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Letter to the Editor: Thoughts on Dr. A. J. Sikkema's Reaction to the Article "Science vs. Faith: The Great Dichotomy," by Sacha Walicord and Ben Hayes

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Letter to the Editor from Dr. J.B. Klautke: Thoughts on Dr. A.J. Sikkema's reaction to the article “Science vs. Faith: The Great Dichotomy,” by Dr. Sacha Walicord and Ben Hayes

Sometimes, but not often, I only read an article attentively after I notice a reaction that runs contrary to what I remember from the article. This was the case when I read Dr. A.J. Sikkema's *Letter to the Editor*.¹ He reacted to the article *Science vs. Faith—the great false dichotomy*, by Dr. Walicord and Mr. Hayes.²

In his reaction, Dr. Sikkema expresses his *dismay* about the original article. I myself had read this article, as he had at first, with great “excitement,” especially as the two authors call for us not to forsake biblical teachings on Creation and the Fall (Gen. 1ff; Rom. 1:18ff) as the categorical frame of reference for every scientific discipline. When I read their article again, I confirmed that this is precisely the intention of the comments made by Dr. Walicord and Mr. Hayes. The two authors unequivocally summarize their point at the end of their article when they write that “*the perceived dichotomy between the Bible and science [is] a false dichotomy. The real dichotomy or the real antithesis lies between the Bible and all the scientific endeavors operating on anti-Biblical presuppositions between truth and lie.*”³

In order to show that they have no intention of proclaiming anything new with this article, they add

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a quote from Abraham Kuyper: “*Notice that I do not speak of a conflict between faith and science. Such a conflict does not exist. Every science starts from faith.*”⁴

What is it that the former Dordt professor takes issue with? After all, it should be known that with this statement, among many, many other statements, Kuyper criticized the dominant philosophy of his time, Neo-Kantianism. This philosophical trend divided reality into “judgments of being” (*Seinsurteile*) and “judgements of value” (*Werturteile*). It resonated with the liberal theology of that time, which was represented by men such as A. Ritschl. In short, liberal theology taught that the Bible is only true in the statements that deal with salvation, i.e. its “value judgments.” In contrast, the “judgments of being” that Holy Scripture makes, that is, the statements about the beginning of the world, about historical events, and about the end of the world, are unreliable. According to those theologians, the modern natural sciences and the science of history are responsible for taking care of these topics. The [liberal] theologians who argued in these categories did not want to be godless or to abandon the Bible completely. They talked often about “serving in the kingdom of God” and about “God who is love.” They described Jesus as our “dear Savior.” But for them, Christ was not the Sovereign over everything, the Pantocrator. When it came to six-day creation, the Fall of Adam and Eve, or the course of Israel’s history, the same theologians declared God’s Scripture to be flawed and incompetent.

Under the authoritative leadership of A. Kuyper, the Reformed Christians (*Gereformeerden*) described those who made this distinction as “the ethical [ones]”

(*de Ethischen*). Answering these “Ethicals,” Kuyper insisted that there is no square inch over which the sovereign Christ does not say, “This is Mine.”

It is a great service of Walicord and Hayes to remind us of this Reformed legacy. In this context, the authors repeatedly deny that science is something unprejudiced, impartial, or neutral. In light of Romans 1:18ff, this can also hardly be contested. The apostle strongly affirms that every person, even the so-called atheist, is a religious being, because everyone is consciously or unconsciously looking for an anchor, a support for his life. If someone does not find or does not want to find this in God the Creator, he will look for it in some idol. Obviously both authors are convinced that in science the contemporary idol is evolutionary naturalism.⁵

Now, Dr. Sikkema is not expressly advocating for evolution here. However, the following question arises: what motivates Dr. Sikkema to disparage Dr. Jason Lisle in such an aggressive way? He criticizes the two authors for having brought “*the perspective of Jason Lisle to the attention of the academic world and the Dordt constituency, giving the impression, that Lisle’s perspective lines up with the Reformed Christian thinking of Bahnsen, Machen, Schaeffer and Kuyper.*”⁶

It is easy to see, from the entire article by Dr. Walicord and Mr. Hayes, that they have no intention of defending every sentence Lisle has ever written. Rather, it was their concern to present Lisle as a representation of the idea that every scientist has presuppositions, and that he is convinced that science only works if you take the first chapters of the Holy Scriptures as the basis of all sciences. With respect to this conviction, Lisle is in general agreement with Reformed men like Kuyper, Machen, Schaeffer and Bahnsen, although minor differences could undoubtedly be identified between them.⁷

As I said, Dr. Sikkema does not explicitly attack Lisle’s creation convictions. He limits himself to signaling to the readers that Lisle is unworthy of even being mentioned in academic publication. He takes his approach by criticizing the authors’ *plain reading* of Scripture. Neutralizing someone by attacking the opponent’s hermeneutics was and undoubtedly still is popular in the 20th and 21st centuries (maybe this method is not that new after all, considering Genesis 3:1).

But does Dr. Sikkema at least agree with the two

authors (and me) that Jesus Christ himself and the writers of the Holy Scriptures obviously had no difficulty understanding the first chapters of the Bible? From the many available biblical texts, let us just consider a few: for six-day creation, Ex. 20:11 and Mt. 19:4; for the garden of Eden, in which Adam and Eve lived as historical persons, 2 Cor. 11:2 and 1Tim. 2:12-14; for Cain and Abel, Mt. 23:25 and 1 John 3:11.12; for the historical Flood, Mt. 24:37-39 and 2 Pet. 3:5.6.

Is Dr. Sikkema furthermore ready to grant that the Church Fathers, in their confrontation with Hellenistic thought, the later Reformers like Luther and Calvin, and finally the Reformed men of the 19th and 20th centuries, like A. Kuyper, H. Bavinck, F. Schaeffer and G. Bahnsen, took the first chapters of the Bible just as historically seriously as they did, for example, the virgin birth and the physical resurrection of Christ? Of course, no one claims that everything those Reformed theologians ever wrote is infallible. But that is not the point. Rather, it is that these men categorically rejected the Neo-Kantian split of reality into judgments of values and judgments of being with respect to the Bible. Likewise, they also discarded Karl Barth’s so-called “neo-orthodoxy.” Dr. Sikkema will certainly know that in evangelical circles, these ideas have not been expelled to this day but are repeatedly discussed at church assemblies and brought up in books on the relationship between science and the Bible, albeit subtly.

We all agree that there can be misunderstandings when we read a text, including when we interpret the first chapters of Scripture. Therefore, there is no question that all interpretations are always done, knowing that someone else can interpret the text even more accurately. Human language is limited and not always unambiguous. Incidentally, readers of the Bible know that this problem is traceable back to God’s judgment on man after the historic event of the Tower of Babel.

Walicord and Hayes anticipated this objection, and they write about the possibility of misunderstandings, “*even if we consider some differences in the interpretation of some passages of Scripture...*”⁸ But that is something entirely different from what Dr. Sikkema claims when he polemically states that “*much of the heat (and none of the light) about science and faith con-*

controversies in the past century has been due to the unsupported idea that there is such a thing [as plain reading]; everyone reads and interprets scripture within a particular context. A few moments of conversation with any biblical scholar or theologian will make this clear."

The hermeneutic that Sikkema defends with his statement was popularized in the 19th century by men such as F.W. Schleiermacher and W. Dilthey, and by H.G. Gadamer in the 20th century. In the meantime, this approach to texts (and to all of reality) has been taken up by modern and postmodern thinkers worldwide. However, the very core of this theory must be critically questioned in light of Holy Scripture. Bearing in mind that there can be misunderstandings, we should emphasize that human understanding is neither solely nor primarily determined by a particular context. Human understanding is not only and not primarily defined by cultural inter-subjectivity or by a dialogical merging of different mental horizons. By no means!

Especially in view of the (re)interpretations of the relationship between Scripture and what was considered as "scientific" within the last 120 to 160 years, we will have to bear in mind that there is something like an *unwillingness to understand what God has revealed in his Word*. The Son of God once asked, "Why do you not understand my speech?" And he himself gives an answer that sharply contradicts the countless modern approaches to hermeneutics: "Because you are not able to listen to my word. You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do." (John 8:42-44). Prophets such as Isaiah or Ezekiel attribute this failure to understand the Word of God to judgment (for example: Is. 6:10; 8:16; 29:10-13; Ez. 2 and 3). The apostle Paul agrees with them (2 Cor. 4:3-6) and even points out that there will be a time when people will not be able to endure sound teaching (2 Tim. 4:3).

Let me say it again: Dr. Sikkema is correct when he says that there can be misunderstandings when we read a text. The importance of noting different genres in the Bible is also uncontested. But since God chose not to create a new language, but instead made use of human languages, and explains to us within his Word how he wants us to understand what he says, we would do well not to despise his revelation or try to level it to our so-called scientific context.

In my opinion, the two authors rightly illustrate

this idea by pointing us to the theology of Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann thought that modern man could not be expected to believe in events like the physical resurrection or the miracles of Christ. This is why he went back to an idea from the 19th century, the so-called demythologization. In this context, he interpreted the corresponding biblical accounts as kerygmatic imaginations of the Early Church. He believed that the first followers of Jesus processed their disappointment with Jesus' death on the cross by using these imaginations and proclaiming in a mythological way that Christ has risen from the dead and that he walked on the water of Lake Gennesaret. It took decades of sober exegesis to banish such an understanding from the heads of theologians. How long will it take before the first eleven chapters of the Bible are finally accepted as they are written, so that both theologians and honest Christian scientists submit to God's Word again and ground their scientific work on this Scriptural basis?

Dr. Sikkema's criticism of the hermeneutics of Dr. Walicord and Mr. Hayes is not just unsound; the fact that he accuses the two authors of understanding "*categories such as 'natural' and 'supernatural' simplistically*" falls back on himself in an embarrassing way. The two authors nowhere use the word "*natural*," even though Dr. Sikkema suggests exactly that by using quotation marks. Instead, they consistently speak of "*naturalistic*." Does Dr. Sikkema not know the difference between "*natural*" and "*naturalistic*"? The two authors even add the adjective "*secular*," as in "*secular naturalistic*," in order to avoid possible misunderstandings. If one party in an academic debate sets up a straw man of his discussion partner by not even quoting him correctly, this party disqualifies itself. But we have already learned that Dr. Sikkema does not like *plain reading* too much—obviously not only when it comes to the Word of God.

When Dr. Sikkema then goes on to criticize the authors for conflating "*methodological naturalism... with ontological naturalism*," he reveals that he either does not understand or does not want to understand the intention of the article. After all, Dr. Walicord and Mr. Hayes are concerned with refuting the very idea that it is possible to separate between them.

Without question, it is possible for a Christian scientist to work with naturalistic presuppositions in his daily efforts. Perhaps to reassure himself, or his

Bible-believing students, he adds that he only works with these presuppositions “purely methodically,” “for the time being,” “temporarily,” or “provisionally.” In contrast, the two authors express their conviction that someone using a naturalistic methodology will always end up with ontological naturalism.

Let me illustrate this relationship with an example: When the Austrian evolutionary biologist (behavioral scientist) Konrad Lorenz, who received the Nobel Prize in 1973, attributed belief in God and religion in man to the instinctive hierarchical behavior of animals such as wolves, it may seem to us that his thinking went in a rather strange direction. But if we keep in mind the presuppositions that this evolutionary biologist based his research on, his path is very straightforward. Of course, someone who sees himself as a Christian can break off this naturalistic way of thinking somewhere along the way, possibly because the consequences of not doing so are unsettling to him. But then he makes exactly what the Reformed theologian and cultural philosopher Francis Schaeffer called an *irrational leap*. This way of thinking is what Schaeffer criticized in the Neo-orthodox theologians. It is a shame that Dr. Sikkema does not provide argumentative evidence for why a methodological naturalism does not—at some point—lead to an ontological naturalism. As far as I can see, there is currently a consensus in epistemology that the respective scientific results are determined by the assumed methodology. In any case, the reasoning of Dr. Walicord and Mr. Hayes aims to point out that one can only understand this world ontologically correctly if one begins with the presupposition of the supernaturalism of God’s revelation in his Word (including Genesis 1ff and Romans 1:18).

In short, none of the points of criticism that Dr. Sikkema puts forward against the article by Dr. Walicord and Mr. Hayes are convincing. However, what bothered me more than the argumentative deficits is the patronizing tone in which he speaks. He writes, for example, “the paper contains numerous misunderstandings about science, about faith and about the decades-long dialogue that has been undertaken by scholars, including Reformed Christians, in many disciplines.”⁹ When reading this sentence, I was reminded of a book by a French historian of science that I read about 15 years ago. He examined the time period of the second half of the

17th and the early 18th centuries. It was the time of deism when the natural sciences began to distance themselves from the revelation of God. I remember this work because of the admirable diligence with which the—nonchristian—author draws his conclusions. Among other things, he shows that the created science emerged at that time as a “third denomination” (in competition with Protestantism and Roman Catholicism). In doing so, he drew attention to the arrogance, derision, and sarcasm with which the (natural) scientists dealt with divine revelation at that time, regardless of whether they were committed to the philosophy of Rationalism or Empiricism.

In any case, I would like to thank Dr. Walicord and Mr. Hayes for reminding me of the responsibility that I have for my students. We can only meet this responsibility if we start from the revelation of God in his Word, which is indispensable for the study of every area of reality.

Endnotes

1. *Pro Rege*, September 2019, p. 35.
2. *Pro Rege*, June 2019, p. 36-40.
3. *Pro Rege*, June 2019, p. 40.
4. *Pro Rege*, June 2019, p. 40 Here the authors quote from Kuyper’s *Lectures on Calvinism*.
5. This is true for the natural sciences, but not only for them. It is also a benchmark for the cultural and human sciences. William James, who is considered the founder of scientific psychology in America, saw himself as a student of the Leipzig professor Wilhelm Wundt. In some ways, James went into a different direction at Harvard University. But he adopted his teacher’s Darwinism. It was this idea that became the foundation for his very influential anthropology which became the basis for American Human Sciences for decades.
6. *Pro Rege*, September 2019, p. 35.
7. See for example: F. Schaeffer; *Genesis in Space and Time*. Inter-Varsity Press, 1972. See also: H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*. Grand Rapids [Baker Academic] 2004, Volume II, p. 473-507., especially, p. 482 [§ 271]: “Christian theology has always related this six-Day period with special fondness....”
8. *Pro Rege*, June 2019, p. 38.
9. *Pro Rege*, September 2019, p. 35.