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Science vs. Faith—Still a False Dichotomy: A Short Reply to Arnold Sikkema



by Sacha Walicord

In his short tale “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” Danish author Hans Christian Andersen tells a tale about two devious weavers who convince their emperor to buy an exquisite set of unique new clothes from them. These clothes are supposedly made of the finest fabric, which, according to them, was invisible to people who were unintelligent, simplistic, or outright stupid. Of course, nobody, not even the emperor himself, can see the extravagant new clothes because, of course, they do not exist. And when he prances naked through the streets, thinking that he is wearing these exclusive new clothes, no one dares to say anything out of fear of being looked at as a simplistic fool. Finally, a child blurts out, “But he isn’t wearing anything!” And slowly

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the townsfolk begin to chime in. Eventually even the emperor himself realizes his nakedness but continues his procession in order to save face.

When I read Dr. Sikkema’s *Letter to the Editor in Pro Rege*¹, I have to admit that I was quite shocked, both by its condescending tone and lack of substance. For a while now, I have been feeling like the little child in Andersen’s tale who can clearly see what is going on, but who is stunned as to why nobody speaks up in light of much of the pseudo-intellectual humbug that goes under the label of science and philosophy at many of our colleges and universities. In comparing myself to that child in Andersen’s tale, I will, of course, not object to Dr. Sikkema’s assertion that there are much smarter people than I who could much better debate on the issue at hand. I have no problem whatsoever accepting this assertion. There are surely many scholars who could jump into this discussion and thereby unmask the ever-increasing liberal and anti-biblical bias, which has infiltrated our churches and universities under the guise of “Reformed” philosophy or theology. For quite some time I have been hoping for such great minds to speak up, but I have been waiting in vain and therefore, just like the little uneducated child in Andersen’s story, I began to speak up with hopes that smarter people who are also seeing many of our institutions of higher learning depart from the Word of God would follow.

I was proven right, and I read with great joy Dr. Klautke’s very thoughtful reply² to Dr. Sikkema’s rant, in the previous edition of *Pro Rege*. The reason that I have begun to speak up (and write) over the

last few years is because I am afraid that we, as historically Reformed institutions of higher learning, are in the process of falling victim to a mindset that has a very low view of the Word of God and a very high view of man.³ A related and alarming occurrence is that anybody who even begins to challenge this theologically liberal mindset will immediately be attacked, ridiculed, and have his reputation tarnished, if not destroyed. This has repeatedly been my own experience and has been reinforced again after Ben Hayes and I had “Science vs. Faith—The great false dichotomy” published in *Pro Rege*.⁴ Dr. Sikkema’s ad hominem attack is a microcosm of the atmosphere that I fear proves that academic freedom and respectful discourse have been for a large part deserted in our colleges. Yes, I am increasingly concerned about academic freedom at Reformed universities in North America.

I urge the interested reader to re-read Sikkema’s letter and ask himself what arguments he actually brought to the table. Amidst the self-adulation, innuendos, and ad-hominem attacks, there is no cogent line of reasoning. And yet, I have heard reports of colleagues of his persuasion high-fiving each other in university hallways over Sikkema’s attack. But my question remains: where is the substance? Where is one single meaningful argument in his letter? He even goes so far as to deny the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture by saying that there is no such thing as a plain reading of Scripture. But if there is no plain reading of God’s inerrant and infallible Word, then there is no plain reading of *any* text; and if there is no plain reading of any text, then language has lost its meaning and function. It is exactly at this point where Sikkema woefully contradicts himself, because he *does* expect us to be able to apply a plain reading to his letter to the editor; otherwise he wouldn’t have written it.⁵ I do not think that I have to deal much further with the content of his letter, firstly, because of its aforementioned lack of substance and secondly, because Dr. Klautke has patiently and exhaustively dealt with all of its innuendoes and platitudes.

The reason that Sikkema did not present any arguments is because there simply are none. Nobody with even a cursory knowledge of basic philosophy would ever dispute the fact that presuppositions direct all of our thinking. Sikkema is an intelligent

and educated man, and he knows that what Ben Hayes and I presented in our article is nothing but basic presuppositionalism applied to science. I also don’t think that he has a problem with the substance of our article, but only with its *application* to the natural sciences in particular. Being the scholar that he is, he knows exactly what this means, namely, that we cannot do any science apart from the Word of God and that the inerrant propositional Word trumps our fallible interpretation of fallen creation.⁶ What this means for the dearly-held hypothesis of biological Macroevolution⁷ in the natural sciences or for the academically beloved philosophy of Neo-Marxism⁸ in the social sciences, I hope I don’t have to explain to the interested reader. The simple fact that many of my colleagues do not want to admit is that we *need some form of inerrancy in order to think rationally*. We need an absolute standard by which we conduct our endeavor of interpreting and researching reality. This most basic worldview foundation is always and necessarily held by faith, as it must be used to even begin to conduct any thinking or research process. If the inerrant Word of God is not this standard, then it must be something else. Therefore, I am fighting tooth and nail against the increasingly popular notion (particularly popular amongst Neo-Kuyperians) of (re-) interpreting Scripture through our (fallen) interpretation of (fallen) general revelation, and not the other way around. If we do that, then we,⁹ and not God’s inerrant, propositional Word, are the highest standard of truth. If we don’t interpret nature through the lens of Scripture, but, conversely, interpret Scripture through the lens of nature, then according to which worldview do we interpret nature, if not the biblical one? In practice this would be the worldview of Naturalism with its anti-supernatural bias.¹⁰ To apply *sola scriptura* and *tota scriptura* to all human endeavors has always been the heart of Reformed thinking. But if we turn this biblical model on its head, as apparently Dr. Sikkema and many of his colleagues seek to do, then we have become humanists and have lost the right to call ourselves Reformed. In that case we have to be honest and tell university donors and parents the truth and not “play pretend” anymore.

Dr. Sikkema kindly let us know that he was instrumental in building the Kuyper Scholars

Program at Dordt University, and I do not dispute his achievement at all. But may I remind him of the academic freedom policy in Dordt University's *Faculty Handbook*,¹¹ which was already in place when he worked at our institution?

Academic freedom must also be acknowledged and promoted within the institution. The college must stimulate, not inhibit, genuine Christian scholarship and teaching. The faculty must be free to explore and investigate. Such freedom, however, is not to be equated with Enlightenment philosophy. Individual autonomy, the traditional idea of academic freedom, suggests that freedom knows no bounds. This view is not acceptable because all perceptions of academic freedom are, in fact, based on worldviews that set parameters for the academic enterprise. All scholarship and teaching is governed by an allegiance to prior commitments. The Enlightenment view of academic freedom is grounded in assumptions about individual autonomy that exclude institutional and communal claims. Unlike secular-religious views of academic freedom that do not acknowledge limitations and restrictions established by unexpressed assumptions, Dordt College boldly maintains that the academic freedom on its campus is restricted and bounded by the Word of God and a Reformed view of academic life as set forth in *The Educational Task of Dordt College*.

This masterful formulation describes exactly what Mr. Hayes and I tried to explain in our original paper, namely, that a proper Reformed understanding of academic freedom rests on the understanding that the *norma normans non normata*, the foundation **and** limitation of all scientific endeavor, must be the Word of God. If we do not follow this requirement, we are committing scientific and educational malpractice and do not deserve to be called Reformed or Christian.

There is really not much more to say about this issue, although, knowing my intellectual oppo-

nents, I have a feeling that there is more to come. I do welcome academic discourse if there are proper arguments and not just condescending name-calling and personal attacks. Keep in mind that I am just the child, exclaiming that the emperor has no clothes.

Endnotes

1. Volume XLVIII/1 (2019).
2. Volume XLVIII/3(2019).
3. For a very thoughtful analysis of this mindset, see Cory J. Griess, "A Report from the Desert," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, Vol.53, No.1, November 2019.
4. Volume XLVII/4 (2019).
5. Not for a second do I deny the necessity of interpretation or taking into account the literary genre of a text, or even the existence of biases, but plain reading as a *prima facie* understanding of a text is possible; otherwise, communication becomes utterly impossible.
6. Romans 8:19-22.
7. That is why Sikkema so dislikes Dr. Jason Lisle, as he is a widely published, leading young-earth creationist.
8. For an excellent short explanation on how Neo-Marxism seeks to infiltrate Christian institution, I strongly recommend Melvin Tinker, *That hideous strength : how the west was lost : the cancer of cultural Marxism in the church and the world, and the gospel of change* (Welwyn Garden City, UK and Wyoming, MI: EP Books and JPL Books, 2018).
9. —through our individual interpretation of reality.
10. Klautke rightly points out that a differentiation between ontological or methodological naturalism is not helpful here because methodology logically follows ontology.
11. Retrieved at: https://www.dordt.edu/sites/default/files/documents/pdfs/faculty_handbook_may_2017.pdf pp.13-14.