**Enlightenment and the Watchmaker God**

**By Grace Ahlers**

The concept of a Watchmaker God came about in the 18th century from Protestant sources, when England was coming into prominence. The framework for a watchmaker God, however, began at the beginning of the Enlightenment (mid 1600s – early 1800s) and was followed by the war between science and religion. It is helpful to note that science and religion are not actually in conflict. Science seeks truth using the material world with things we can measure, see, and feel; theology is also interested in truth, using logic and reasoning. Science and religion, when properly understood, are not actually in conflict, but are complementary. (For more background on how natural science and sacred science work together to inform our intellects, you can see Dr. Rossi’s introduction to this series.)

The Watchmaker God theory was preceded by the Enlightenment. Throughout the Enlightenment and the middle ages, people were concerned about causation. The standard idea of causation at this time was supernatural causation (also called primary causation). This is the idea that God created the world. Fundamentalism was also prominent at this time, meaning that people took everything from the Bible literally. God created the earth in exactly six days, and the earth was repopulated after a giant flood with the animals Noah kept on his boat. As the period of Enlightenment continued, more scientific advancements and discoveries were taking place. This advancement in science created conflict because of fundamentalism, making it difficult to see how both science and theology can play a role in causation. One example of this conflict was when Copernicus first said that the earth moved around the sun. Copernicus’ argument disagreed with scripture, and therefore came under a lot of attack. In particular, someone from the Medici family (a very powerful family who financed a large portion of the Church) said that the story of God stopping the sun to give Joshua more time in the battle of Jericho means that it would be impossible for the earth to rotate around the sun.

The Galileo Affair swiftly followed the conflict caused by Copernicus’ statement that the earth revolved around the sun. In 1610, Galileo was studying Venus and discovered that Venus revolved around the sun. He then began promoting heliocentric ideas (Johnston). Galileo and the Church continued to be in conflict until 1633. Then, the Inquisition found Galileo guilty of a mild heresy (Finocchiaro). In an attempt to reconcile this conflict, a cardinal named Bellarmine proposed Instrumentalism. Instrumentalism proposed that science can tell us about useful and practical knowledge, but anything beyond this information is informed by faith. Bellarmine hoped that instrumentalism would be able to recognize the differences between science and religion (Byl).

This conflict created a distrust of supernatural causation, and the public began to say that God doesn’t cause miracles, and that primary causation is no longer supernatural. This cultural shift allowed for the rise of natural theology. Natural theology is based only on reason and human abilities. It ignores divine revelation, scripture, creeds, and miracles. People argued that natural science was on the same level as supernatural science, and natural science could tell us everything. Basically, natural theology says that we are able to see God through His creation, but it stops there (Chignell).

This idea of natural theology lays the perfect framework for the Watchmaker God theory. The Watchmaker God theory diluted the power of theology, seemingly to try and reconcile faith and science. The Watchmaker God is a simple analogy: just as a watchmaker makes a watch, God made nature. William Paley, the founder of the Watchmaker God theory, proposed that this God has a lot of power and knowledge, but He is ultimately just an assembler, an overseer, or a judge. This idea of God is that of someone who delegates work, and then lets nature more or less take its course. A Watchmaker God is not personal or intimate (Shapiro). The Watchmaker God theory could allow for both religion and the scientific theory of evolution. God creates the first creatures and then lets His creation change and adapt randomly by natural selection. A major point of this theory is that it tried to argue for intelligent design, but completely ignored the theology of a deeply intimate and personal God. The image of a Watchmaker God is not our Lord. The Watchmaker God is not the kind of God that Bl. Miguel Pro would be executed for, while shouting “Viva Christo Rey.” As St. Theresa of Avila said, “Mental prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us.” Jesus, the Word Incarnate, did not watch humanity fall into hell. He came down to earth in the flesh; He lived a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience; He suffered and died for each person specifically. The Watchmaker God attempted to prove supernatural causation and allow for the scientific discoveries like evolution to persist. However, the Watchmaker God theory was followed by an increase in conflict between science and religion.

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