

Review of James C. Ungureanu, *Science, Religion, and the Protestant Tradition: Retracing the Origins of Conflict* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019).

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Science and religion interact, according to the ‘conflict thesis,’ only as foes, invariably at odds with one another. The historical record, the thesis continues, bears this out, showing how religious institutions have always hampered reason’s scientific progress. James Ungureanu seeks in this work to reveal the origins of this conflict *thesis* (not, as a point of orientation, the causes of historical *conflicts* between science and religion). As Ungureanu documents in helpful detail, proponents of the conflict thesis had, and have, a clear opinion as to the historical causes of the perceived prolonged controversy—restrictive ecclesiastical authority, metaphysical accretion, imperial complicity, divisive theological disputes, the arrest of reason, and a vested interest of the Church in undermining intellectual and cultural progress. In its fullest articulation, the conflict thesis marshals these purported causes against not only a narrow dogmatism but religion altogether. Here, triumphant science must displace all religion. In this well-researched volume, written in lively prose, Ungureanu traces this unconvincing, though tenacious, thesis back to its source.

The author challenges a number of basic assumptions about the nineteenth-century origins of the science-religion conflict thesis, arguing, most importantly, that the infamous pair of John William Draper (1811-1882) and Andrew Dickson White (1832-1918), to whom the thesis is typically traced, “did not in fact posit an endemic and irrevocable conflict between ‘science and religion’” (13). A reading of their texts, Draper’s *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1874) and White’s *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896), shows instead (the titles, Draper’s in particular, notwithstanding) that the two hoped their narratives would actually preserve religious belief. Science, in the views of Draper (physician at New York University) and White (historian and first president of Cornell University), could serve as an agent to reform, not remove, religion. Indeed, for both, science was secondary to the real issue,



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namely, the discord between a more progressive and liberal Protestantism, which had their allegiance, and a more traditional, doctrinaire, and conservative Christianity.

Yet, for many historians of science, as Ungureanu rightly notes, the work of Draper and White still serves as the *locus classicus* of the conflict thesis, a view that, put simply, “is wrong,” says Ungureanu (24). While agreeing with the majority evaluation of historians that the conflict thesis (its content) has little if any historical basis, Ungureanu thinks that the consensus view (as to its origins) that insists that “Draper and White developed, defined, and defended the conflict thesis” (11) is a complete misunderstanding (107, 174). If the motivations of Draper and White have so often been misconstrued, this is largely due, Ungureanu argues, to the way in which their works were originally promoted and popularised by science editor Edward Livingston Youmans (1821–1887), who pressed into service the writings of White, Draper, and others in advocating for his vision of the religion of the future, which had to go beyond Protestantism, indeed, beyond all dogmatic traditions, to a scientific naturalism, the ‘cult of science’ in the later nineteenth century. “Youmans ultimately distorted, wittingly or unwittingly, the subtle distinctions between Draper, White, and their conceptions of the reconciliation between science and religion” (177).

Draper and White, Ungureanu contends, are not in fact the origin of the conflict thesis. Nor, he submits, is Youmans, who held that science would give new shape to religious belief (214). Beyond Youmans, the narratives of Draper and White were ultimately embraced by ‘freethinkers and atheists’ who used their works as a weapon against all religion. In particular, White’s writing became, “however inadvertently, one of the most effective and influential weapons of unbelief” (103). Both authors were “appropriated by secularists and atheists and promulgated at the end of the century without any of their nuances and subtleties. In the end, their narratives were taken out of context, reconstructed into positions they did not hold, and therefore ultimately transformed into something more equivalent to the modern understanding of the ‘conflict thesis’” (219).

Ungureanu thus pins the conflict thesis—the story of unremitting hostility between religion and science—on freethinkers and atheists at the end of the nineteenth century seeking to do away with religion altogether. However, he adds, this was only possible because of the rhetoric of reason and the reconstruction of history that goes back to the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation.

The Reformation, its spirit and themes, were extremely formative for both Draper and White. In this, they were but two voices among the vast majority of English and Americans who held, tacitly or explicitly, anti-Catholic sentiments in the Victorian period. Here, the Reformation,

viewed as a triumph over the Roman Church, was touted by Protestants as the sole source of political liberty, scientific advancement, and economic flourishing (106). In the two previous centuries, against the background of the 'Age of Discovery' and the spree of religious wars, there were efforts to resolve internal religious strife by allowing reason to be arbiter. The resulting 'reasonable' and 'essential' faith was combined, in the early nineteenth century, with science-oriented Protestant self-critiques which allowed more liberal circles to distinguish themselves from both mainstream Protestants and Catholics. One of Ungureanu's central claims emerges here: "The historical narratives of Draper and White have been misunderstood by historians of science largely because they have failed to put them within the context of this Protestant heritage" (107). Draper's rationalism was grounded upon English latitudinarian thought, while White's evolutionary theism was based on the German theological tradition (147). Draper's narrative was influenced by "reasonable" Protestantism, White's by Protestant romanticism and idealism (234).

The Reformation gave rise to a new historical consciousness. By gathering and employing historical evidence, theological criticism, and rational analysis, Protestant reformers enacted a new vision of history that rejected *traditio* and that served as a weapon against theological opponents. The emergence, with the Reformation, of this Protestant historiography became an essential feature of the history of science narratives found in writers like Draper and White. The advent of Protestantism precipitated a significant shift in the perception, investigation, and interpretation of the past. The reformers had recast the past in order to give historical legitimacy to their protest, and with this invented historiography there came about a fundamental and irrevocable shift in historical perception (106-111). "The Protestant Reformation," writes Ungureanu, "...had a tacit and perhaps even explicit role in creating the perception that science and religion were in conflict." In short, the "modern unbelief" of today's scientific culture "betrays roots to the Reformation" (172).

While variations of this thought are found already in Max Weber, Charles Taylor (*A Secular Age*), and more recently in Brad Gregory (*The Unintended Reformation*), Ungureanu insightfully adds to this picture the claim that it was a particular kind of religion, namely, liberal Protestantism, "that both subjected Christianity to rational criticism and subordinated it to experiential religion, which eventually gave birth to a conflict narrative that, in turn, enabled the rise of secularism" (173).

A few minor critiques: While Ungureanu's claims eventually make it through his enjoyable prose, some of the argumentation could be tighter. Similarly, several internal references (via pronouns) are unclear, slightly out of place, or delayed in their connections. At various points, important statements seem underdeveloped or unrelated to neighbouring sentences. On the whole, however, the book is highly recommended for both students and researchers seeking insights into

the origin of the conflict narrative—a story that, though its sweeping thesis is without historical basis, is not without historiographical precedence in its Reformation-like rhetorical strategy. Ungureanu's volume helpfully adds to one part of the complex and ongoing debate on science and secularization in today's world.