

The role of Alexander von Humboldt in the emancipation of science from religion – Nicolaas Rupke (History), University of Göttingen (Germany)

Alexander von Humboldt's Kosmos (5 vols, 1845-62) played a leading role in the determination of the place of scientific knowledge in mid-nineteenth century European society. The book represented a culmination of the emancipation process of the scientific study of nature from its traditional servitude as "handmaiden" of religion (and of theology). The physical description of the universe, Humboldt insisted, leads up to a picture of harmony and unity; but, as Immanuel Kant had argued a century or so before, "all higher speculative views" lie outside the realm of scientific study. Humboldt's narrative of Nature was a consciously secular one and omitted all rhetoric of the divine. Moreover, Humboldt treated the Old and New Testaments, and the Hebrew and the Christian religions on a par with many other sacred texts and systems of faith respectively, relegating these to historical stages in the cultural history of mankind, each characterised by a distinctive idea of Nature. In Kosmos, Nature as a place and source of pious worship was replaced by Nature as an aesthetic experience. Kosmos enjoyed many reprints, translations, reviews and imitations. The discussions in the periodical literature showed marked national and denominational-religious differences. In the English-speaking world, where the Bridgewater Treatises (1833-36) had just reaffirmed the traditional (yet liberal-reform) stance that the study of Nature leads up to Nature's God, Kosmos was much criticised for its omission of God, and attempts were made to "domesticate" Humboldt's book for local audiences by connecting it to the argument from design. In the German-speaking world, similar criticism was uttered, but less by Protestant than Catholic critics. Moreover, many German commentators instrumentalised Kosmos as a work of popularisation and scientific literature on behalf of a drive for socio-political emancipation that led away from particularism with its church-supported monarchical traditionalism. After German unification, throughout the period of the Kaiserreich, Humboldtianism retained its anticlerical significance, the Monist League adopting Humboldt as a secular patron saint as late as the early years of the twentieth century.