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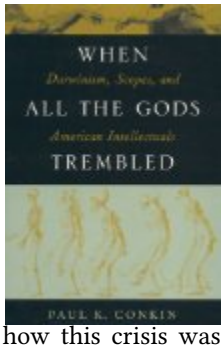
Paul K. Conkin. *When All the Gods Trembled: Darwinism, Scopes and American Intellectuals.* Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998. xi + 185 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8476-9063-3.



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In assessing the influence of Darwinism on philosophy fifty years after the publication of the Origin of Species, John Dewey asserted that "intellectual progress usually occurs through sheer abandonment of questions together with both of the alternatives they assume . . ." Questions disappear, evaporate, with new questions taking their place, and the "greatest dissolvent" of the old theological and metaphysical questions Dewey argued was Darwinian evolution. As Dewey famously quipped of these questions, "We do not solve them: we get over them."

Yet for all his insight, Dewey was no prophet here, for almost a century later we still have not gotten over the implications of Darwinian evolution. Debates over religion and science are hot topics, with everything from the Kansas school board decisions of 1999, to a renaissance in "intelligent design" as a philosophical movement and research program, to a series of major grant programs funded by the Templeton Foundation on religion and science. Clearly we have not gotten over them, nor will we anytime soon, for so much is at stake.

In the American context, the debate over the implications of Darwin's ideas really began in the 1920s, culminating in a popular anti-evolution campaign which resulted in the trial of teacher John Scopes in Dayton, Tennessee in 1925. Paul Conkin himself was born just a few miles away and a few years after the trial, and in the 1990s, he has turned his attention more closely to religious issues, with *The Uneasy Center: Reformed Christianity in Antebellum America* (1995) and *American Originals: Homemade Varieties of Christianity* (1997).

In this new book, *When All the Gods Trembled*, he brings some needed clarity to the religious crisis of the 1920s, for he is disillusioned with how this crisis was handled, both now and at the time. "[M]ost American intellectuals failed to provide either a deep analysis of the issues at stake or more than myths and fictions to replace the spiritual loss." Many of them tried to prematurely reconcile this clash of worldviews, papering over the chasm through vague or misleading language. So much was at stake in this conflict over worldviews, for the political, cultural and religious history of the past generation has demonstrated clearly that the questions raised in the 1920s are unresolved, and still live subjects for contentious debate. But Conkin finds most often in the literature "an irresponsibly irenic response" which "reflects either stupidity or a deliberate refusal to define terms and think rigorously," forcing him to confront "ad nauseam the assertion that 'science' and 'religion' do not conflict." In saying that, as Paul Jerome Croce pointed out in a brief early review, Conkin embarks upon a counter-revisionist course, seeking to at least restore the tension that was apparent in the 1920s.

Conkin's goal is not to introduce new empirical knowledge, but rather to "achieve a high level of analytic rigor and conceptual precision," in order to "encourage new insights into . . . very complex and vitally important issues." His method is through a refreshing focus upon public intellectuals, those cultural elites "who are deeply involved in the life of the mind . . . and who try to interpret intellectual innovations to a wider, literate public through the print media." This is the general focus of a new series, of which this book is a part, on "American Intellectual Culture," edited by Jean Bethke Elshtain, Ted V. McAllister and Wilfred M. McClay. Conkin's work fits well into this promising series, interjecting a more measured and tragic tone to an often triumphalist and/or nar-

rowly partisan literature. Virtually ignoring secondary accounts, Conkin concentrates on actual arguments, and provides a useful reading guide at the end of each chapter. This approach allows him to highlight the public development of the competing worldviews.

The book is composed of six essays that are reasonably self-contained yet advance the book's argument. Conkin considers the central challenge of Darwinian evolution was that it proposed "a world that seemed to exhibit no purpose, move toward no preordained goal, and provide no promise of human redemption." It was this loss that caused a crisis of faith that climaxed in the 1920s, a crisis that "involved the credentials of age-old beliefs in the existence of a god, in a world that exhibits some extrinsic or intrinsic purpose, in the divine origin and special destiny of humans, and in moral values that have some transhuman sanction."

The introductory essay examines these "age-old beliefs," recapitulating the received scholarly consensus on what he calls the "Semitic cosmology of Western monotheism." This Semitic cosmology assumes a masculine creator with attributes of will and personality, who created a contingent universe for a divine purpose. In this scheme, only humans enjoy self-consciousness and see events in a meaningful stream of history, moving towards some providential goal. This well-written section would be an excellent starting point for a class on science and religion, as it clarifies the specific outlines of the Genesis account, and also briefly surveys the major causes for its breakdown.

One of the main tasks of this introduction is to clarify the various deities of Christianity. "I find dozens of different gods among modern Christians. Some are closely related, with many overlapping characteristics. Others are not even cousins. … The exact identity of a single deity is often blurred, and for good reason. It is all but impossible to frame a fully coherent image of a god who is, at one and the same time, the ultimate reality, the creator of all phenomena, and also humanlike and gendered." What Darwin did was to force Christians to explore, "as never before, what they meant by the word 'god.' " Darwin's achievement was most fundamental in eroding this Semitic cosmology, more than any other event, even biblical criticism and modern technology.

After the introduction, the book is divided into five chapters, with the center of the book on the Scopes Trial itself. In the first chapter, "What Darwin Wrought," Conkin provides a close reading of Darwin's work, asking, "what were the exact implications of his theories, particularly as they relate to Christian theism and human origins? " Like many historians, Conkin is critical of Darwin's loose language and the implicit teleology of such terms natural selection, but also admires the natural historian for his metaphysical restraint. For Conkin, the central goal of the Origin "was to describe a naturalistic substitute for the Semitic cosmology," but he is careful to describe the actual result Darwin did not prove evolution, but instead provided "a coherent historical hypothesis about the critical necessary conditions that made possible a pattern of historical development in the organic world." As it related to religion, this theory challenged only certain forms of Christian theism, which "proved a great stimulus to theological workshops, which began to turn out new gods, or new versions of the Christian God, almost every year."

His second chapter examines this conflict, not between Christians and non-Christians, but between competing Christians. Conkin looks at the emerging Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy within Christian theology, as it developed out of an earlier, theologically less precise Evangelicalism. Much of Conkin's desire is to increase definitional clarity while warning against the "essentialist fallacy" that is often present in Evangelical, Fundamentalist, or Modernist accounts. The characters in this telling of the story are familiar, although Conkin adds a useful precision, and indeed helps us to understand the profound transition in beliefs about human origins that are still less than a century and half old. This sympathetic approach helps in his discussion of the Scopes Trial, the center and the turning point in the debate, where Conkin relies on the research of Edward J. Larson, especially his Summer of the Gods.

It is in the last two chapters where Conkin's approach and method really comes into its own, for here he summarizes, in brief yet coherent and complete form, the central intellectual debates. Chapter four focuses on "A Dialogue Among Christian Intellectuals," looking at the arguments and careers of the three main protagonists, fundamentalist J. Gresham Machen of Princeton Seminary, liberal minister Harry Emerson Fosdick, and the modernist dean of the University of Chicago Divinity School, Shailer Matthews. Chapter five moves "Beyond Theism" to examine the ideas of those who rejected traditional Christianity. Conkin's desire is clarity, to avoid the false reconciliation that was the common strategy for many intellectuals in the early decades of the twentieth century. The reconcilers spoke from a broad Protestant establishment and thus had some class interest to preserve against a "populist insurgency," as Conkin points out, but

the more serious issue for him is that it has distorted the memory of the Scopes trial and has ignored the real intellectual conflict between Darwinian naturalism and the Semitic cosmology.

After briefly setting the stage with the classic American philosophers of Peirce, Royce, Whitehead and James, each of whom attempted to reconcile Darwin with a form of theism, Conkin concentrates on the main figures who moved beyond this reconciliation: philosophers John Dewey, George Santayana, along with historian Harry Elmer Barnes, journalist Walter Lippmann, and critics Joseph Wood Krutch and John Crowe Ransom. Here, the story is again familiar, but Conkin's tight and cogent narrative style effectively summarizes the main points of each figures' responses to the intellectual debates over science and religion. All shared the analysis of Walter Lippmann, that the "acids of modernity" had dissolved what was left of supernatural religion and the god of the Semitic cosmology, but they differed in their attitudes to it: Lippmann called for higher religion of neo-stoicism, Dewey for a naturalistic "common faith," Barnes sneered at any form of faith with a "belligerent agnosticism," Santayana appreciated the moral wisdom and aesthetic sense of Christianity but remained a confirmed atheist, Ransom sympathized with traditional Christianity and felt a deep sense of loss at its decline, but found himself unable to believe, and Krutch surveyed in pessimistic gloom a universe without purpose, with a loss of a sense of love and tragedy. Beyond theism, Conkin seems to suggest at the close of this chapter, was the conclusion from Krutch's *The Modern Temper*, in all its stark realism: "Ours is a lost cause and there is no place for us in the universe, but we are not, for all that, sorry to be human. We should rather die as men than live as animals."

In many respects, Conkin's story ends too soon, although this is a common problem in the retelling of the intellectual history of the period, for the period has traditionally been defined too narrowly. By around 1930, the debate apparently had ended, with Dewey being the last to weigh in with his *A Common Faith*. What is overlooked with this approach is the implications for this loss of faith for democracy itself, for other than Dewey, the main protagonists were not particularly friendly to democracy. Perhaps Nietzsche was right, then, in linking the essence of democracy in a Judeo-Christian framework. Clearly Menken thought so, and damned them both together. Yet the deepening intellectual crisis of the 1930s in central Europe made these debates much more relevant and forced American intellectuals to confront, uncomfortably for some, the theistic implications of the phrase "all men are created equal." The relationship of these debates to their predecessors are still under analyzed, although they are a vital link in the intellectual narrative.

Conkin ends the book with an epilogue: "The Gods Still Tremble: An Update," reflecting on the story three generations later. The various Christian gods still live, but their followers "make up a self-conscious minority nationally and are more culturally isolated than ever before." Culturally, if not necessarily statistically, belief in "a personal, gendered, and omnipotent Jehovah has declined rather steadily in this century," even more so as higher education increases. This decline is most advanced among intellectuals, were a majority "have relinquished a belief in any inherent purpose in the universe, any god that created it, any firm grounding for truth claims, and any external authority for moral preferences or values."

Part of the burden of the book is to explain how much has been lost in this surrender of the "Semitic cosmology," for the divine guarantee of purposefulness to the universe, along with justice and truth, was the essential foundation of Western Civilization. Indeed, as Conkin notes, science itself in the 1920s and after was based on these certainties: "A common faith in a cognitively transparent and purposeful universe undergirded both the sciences and traditional forms of theism." He only hints at the larger story, though, for among university intellectuals, theism is highest among physical scientists, and lowest among humanists, where "belief in any god, . . . or a confident hope of immortality, makes one an oddity."

He is most concerned to explain the sense of what the loss of faith really meant to those who lived through it. His intellectuals knew from experience "what it had been like to live in a structured and purposeful universe. . . . For those who had for a time believed, . . . the most important fact of their existence was the God who was absent. It was like the loss of a father." In the American context, this was no deicide by a Nietzschean madman, but rather the death of a beloved parent, whose wasted and emaciated body lay in the parlor. It is this tragic experience, of liberation but also sorrow, that pushed Conkin to write this book. "Few intellectuals today know the poignancy, the tragic sense of irreparable loss, that their grandparents suffered."

Yet it is this purpose, to explain the experience of this tragic loss, that gives the book its strange and sad taste at the end. Who is the intended audience? Perhaps it is those moderns of Conkin's generation, familiar with the

battles and heirs of the victors, for it does not seem to be written for the average post-modern individual, who is consumed with the search for unknown gods and is suspicious of the purposelessness of the skeptical secularity of his teachers. Conkin is right in resurrecting this sense of paternal loss, but it is hardly more poignant than the generation that found itself orphaned, and then has chased after countless surrogates in a vain quest at discovering meaning. One is reminded of the Chestertonian insight that when one stops believing god he doesn't then believe in nothing, he believes in anything.

Perhaps this work will help teach a new generation what is at stake. Clearly we have not solved the cultural clash between Darwinian naturalism and the gods of the Semitic cosmology, but neither have we gotten over them. In this way, Conkin's work may help keep the new "dialogue" between science and religion honest, without the false irenicism he so rightly disdains. This book will thus prove useful to anyone interested in the continuing cultural controversy over science and religion, and an excellent introduction for advanced students and professionals in these fields.

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