

Ernst Pihlblad, Science, and Religion

Dr. Ernst Pihlblad was also a great preacher and educator, as was his noted predecessor, even though he was a bit more meek and mild. He was not so sure and egotistical that he was, like Swensson, a "bull in a china shop," willing to take on all comers to the point of being boorish and snobbish. Pihlblad was softer spoken; he was not so prone to antagonize anyone though he was harsh in classroom discipline and a terror for any student who did not know his lesson.⁴⁷ In the essence of his words, he was just as strong as Swensson for a Christian education and an extirpation of all heresies. For Pihlblad there was no middle ground between Christ and godlessness.

Either accept Christ or wander off into the wastes of agnosticism, which must eventually bring about our personal undoing and the disintegration of society with the extinction of its most cherished ideals.⁴⁸

The question of religion was settled in the mind of Rev. Pihlblad. He was not receptive to the idea of allowing any skeptic to parade his wares before the formative minds of his students. In a presidential report, Pihlblad quoted a Dr. William Smyser as saying that we need to maintain a positive Christian influence which will fight the cynicism and skepticism of our day, its materialism, worldliness, love of pleasure, Nietzschean denials and revolts.⁴⁹

⁴⁷Emil Deere, personal interview with the author, May 13, 1965.

⁴⁸Ernst Pihlblad, "Yokes of Wood and Iron," a baccalaureate sermon, June 1, 1919, p. 16, notes, Bethany Archives.

⁴⁹Pihlblad, "President's Report," Kansas Conference Minutes, 1939, p. 31.

President Pihlblad asked the students to "take upon you the yoke of Christ as your best protection against the foes that are seeking your enslavement."⁵⁰ He believed that there is greater freedom when one takes upon himself the fixed system of belief or commitment to a cause.

Liberal thinking on science occurred during the administration of President Pihlblad. It may be deduced that Pihlblad did not confine his science teachers to the teaching of the truth from what he considered to be his Christian point of view. Bethany, then, was not as Wheaton College and others remained until at least into the early 1950's-- strictly anti-evolution. Bethany College had an open-minded atmosphere in the area of science and religion, and the credit must be given to the open and democratic administration of Pihlblad as well as to the controlling Augustana Synod of the Lutheran Church. This does not mean that President Pihlblad was as permissive in the teaching of political and religious views as he was in science. He would not allow a "Red" to be on the faculty,⁵¹ and he was extremely particular when it came to hiring a Christianity teacher. He did not go for the modernists.

President Pihlblad observed that there has obviously been a dispute between science and religion, but this is because both sides have been at fault; they have over-stepped their bounds. "Theology has not always been Christianity. . . . Nor is scientific opinion pure science."⁵²

⁵⁰Pihlblad, "Yokes of Wood and Iron," p. 20.

⁵¹Emil Deere, personal interview with the author, July 29, 1965.

⁵²Ernst Pihlblad, "Is Our Civilization Christian?" (Talk over KMBC, Kansas City, April 21, 1940; copy in president's office), p. 1.

This may be a neat way of evading the issue and avoiding commitment to either side, but it was a diplomatic maneuver; Pihlblad was tactful enough to win and keep more disciples. He continued, "Christianity and science are not in conflict. The attempt to learn, to find out, and to apply knowledge is inherent in the very Christian spirit."⁵³ True, some advocates of Christianity have not always been in the avant-garde of learning, advocating the latest ideas on the frontiers of knowledge, but this does not detract from Pihlblad's religious basis for seeking true knowledge. In fact he may have taken an approach to learning about God's creation which the Puritans of New England advocated--that it was up to the Christian to find out all he could about the marvelous works of God.

Pihlblad was not only favorable to true science, but he gave credit to Christianity for being responsible for the rise of science. In one presidential report, however, Pihlblad was not quite so favorable toward certain aspects of science. This was before he made the more favorable comments, which is paradoxical, because in other respects Pihlblad became more conservative as he grew older. In the report, Pihlblad quoted Darrow as saying: "I view death neither with fear nor pleasant anticipation. I have arrived at the conviction that there is no hereafter." Then Pihlblad added: "That utterance is the logical conclusion of the materialistic thinking so widely prevalent in the world today."⁵⁴ President Pihlblad was obviously keeping up his

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Pihlblad, "President's Report," Kansas Conference Minutes, 1935, p. 29.

predecessor's fight against "materialism." Pihlblad then lamented that the much-lauded and frequently misunderstood scientific point of view with its overemphasis on matter and blind force had caused men to cast out God, the soul, and eternity.⁵⁵ Two points, one for science and the other against, are evident in the preceding preachment. One is that science overemphasizes materialism, that is, matter in motion by blind force. The other is that science itself is often misunderstood. The former statement is definitely against the materialism of the scientific view as so often understood or misunderstood, but the latter could be said to favor true science in that Pihlblad recognized that true science is often misunderstood.

The conflict of science versus religion has been central in the history of the church and university.⁵⁶ All through the ages there has been a "travail of religious liberty"⁵⁷ and an antagonism between the two modes of thought. As will be documented further in the following discussion of Professor Deere and evolution, it is a credit to Bethany and especially President Pihlblad that this conflict has not been evident in Bethany's religious-intellectual history. This was because although Bethany has always been officially orthodox and evangelical, at the same time it has not officially taken the side of the fundamentalists in the science-religion debate.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Bertrand Russell, Religion and Science (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961).

⁵⁷ Roland H. Bainton, The Travail of Religious Liberty (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951).