence, modern religion has retreated from these areas of historically theological domain (White). Even with ever progressing science, religion will not likely be eradicated; for many people, religion speaks to them in ways that science cannot. It is this key distinction that might allow science and religion to coexist. Though science will continue to advance and discover new truths, religion may be able to assert authority where its greatest strength lies: spirituality. Thus, in order for a synthesis to be made, science and religion must be kept separate – science to deal with testable theories, religion to deal with spiritual and moral matters.

The “disparate synthesis” is simple in concept. Since a synthesis will break down upon holding conflicting beliefs, science and religion must not be employed to answer the

same questions. For science, questions such as the world's history, the evolution of humans, and the greater universe will all be left for discovery. Religion will have sovereignty over questions like morality, the path through life, and God.

Certainly there will be pitfalls. The Church will be reluctant to relinquish ground and power to science, people will still cling to their current beliefs, and some questions may fall uncertainly between scientific and religious domains. Though difficult and slow, acceptance of the disparate synthesis may be inevitable. Just as the Church accepted the idea of antipodes, it might eventually have to accept all others that science proves beyond a reasonable doubt (White). Ultimately, when science and religion are completely separated, one may believe in God, or not, without sacrificing scientific truths. A religious person, therefore, becomes no different than an atheist on questions of science and only differs in her source of spiritual guidance. By allowing both sides complete authority over a certain set of questions, the disparate synthesis could, over time, gain popular acceptance.

The Gosse synthesis struggled gaining acceptance for a number of reasons. Perhaps the biggest, for both the religions and scientific communities, was that Gosse failed to draw a clear line between the two. Instead of proclaiming certain questions a matter of science (like the age of the earth) and others as a matter of religion (like moral guidance), Gosse attempted to slightly alter the beliefs of both to try to make them fit together. The fact that science and religion were trying to answer the same questions with different answers created a conflict that could only be solved by one side being wrong. If the realms of science and religion are isolated, they can coexist not only in the same world, but also in the same mind, for neither undermines the holdings of the other. The disparate synthesis may tear science and religion apart, but in the end it might be the only way to bring them together.

Bibliography

- Roizen, Ron. "The Rejection of Omphalos: A Note on Shifts in the Intellectual Hierarchy of Mid-Nineteenth Century Britain." Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 1982. 365-369. Ron Roizen, Ph.D.. www.roizen.com. 9/26/2008 <<http://web.archive.org/web/20070219011828/http://www.roizen.com/ron/omph.htm>>.
- Russell, Bertrand. Religion and Science. Oxford University Press US, 1997.
- Slifkin, Natan. Challenge of Creation. Zootorah, 2006.
- Thomas, David. Resolved by NMSR: Biblical Inconsistencies rule out a Literal Interpretation of the Genesis Creation Story. April 4, 2001 New Mexicans for Science and Reason. 9/26/2008 <<http://www.nmsr.org/essay6a.htm>>.
- White, Andrew. A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom. Kessinger Publishing, 2004.