

## THE WORD AND THE WORKS: CONCORDISM IN 19<sup>th</sup>-CENTURY AMERICAN THOUGHT

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**Summary:** American Protestant thought about religion and science in the nineteenth century was substantially informed by the powerful metaphor of God as the author of two "books," nature and scripture, which ultimately must agree. In the wake of Darwin, however, concordism came undone, and no one model has gained the adherence of enough Protestants to function as its replacement.

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**Concordism:** The assumption that the Bible (the word of God) and nature (the works of God) must agree; indeed they tell the same story in different terms. Held by many over the years, but especially important for English and American concordists was the influence of **Francis Bacon**, in *The Advancement of Learning* (1605). Bacon influenced the Americans not only in his use of the metaphor of "two books," but also with his advocacy of natural theology: reading the book of nature with theistic spectacles.

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Throughout the 19th century, the age of the earth was dealt with mostly through concordism. A particularly illustrative example: geology in antebellum New England, which took its lead from Benjamin Silliman, who started the first undergraduate science education in America (at Yale College in 1802), founded the *American Journal of Science* (known for years as "Silliman's Journal"), and co-founded the AAAS.

Four issues were very important to the American concordists:

- The age of the earth, relative to biblical chronology. How could an old earth be reconciled with Scripture? Silliman and two of his most influential pupils—Edward Hitchcock and James Dwight Dana (Silliman's son-in-law)—endorsed either the "gap" view or the "day-age" view.
- The geological significance of Noah's flood
- The existence of animal death prior to the fall of Adam and Eve
- The special creation of human beings (and, in many cases, other organisms as well)

Concordism was a highly fruitful approach for much of the 19th century. What was its ultimate fate?

- Concordism remains popular among conservative Protestants today.
- Concordism has been rejected by scientific creationists, however, for conceding too much to science. e.g., John C. Whitcomb, Jr., in *The Origin of the Solar System* (1964), writes, "The double-revelation theory underestimates the limitations of the scientific method, ... the failures of all naturalistic theories of cosmogony, ... [and] God's special revelation in Scripture."
- Concordism was also rejected by Asa Gray, the first Darwinian in America, because it seemed to put science and theology together too closely: "We have faith in revelation, and faith in science, in each after its kind; but, as respects cosmogony, we are not called upon to yield an implicit assent to any proposed reconciliation of the two." (reviewing Dana's *Manual of Geology*, 1863)
- Concordism has been rejected by unbelievers, who see no positive relevance of religion to science.

Concordists mainly rejected evolution, although there are some important exceptions in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (e.g., Warfield). Those thinkers who accepted evolution usually took other approaches to science and religion, as follows:

- Orthodoxy: traditional theology largely "compatible" with modern science; theology and science as complementary rather than competing types of explanations (Gray)
- Modernism: "religion" as life, not doctrine; this kind of religion in harmony with modern science (Shailer Mathews, Robert Millikan)
- Religious naturalism: traditional religion is outmoded, replaced by the "religion of science" (Paul Carus)
- Atheistic materialism: religion is pointless in a purposeless universe (James Leuba, Clarence Darrow)

CONCLUSIONS: Too many to discuss here. I leave these for the audience to request, in the form of specific questions.