

Science and religion in popular publishing in nineteenth-century Britain – *Aileen Fyfe (History), National University of Ireland, Galway (Ireland)*

Our modern belief in a controversy between science and religion has its origins in the activities of a relatively small number of intellectuals in the late nineteenth century. Previously, scientific and theological explanations had sat comfortably side-by-side in most discussions of the natural world. There were certainly heated debates about which particular explanations would fit best together, but very few people saw any necessary controversy between ‘science in general’ and ‘theology in general’. As the new generation of professional ‘scientists’ asserted their authority to speak about nature, a few of them did openly criticise theological explanations and the authority of religion. More generally, almost all scientists – even those with faith – began to express their statements about nature in secular terms, thus promoting the appearance of a separation between science and theology.

My concern in this paper goes far beyond the limited sphere of intellectual scientists or theologians. I am interested in how people in general regarded science and theology during the nineteenth century. Although both science and theology can be seen as systems of knowledge, there is a key difference in the ways they are understood or experienced. The general public of nineteenth-century Britain had regular contact with theological modes of explanation and authority through the extensive networks of churches, Sunday schools, ministers, missionaries and teachers which criss-crossed the country. Religious practice was part of everyday life for a very large sector of the population – and there was nothing obviously equivalent for the sciences. This is why I will be talking about popular publishing, because reading was a significant way in which non-specialists could learn about the sciences. Books and magazines were not, of course, the only ways people could have learned about the sciences – there were also museums, exhibitions and public lectures – but I would argue that printed matter was the most widely available medium and the one with the largest social and geographical scope. In my paper, I will trace the emergence of print as a mass medium in the 1840s and 1850s, and discuss the impact this had on the cultural presence of the sciences, particularly with regard to religion.

A rough timeline

- 1800-1840: Most publications on the sciences routinely include both theological and scientific explanations. But most publications are too expensive to reach wide audiences. Many men of science are clergymen, too.
- 1840-60: Changes in the publishing trade make print the first mass medium. Science (and other subjects) can now reach wide audiences. Decisions about what sells (i.e. how science should be presented) are made by publishers, editors and writers – not by expert men of science.
- 1860-1900: Expert science becomes professionalized and secular – but the science in popular publications continues to appear in a wide variety of Christian and secular forms.

One of the key features of popular publishing is the fact that it was not in any way under the control of the emerging scientific profession. What readers found in their books and magazines was what publishers thought would sell – and this did not necessarily reflect the latest thinking about science, or about science and religion. Secular presentations of the sciences were increasingly common in popular literature from the 1830s onwards, but this did not represent an opposition to religion per se (but rather, to sectarianism); nor did Christian presentations disappear. The increasingly secular state of professional science in the late nineteenth century did very little to change the range of popular writing upon the sciences – and Christian narratives continued to appear and to sell. It is thus far from clear whether science did in fact replace theology as a system of knowledge – for the majority of the population – in the nineteenth century.