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Divorce of Reconciliation? (Work Station Two)

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Gary B. Swanson

In the first segment of *The Triangle*, a three-part made-for-TV miniseries about the so-called Bermuda Triangle, a character asks an engineer with four post-graduate degrees, “Why does it always seem the more education a person has, the more unwilling they are to accept new ideas?”

Notwithstanding the poor grammar—and at the risk of sounding anti-intellectual—he has a point. In a later exchange, after a discussion has ensued about the causes of unexplained phenomena, the same character observes, “Everyone uses *supernatural* like it’s a dirty word!”

What he is talking about is the conflict that has arisen between those of faith and those who have elected themselves as spokespersons for science.

But science, as we know it, has not always been at odds with religion. In fact, in the Western tradition, science got its start from the Christian search for a greater understanding of God.

DIVORCE OR RECONCILIATION?

“Science took root and flourished in the soil of Christian thought,” says scholar Alvin Plantinga.

“It was nourished by the Christian idea that both we and our world were created by the same personal God, the same living God, the same conscious being with intellect, understanding, and reason. And not only were we created by God, we were created in His image. And a most important part of the divine image in us is our ability to resemble God in having knowledge, knowledge of our world around us, knowledge of ourselves, knowledge, even, of God Himself.”¹

Out of this kind of thinking arose the genesis of what we today call science. It was originally a tool that was intended to bring us closer to our Creator. Ellen White referred to what she called “the harmony of science and Bible religion.”

“Nature is full of lessons of the love of God,” she wrote. “Rightly understood, these lessons lead to the Creator. They point from nature to

nature's God, teaching those simple, holy truths which cleanse the mind, bringing it into close touch with God. These lessons emphasize the truth that science and religion cannot be divorced."²

Yet, those who claim to represent science today have indeed sued for separation from faith. They have, in fact, even sought to prevent those of faith from expressing themselves in the open discourse of learning. This is much like demanding a divorce—and a gag order.

The Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, a consortium of scientists and environmentalists, for example, are protesting the National Park Service's persistence in offering for sale a creationist account of the Grand Canyon's formation in the visitors' center there. This organization bills itself as "assisting federal and state public employees . . . to work as 'anonymous activists' so that agencies must confront the message, rather than the messenger."³ This group demands that the public must be protected from the message that there is an alternative to science's explanation for the formation of the Grand Canyon.

Curiously, in the historical battle between faith and science, the two have reversed roles. The Inquisition of the dark ages is a matter of sound, well-documented historical fact, and those who questioned the orthodox-

ies of faith were dealt with in cruel and inhuman ways.

But without in any way affirming the atrocious methods of the Inquisition of the church that lasted for six appalling centuries, at least it was being operated *ideally* from a concern for the eternal salvation of the heretics and of the wider society that could be negatively affected by them.

There is, however, no concern over the eternal in the scientific inquisition to which our culture is being subjected today. And with every bit as much enmity and intolerance as the Inquisition of old, those who represent science are seeking to root out what they consider to be heresy.

Yet, on closer examination, science is not truly antagonistic to faith. And scientists are not as unanimous in their disavowal of the supernatural as some would have us believe. To be sure, the majority, those to whom the media seem to be listening most intently, may have denied belief in the existence of God, but this position is by no means undisputed.

Research by Rice University sociologist of religion Elaine Howard Ecklund reported in 2005 that 41 percent of biologists and 27 percent of political scientists declare disbelief in God.⁴ Though, of course, the remaining majority would include agnostics and an array of belief in

the transcendent, atheism is clearly not universal in science.

The film version of Carl Sagan's science fiction novel *Contact* explores the relationship between faith and science. Central character Dr. Ellie Arrington, a lead researcher in a SETI-like project and ardent believer in the religion that science has become, is transported somewhere in the cosmos, where she communicates extensively with other beings in a world that has been constructed to simulate Earth so she will be made to feel comfortable. When she returns to Earth, however, according to the scientific instruments, she has been gone only a matter of seconds, not nearly enough time to account for her experience as she describes it. So now she finds herself before a kind of inquisition, in which she is trying to defend her personal experience, even though it flies in the face of what has shown up in the scientific instrumentation.

The panel before which Dr. Arrington is interrogated ultimately rejects her "Damascus road" experience because there is no empirical evidence for it other than her word, but the film leaves wide open the idea of the transcendent.

At the end of the day, the gulf between faith and reason isn't between religion and science. True scientists will admit that their basis for belief can no more be proved than that of believers in the transcendent. It is

just that the majority of the most influential self-appointed spokespersons for science in today's culture believe in naturalism: the idea that all phenomena can be explained by natural (as opposed to supernatural) causes. The word *believe* is used here because they cannot prove naturalism scientifically. They have faith that it is true.

Alvin Plantinga reminds us that "naturalism and evolution *together* really undermine science . . . because their combination makes it impossible to see how there could arise human beings like us who have a real capacity to understand the world around us in a deep and profound way. Naturalism and evolution together make that impossible to understand."⁵

True science isn't God's enemy. He initiated it as a means of revealing Himself to us. To the true scientist, "supernatural" *isn't* a dirty word. The divorce has never been consummated.

REFERENCES

¹ Alvin Plantinga, <http://www.calvin.edu/january/2000/plant.htm>, accessed January 12, 2007.

² *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 274.

³ *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1144.

⁴ See <http://www.peer.org>, accessed February 5, 2007.

⁵ See <http://media.rice.edu/media/News-Bot.asp?MODE=VIEW&ID=7583&SnID=895062746>, accessed January 12, 2007.

⁶ Plantinga, *op cit.*, italics supplied.