

Soft secularism is no solution

A review of
*Worlds Before Adam: The
Reconstruction of Geohistory
in the Age of Reform*
by Martin J.S. Rudwick
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Martin J.S. Rudwick is a prolific and prominent historian of geology; his career culminating in an encyclopedic survey of the history of deep time.^{1,2} In the second volume, he finishes with a “Concluding (Un) Scientific Postscript”³ that offers insights to his opinions about geology, history, and—near the end—their relationship to Christianity.

On one hand, Rudwick debunks the simplistic secular myths about the history of earth science. He commends Christianity for providing an intellectual framework for both science and history, and denies the ‘conflict’ template of geologists since Lyell, instead seeing the development of geology as the normal progression of science. He is readable, and offers a balance between flowing narrative and technical detail, with ample supporting references. He also makes good use of old illustrations, noting their importance in the early days of the science in communicating ideas to both the public and researchers unable to travel extensively.

However, his work reveals a series of misunderstandings that, taken together, form a frame of reference that might be called ‘soft secularism’. It rejects hard atheism and orthodox Christianity, willing to appreciate religion as long as it avoids truth claims about natural history. This view distorts

theology and church history, and is notable for its soft positivism.

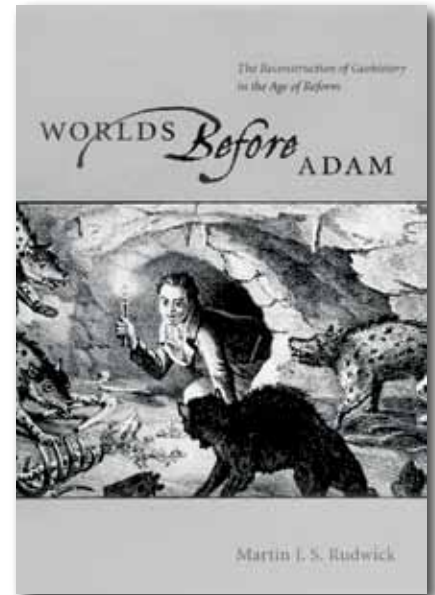
Rudwick has amassed many achievements, providing the historical apologetic for modern neo-catastrophism by rehabilitating early secular catastrophists like Cuvier (figure 1). But everyone operates from a worldview, and a detached appreciation of the benefits of the Christian religion is not the same as a commitment to its reality and truth as an integrated framework of reality.

Rudwick on Scripture

One’s view of earth history is determined by one’s view of Scripture: (1) creationists accept the Bible as inerrant revelation, (2) atheists reject it out of hand, and (3) others accept it as a source of spiritual enlightenment or religious instruction but not factually true. The first option echoes the words of Jesus: “Your word is truth”⁴ This view carried down through the millennia. *Sola Scriptura* was one of the mottos of the Reformation. Modern secularism has weakened that view.

Rudwick chooses the third option; rejecting revelation with faint praise. His token respect is undermined by his view that the Bible is either a generic handbook of religion or ancient mythology, rather than God’s revelation, citing unsupported allegations of biblical unreliability.⁵ In his discussion of Cuvier, he seems to approve of the idea that the Bible is just one of many inaccurate, religious, historical sources. Instead of Flood legends confirming Genesis, Genesis is just another Flood legend, and thus no impediment to secular prehistory:

“... most savants, whether religious or not, treated the Flood story—unlike the Creation story—as clearly *historical* in character, whether the history was regarded



as reliable or merely legendary. That brought it into conflict with the new geohistory, since it purported to record an event that might have had its place *both* in human history and in the physical history of the earth. In effect, therefore, it might represent the boundary zone between recorded human history and prehuman geohistory. However, Genesis was not unique in this respect. As Cuvier recognized, a mass of ancient records in other cultures, ranging as far away as China, also deserved to be mined for their possible evidence for an exceptional watery catastrophe, however obscure and garbled all of them (including the Genesis account) might be.”⁶

Although Rudwick accuses Genesis of being ‘obscure’ and ‘garbled’, he offers no evidence to back it up. It is instead a window into his own belief in a low view of the Bible. Most textual scholars recognize that the Genesis account is neither garbled nor obscure; it offers succinct and internally consistent detail in a coherent narrative. Rudwick is stuck with a soft secularism: he cannot accept it as revelation, but neither can he accept a hard atheism.



Photo courtesy of James Thompson

Figure 1. Georges Cuvier (1769–1832) was the leading French naturalist of the early 19th century. A brilliant comparative anatomist and paleontologist, he advocated a geohistory distinct from Lyell’s by its repeated catastrophes and related extinction events. Ironically, his views are probably more similar to current ideas than Lyell’s. His metaphor of fossils as nature’s antiquities helped drive natural history away from its biblical roots.

But he cannot run away from the problems of his own view. The Bible is by far the oldest, most complete, and best verified document of ancient history. It has been repeatedly confirmed by archeology and possesses a logical consistency spanning many books, authors, and centuries. Rudwick seems bent on a Kantian quest to deny the factuality of biblical truth, while allowing a spiritual benefit. His low view is also obvious in his diagnosis of the problem between Genesis and geology. He sees no inherent conflict between deep time and the Bible, only between geology and some ‘fundamentalists’. That is seen in his cavalier dismissal of both 19th-century scriptural geologists and contemporary creationists:

“But all of them [early geologists] repudiated the ‘scriptural geology’ propounded by some of their contemporaries among the general

public (almost exclusively in the Anglophone world), with its insistence on a ‘short timescale’ of no more than a few millennia for the whole of cosmic history. Their attitude was closely analogous to the reaction of modern earth scientists to the similar ‘young-earth’ theorizing of some fundamentalists in modern America.”⁷

Note how Rudwick uses the *ad hominem* classification of orthodox Christians as ‘fundamentalists’, an outworn debating trick.⁸ Never defining the term, Rudwick tosses it at both orthodox Christians and atheists, apparently hoping to triangulate between the two extremes. In his quest for the golden mean, all he achieves is the fallacy of the false dilemma.

He digs his hole deeper by defining the ‘error’ of the ‘fundamentalists’ as ‘literalism’, again providing no technical definition and

hoping that emotive reactions will win his argument without recourse to scholarship.

“Though the social settings were quite different, in both these situations the underlying issue was and is that of *literalism* in biblical interpretation. In the period covered in *BLT* and *WBA*, the development of scholarly biblical criticism—motivated as often by the desire to deepen religious belief as to undermine it—had already influenced savant circles, even in benighted Britain, far more deeply than modern secularist myths might suggest Literalistic readings of biblical texts had already been widely displaced by historically and culturally sensitive interpretations, often with the intention of uncovering deeper religious meaning.”⁹

His appeal to Enlightenment ‘higher criticism’—thoroughly discredited today—is a slender reed. He evinces no understanding of biblical hermeneutics or biblical theology; a cursory understanding of both is sufficient to penetrate his emotive semantics and show his view as outworn and naïve. His belief that critical theology invalidates Genesis has been addressed and shown false in numerous works.^{10–12}

Rudwick’s intellectual issues stem from a refusal to recognize spiritual conflict. Christ said, “He who is not for me is against me...”¹³

The Bible claims to be true because it originates from a God who cannot lie. That is, and has been, the position of orthodox Christianity and Judaism since Moses came down from Mount Sinai. Rudwick may not agree, but his disingenuous attempt to allow the Bible to be religiously true but factually false is hypocritical, though it mirrors the views of early Christian geologists like Buckland and Sedgwick. In many ways, a blunt atheism is a more straightforward position.

Rudwick on ‘conflict’

The heart of Rudwick’s confusion is his overreaction to the Enlightenment myth of an inherent conflict between science and religion. He rightly denounces the secular ‘warfare’ meme, but instead of properly noting a worldview conflict, he concludes that there is no conflict at all, again committing the fallacy of the false dilemma. Many have written about the worldview conflict, and Stark¹⁴ in particular provides a better explanation for the secular propaganda. However, Rudwick’s treatment of the history of geology is a step forward from the standard ‘science vs religion’ tale. A better understanding of theology could have saved him from his distorted views of Scripture, the Church and science.

Enlightenment mythology is false

Having read many original sources and examined the lives and work of countless savants during the 18th and 19th centuries, Rudwick dismisses the secular ‘war’ between science and religion, though he is more accepting of the positivist view of the evolution of knowledge. Stark explained the purposive deception of the Enlightenment secularists, and had Rudwick looked more closely at the ‘higher criticism’ that he thinks invalidates Genesis, he might have seen its origins in the same ideas that created secularism *per se*.

There is no doubt that Rudwick, like any other educated person, is aware of the claims of the inherent incompatibility between Christianity and science:

“I have left to the end of this concluding essay any mention of the supposed controversy in the history of geology that now looms largest in the public mind, or at least in the minds of many of my friends and colleagues On hearing that I was exploring the history of a dawning realization that our species is a recent newcomer at the tail end of a lengthy geohistory, their reaction was almost always, ‘I suppose then that you’ll be dealing with the conflict between geology and Genesis’ or ‘between geologists and The Church’ or—most sweepingly—‘between Science and Religion.’”¹⁵

He understands the fundamental deceit in this position; that it is motivated by atheist animosity towards Christianity:

“The great fallacy in the ‘conflict thesis’—a fallacy sedulously fostered (by?) those modern commentators who can fairly be described as crusading atheistic fundamentalists—is that it treats both sides of the supposed conflict as reified and ahistorical entities: ‘Science’ and ‘Religion.’”¹⁵

But conflict is real

Overcorrecting to an error can be as dangerous as the original mistake. Although Rudwick is correct to dismiss the Enlightenment myth, he discards both baby and bathwater by claiming there is no conflict, ignoring secular attacks on Christianity since the Enlightenment. This antagonism should be obvious to anyone, much less a renowned historian. But since it deals with fundamental principles of theology and philosophy, many prefer to avoid the fight. Rudwick avoids any discussion of these issues, despite their being widely documented elsewhere.^{16,17}

He also misses the fallacy of equivocation, and ironically misses his own point. Secularism and Christianity—the true combatants—can be accurately described as ‘reified and ahistorical’ entities. As worldviews, they are quite properly ahistorical in the sense that their propositions are universal. If there is any correspondence between truth and reality, then “reified”—seeing abstract ideas as real—is also an appropriate descriptor of a worldview, if it is true. But instead of using these terms thoughtfully, Rudwick uses them pejoratively.

Fundamental contradictions cannot be synthesized. Thus Rudwick’s ‘no conflict’ thesis is no truer than the Enlightenment cant about science and religion. But Rudwick wants to have it both ways. On one hand, he notes:

“In fact I have tried, on the contrary to follow the historical actors themselves, not only in their accent on fieldwork and their international outlook and so on, but also in the way they treated any such ‘conflict’ as marginal.”¹⁸

Yet at the same time, and apparently missing the irony, he describes the ongoing and virulent reaction to the scriptural geologists by secularists.¹⁹ Rudwick dances perilously close to another fallacy by implying that they were wrong because

the ‘elite’ geologists all disagreed with them. In other words, Rudwick makes the same error as Buckland, Sedgwick, *et al.* ... he compromises whatever part of orthodox Christianity gets in the way of secular natural history and then proclaims peace!

So Rudwick uses the inconsistent faith of inconsistent elites to dismiss orthodox Christianity. But truth and error do not reside in the expertise of the advocate. The scriptural geologists illustrate the tension between Christians who are consistent with their faith and those who are not—the same tension seen today. The example of compromisers like Buckland and Sedgwick (figure 2) blinded Rudwick to the real warfare, despite his attempt to make any conflict a matter of personal disagreement:

“On the issues of the earth’s timescale there was therefore no significant conflict between geology and Genesis, or between geologists and a ‘Church’ that in reality was far from monolithic. The only conflict—sometimes and locally—was between scientific savants (including those who were religious believers) on the one hand, and specific sections of the wider public on the other.”²⁰

Except for the scriptural geologists, of course!

Rudwick on science

Errors of omission and commission flow from Rudwick’s soft positivism, more an attitude now than a philosophical school:

“I know that there are enough varieties of positivism to permit the professors to retain their individuality, but I insist that behind the multiplicity of technical jargons there is a single doctrine. The essential point of that doctrine is simply the affirmation of science, and the denial of philosophy and religion.”²¹

This neatly sums up Rudwick’s position. It is this elevation of science

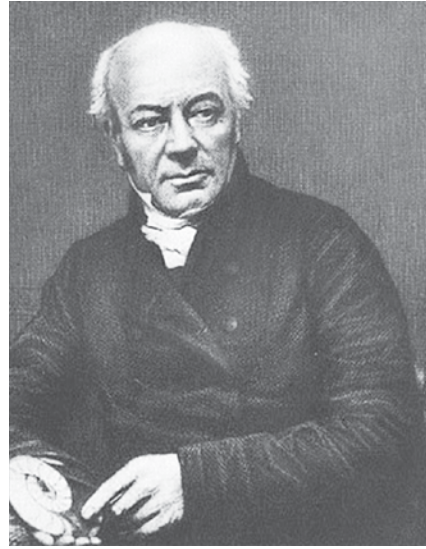


Figure 2. Adam Sedgwick (left) and William Buckland (right) professed Christianity, yet rejected Genesis in favour of their beloved natural history—a position quite similar to that of Rudwick.

that blinds Rudwick to his own tacit admission that the timescale was *a priori* and not *a posteriori* (figure 3).

“For example, those savants who came to be called geologists, whether or not they regarded themselves as religious believers, treated the question of the *timescale* of geohistory as having been settled long ago and once and for all. In their opinion it had become clear beyond question that the timescale was vast, far beyond the whole of recorded human history and indeed literally beyond human imagination, even though no quantitative figures could be attached to it.”⁷

Anything that was settled ‘long ago’ is remote from current evidence, and Reed²² has shown the ‘evidence’ of the day to be deficient. That is why the more telling phrase is that it was settled ‘once and for all’. Empirically speaking, *nothing* is settled once and for all because there is always the possibility of new data and ideas. Rudwick’s wording reinforces the idea that deep time was a philosophical template of history, not an empirical conclusion of science.

In another telling quote, Rudwick states:

“... Buckland, adapting the issue to the local circumstances of England ... narrowed down

Cuvier’s multicultural approach to the single issue of the historicity of the Genesis account. Yet in the long run even Buckland followed his geological colleagues, and notably the pious Sedgwick, in abandoning the equation between the puzzling ‘diluvial’ phenomena and any early human records, recognizing that the former were much more ancient than the latter ... All this was not a triumph of Science over Religion, but simply a case of the usual scientific learning process, in the course of which the chronologies of geohistory and human history came to be more clearly distinguished and differentiated.”⁷

There are two important statements here. The first is that the advent of geohistory was merely the ‘usual scientific learning process’, which ignores the prior rejection of Christianity by secularists. The second, in the following sentence, ignores the reality that the study of unique past events is history, not science,¹⁶ and Rudwick sees no distinction. Furthermore, the framework of history is derived from theology or philosophy. Deep time and secular prehistory were derived from materialistic metaphysics, just as Genesis is the position of the Christian worldview.

Squaring the circle

This confusion over science, history, religion, philosophy, and worldviews reaches its culmination in Rudwick’s take on Christianity. Ultimately, it is an attempt to square a circle. He wants Christianity as a religion, as a culturally significant foundation for science and history, but without regard for its ultimate truth. This pragmatic extreme cannot work. Christianity cannot provide useful axioms to undergird science and history unless the theology that justifies those axioms is true.^{16,17,23} We must carefully trace Rudwick’s two-fold argument to find its flaws.

Christianity was useful ...

Rudwick applauds the role of Christianity in the development of geology and natural history:

“Finally, I have suggested in *BLT* that the Judeo-Christian cultural tradition had a far more profound role in the shaping of the new practice of geohistory, and a strongly positive one at that. What was transposed from human history into geohistory, from culture into nature, was not only a fertile set of metaphors and analogies, but also an underlying belief in the *historical* and therefore profoundly *contingent* character of the world, both human and non-human.”⁷

But there is another, valid, view of this history. It is that secular enemies of Christianity stole Christian axioms and paradigms without considering the resulting inconsistencies.¹⁶ This might have been excused at the time, since Europe was steeped in Christianity, but it is less excusable that modern historians have missed that point. It seems clear in retrospect, but only to one ready to recognize the warfare between Christianity and secularism. Rudwick’s inability to see this conflict blinds him to the corollary. He does not see that Christian theology cannot be imported into secularism without consequence:

“And this in turn was derived primarily from the Judeo-Christian sense that human lives, and the whole history of the world, were under the sovereignty of God as, ultimately, creator and sustainer of all. The savants who were most effective in constructing a fully historical approach to the study of the earth—who recognized that every feature of the earth had *its own history*—were those ... who shared the Judeo-Christian sense of the contingency of the world’s history, the sense that the course of past events could at any point have been different, and might be unpredictably different in the future In contrast, those savants (such as Hutton) who were sustained by a deistic metaphysics, stressing the supremacy of unchanging causation, were antithetical to any true geohistory and played no major part in its reconstruction. Even Lyell, who in certain respects exemplified the fusion of these intellectual traditions, clearly owed the geohistorical component of his synthesis to his Christian cultural environment”²⁴

... but not really true

The key to understanding Rudwick’s position is found in his strange concept that it is religiously, but not factually true. He thinks science is the queen of knowledge and Christianity its handmaid (though confused and garbled).

“This suggestion that the recognition of the historical character of the natural world, and specifically of the sheer contingency of geohistory, was fostered by the Judeo-Christian understanding of the contingency of human history under divine sovereignty, does not amount to a claim in favor of their validity of that or any other religious tradition. Nor do I propose it primarily as a positive counterweight to the relentlessly negative picture presented by the outworn historiography of intrinsic ‘conflict’, though it is that.”²⁵

In other words, Rudwick respects those aspects of Christianity that are useful to geology. The rest is mere ‘religious tradition’, no more significant than Zoroastrianism or Baal worship. For Rudwick, like many others, there is no ultimate truth or power in Christianity, only a few insights that contribute to his real religion—secular natural history. Schlossberg²⁶ was correct in noting that modern man has built idols of both nature and history, and secular natural history is an idol that incorporates both.

Conclusion

Rudwick’s views probably represent those of many intellectuals co-equally uncomfortable with hard atheism and orthodox Christianity. However, basic errors of fact and logic are required to sustain that middle ground:

- ignorance of Church history and Christian theology
- ignorance of the rules of hermeneutics and exegesis
- a low view of Scripture
- a high view of science apart from its Christian underpinnings
- the need for *ad hominem* arguments to marginalize scriptural geologists and modern creationists
- the fallacy of the false dilemma to escape the reality of conflict between incompatible worldviews.

Although Rudwick has done a service by debunking secularist myths about the origin and history of geology, his positive interpretation of secular natural history as something compatible with a denatured Christian religion is nothing less than a soft secularism, or perhaps syncretism, if his coy refusal to validate its truth masks some kind of personal belief.

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