

Philip Henry Gosse's *Omphalos*: How Third Party Politics Fails When up Against the Scientific Community and the Church

The conflict between the Roman Catholic Church and science is political race that has been going on for hundreds of years. Like all political races, the main conflict centers around the battle for influence. Various issues have divided these two sides in history from whether the world is flat to whether God exists. Like politics, people are segmented based on their beliefs; however, instead of libertarians, conservatives and liberals, people are labeled as evangelists, agnostics and atheists. Throughout the centuries, the influence of both sides has waxed and waned in a battle with few interruptions or unconventional challengers. All this changed with the publication of Philip Henry Gosse's *Omphalos* in 1857. Gosse's idea was a hybrid explanation using religious and scientific ideas to propose a new and completely logical interpretation of the origin of the earth. Such an attempt was quite unorthodox and therefore was very confusing to scientists and religious theologians. Neither side understood what the ramifications would be if the public embraced the work, and in a classic example of fearing what one does not understand, the church and the scientific community both proclaimed that Gosse's theory was invalid. Gosse's failure to gain influence is indicative of the similarities between the struggle between science and religion and the de facto two-party system of the US Government. Science and the Church's oligopoly on the debate of human origin prevents any third-party opinions like *Omphalos* from gaining significant influence and makes it seem that a synthesis between science and religion is about as likely to happen as Arnold Schwarzenegger getting the constitution changed and being elected to the presidency.

The comparison of Gosse to a third party candidate can be seen through several figures in history such as Eugene Debs, the father of American socialism. Debs ran for office several times in the early twentieth century, most notably in 1920. Prior to the election, the Supreme Court, made up exclusively of Democrats and Republicans, unjustly imprisoned Mr. Debs because his political views were far deviated from the two-party opinion gap. While in prison in 1920, Debs received almost 800,000 votes because his ideas did in fact resonate with some people. The existing two parties, however, made it impossible for Debs to express his ideas. The plight of Mr. Debs was not dissimilar from that of Gosse's. In both cases, a new and potentially explosive idea was squelched by the established two parties of power. Philip Henry Gosse's attempt at synthesis scared both the church and the scientific community. Both thought that *Omphalos* could be the event that triggered "swing voters" to change their belief systems and thus, saw the only option to discredit and not accept Gosse's postulate.

Omphalos was published in 1857, two years before the publication of Darwin's revolutionary work, *Origin of the Species*. The scientific community was gaining momentum and people were becoming more likely to accept new scientific ideas. Also, the Church didn't have the menacing power to threaten and punish people for disobedience. The stage was set for a shift of power away from religion, and the church hierarchy knew it. While we know today that it was Darwin's work, not Gosse's, that changed the landscape of the debate, *Omphalos* must have appeared very threatening to church doctrine at the time. Gosse portrays God as a trickster, not as the omnipotent, amicable God the church described. People could wonder, if God could create such a lie as falsely creating millions of years of world history, could He be also be lying about the

ten commandments or the existence of heaven and hell? Church officials thought this logic could be catastrophic for Christians to hear. Therefore, they took the only prudent approach and declared Gosse's assertions in *Omphalos* to be false.

The scientific community also rejected Gosse's claims, but for different reasons. For some scientists, such as geologists and other natural scientists, *Omphalos* proposed that the careers of certain scientists, especially geologists and other natural scientists, had been spent not finding truth, but uncovering God's lies. For other scientists, Gosse's theory didn't directly affect their line of work; however, it caused the profession of science in general to be less respected. If the public thought that natural scientists had been wrong for hundreds of years, they could think the same about chemists or physicists or the like. Future discoveries could be taken less seriously and scientists would lose influence on society. For this reason, the fear of losing relevance and influence motivated scientists to disregard Gosse's hypothesis.

Mr. Gosse's theory seemed to have all the right ingredients for success, yet it still failed. It was logical, and would resolve a debate that had been going on for centuries. The work was very timely also; it is not as if people were in a state of mind to reject new ideas as Darwin proves two years later. Thus one might wonder: if Gosse's synthesis fails, is it even possible for one to succeed? While no one knows for sure, it would seem very unlikely for such a theory to gain public influence because of the nature of the topic it addresses. The origin of humans, a very fundamental topic has polarized much of society, leaving little room for middle ground. Creationists listened to ideas of other creationists, and scientists listened to theories of other scientists; theories synthesizing these two beliefs alienates those at the religious and scientific bases and thus won't be

respected and adapted. In politics, a candidate cannot have much success unless the party base is behind him/her. People who advocate synthesis ideas lack a base, and without public support, an idea can never have much credence and for that reason is unlikely to ever gain significant influence.

Through examining Philip Gosse's attempt at a unifying synthesis of human origins, it is apparent that the church versus science is much like a political race and Gosse was the third party candidate. The race is a continuous one for gaining influence that has been going on for hundreds of years and will presumably keep going. As history has shown, third party candidates rarely succeed not because their ideas are inferior, but because without a base of influence, they never had a chance. Gosse fits perfectly into this mold. His idea was logical, but the church and the scientific community discredited the idea before it even got out of the gates. The battle for influence is cutthroat, and while the "two political parties" (church and science) are still powerful, Gosse's idea and others like his will always be remembered as logical successes, but failures in terms of gaining societal acceptance.