



Stephen Contakes

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Pondering What It Means to Stay on Mission in Disrupted Times

I write this editorial in early February 2026 from my office at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California, USA, a town sometimes dubbed the American Riviera. Outside, the sky is blue, there is a gentle breeze, and the air is warm, a pleasant scene. Nevertheless, I am cognizant that I and many others of us who are concerned about science and Christian faith have been experiencing various severe and profound disruptions. By this I do not mean the freezing cold temperatures, snow, and other aftereffects of Winter Storm Gianna, the bomb cyclone that swept through much of the Eastern and Central United States and Canada late January. Rather, I mean what the Oxford English Dictionary calls “violent dissolution[s] of continuity.”¹ Of these, the most obvious involve the significant changes in US government science policy and practice since the beginning of Donald Trump’s second term in office as the President of the United States, changes which have affected many of our readers. More broadly still I refer to any dissolution that has affected one or more dimensions of humanity’s shared life together in the last few years, both locally and globally.

Some of these disruptions factor into the work of the journal, *PSCF*, though not every disruption affects us equally. For instance, over the past two weeks a number of disruptive incidents occurred. The national-level debates over immigration enforcement tactics came to Santa Barbara in the form of a US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent violently attacking a Santa Barbara real estate agent who was peacefully filming an “enforcement action” taking place in her neighborhood. About the same time, I learned that two of Westmont’s brightest chemistry majors—including one on a par with those of past students who have gone on to study in top programs and win National Science Foundation (NSF) fellowships—had yet to receive even a single acceptance or even an interview offer from any graduate program. Meanwhile, a reviewer had alerted me about a received manuscript that may have been written using AI in ways that violate our publication guidelines—a manuscript authored by a tenure-track faculty member at a Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) institution.

Of the incidents mentioned, only the latter affected *PSCF* directly and called for immediate action. The possibility that we were considering an AI-written manuscript that had been undetected in the initial stages of our review process raised all sorts of questions. We quickly learned that policies which delineate appropriate AI use are insufficient; we also need policies for what to do when we suspect undisclosed and inappropriate AI use in submitted and published manuscripts. However, what policies are appropriate? Some were fairly easy to determine: We added a note to the instructions we send to reviewers asking them to not use AI checkers to conduct their own investigations but, rather, refer any suspicions to the editor-in-chief.

Other concerns are taking longer to navigate. For instance, we initiated conversations about how to follow the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) guidelines for research integrity and publication misconduct; these involve giving authors a chance to respond. If they do not, or if their response is unsatisfactory, then do we contact their institutions to report the potential misconduct and ask them to help us assess the integrity of the submission?² If so, how much should we disclose, and how should we frame the possibility of misconduct? I wanted to be careful to point out where the manuscript was original and remain open to the possibility that some of the problems may have resulted from either honest error or overreliance on English as an additional language editing tool.³

I am confident that we will arrive at workable policies for addressing cases of inappropriate AI use. Our editorial staff and board embody much wisdom and experience, and we can learn from the policies of other journals, as we have in the past. Over the last two years alone, we have developed procedures to make it possible for authors to propose theme issues, INSIGHTS articles, and REVIEW articles; we have defined policies for open-access articles, clarified that we will consider manuscripts that have already been posted elsewhere as preprints, and addressed a number of other scenarios, including the acceptable use of generative AI.

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The other disruptions seem thornier. Whatever the merits or demerits in moral reasoning of those who develop AI, from the viewpoint of a journal editor, it is difficult to consider AI as possessing sufficient moral agency to morally praise or blame it for its disruptive effects.⁴ However, that is not the case with law enforcement agents who resort quickly to violence in ways that discourage evaluation of their activities, admissions committees failing to select an exceptional young scientist for a spot in their graduate programs, or faculty considering promising opportunities that do not seem to fit a college's mission. For such, it is far easier to blame or praise particular people. For example, my student's experience with graduate school admissions reflects the fact that scientists who manage graduate programs are now being much more conservative when admitting students, and those managers are likely more conservative because of the actual and threatened disruptions to federally funded research in the United States enacted and proposed by various officials in the second Trump administration.⁵

In principle, this is a fit subject to take up. Budgets and policies encode moral judgments which, like all other moral judgments affecting science, can be analyzed from a Christian perspective in ways that merit publication in *PSCF*. Also valuable could be an examination of the links between the disruption of science and the moral reasoning of the US voters (85% of white evangelicals, 64% of Hispanic Protestants, 59% of white Catholics, 57% of white nonevangelical Protestants, 43% of Hispanic Catholics, and 14% of Black Protestants) who stand in the causal chain of responsibility for disruptions to science in the United States.⁶ Indications are that the topic would be interesting. Previous studies of Christian opposition to science point to a more nuanced picture than suggested by these statistics⁷ and hint at a complex mix of factors that serve to illuminate less-recognized aspects of the relationship between science and religion in real life.⁸

Nevertheless, I am reticent as an editor to encourage analyses that bear directly on charged and contested matters of public debate. It is proper and good for journals to provide a forum for rigorous academic debate of matters that pertain to their mission. But editors function most effectively as umpires who make sure that contributions fit our mission, and as producers who enrich the work of authors through feedback, including the work of authors whose conclusions we might disagree with! However, by last summer we were aware that public policy and science administration disruptions were creating practical and moral difficulties for some of our readers. Consequently, at *PSCF*'s summer 2025 editorial board meeting, we discussed whether we should solicit articles addressing recent changes in US science policy

and funding. Ultimately, we concluded that you would be better served by articles aimed at helping our readers to contextualize the recent changes to federal science policy within a larger historical frame and to equip them to understand Christian mistrust of science. Those articles are forthcoming.

In the meantime, know that we are also aware from both Christian theology and personal experience, that certain forms of inaction can elide into disobedience to the commands of Christ. As Bonhoeffer observed, writing in the early days of Hitler's Third Reich, "Christendom adjusts itself far too easily to the worship of power."⁹ Indeed, he spoke those words even as the vast majority of German church leaders and academics were actively developing the intellectual and moral frameworks which enabled ordinary Germans to rationalize their complicity in militarism and the holocaust.¹⁰ Both the above, and the changes many of America's top research universities have undergone in the face of various currents of empire left, right, and otherwise, weigh heavily on my thinking about these issues. For fallible humans, the boundaries between responsible action and inappropriate cooperation or complicity with unjust systems are necessary but difficult places to navigate.

PSCF does "not take an official position on controversial issues"¹¹; however, as the journal of "an international network of Christians in the sciences,"¹² there is much we do not consider uncontroversial. Chief among them is the understanding of Christian faith encapsulated in the Nicene Creed, which affirms that it is Jesus who "will come again, with glory, to judge the living and the dead" and that we "look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."¹³ As C. S. Lewis reminded Oxford students amidst the outbreak of European hostilities in the Second World War, the real danger for the Christian arises at a time when things seem to be going our way. In contrast, loss and threats of loss can be a spiritual blessing.

all schemes of happiness that centered in this world, were always doomed to a final frustration ... If we had foolish un-Christian hopes about human culture, they are now shattered. If we thought we were building up a heaven on earth, if we looked for something that would turn the present world from a place of pilgrimage into a permanent city satisfying the soul of man, we are disillusioned, and not a moment too soon.¹⁴

Similarly, with the Nicene Creed we at *PSCF* affirm a belief in "the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life ... who spoke by the prophets" and can guide us into all truth. Consequently, we follow Lewis in offering that the reframing of our hope on the eternal does not make

either science or the type of scholarship featured in the pages of *PSCF* irrelevant. Rather, it reaffirms and properly refocuses our understanding of its importance. For as Lewis concludes:

If we thought that for some souls, and at some times, the life of learning, humbly offered to God, was, in its own small way, one of the appointed approaches to the Divine reality and the Divine beauty which we hope to enjoy hereafter, we can think so still.¹⁵

It is in this spirit that I present to you a variety issue, addressing topics of longstanding interest to readers of this journal. The topics considered predate both the rise of generative AI tools and America's present cultural moment. Yet, to the extent that each develops our understanding of what is good, true, and right with respect to the Divine reality, they can in some small measure help us "understand the present time"¹⁶ and know how to behave amidst "dissolutions of continuity."¹⁷

Notes

¹"Disruption (n.), sense 1," *Oxford English Dictionary*, June 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8356862144>.

²COPE Council, "COPE Flowcharts and Infographics—Suspected Ethical Problem in a Submitted Manuscript—English," last reviewed May 1, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2019.2.19>. See also, COPE Council, "COPE Guidelines: Cooperation Between Research Institutions and Journals on Research Integrity and Publication Misconduct Cases—English," last reviewed February 1, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2018.1.3>. Note that *PSCF* is not yet a member of COPE, for reasons I have not yet ascertained. However, we do seek to follow COPE guidance where such is available.

³This problem may be exacerbated by the tendency of AI detectors to pick up the constrained language of nonnative English speakers as AI-generated prose. Weixin Liang et al., "GPT Detectors Are Biased Against Non-Native English Writers," *Patterns* 4, no. 7 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.patter.2023.100779>.

⁴Yet it is possible to develop AI carelessly or deliberately in ways that promote illicit ends. For an example, see Marc Watkins, "An Open Letter to Perplexity AI: Absolutely Don't Do This," *Rhetorica*, October 17, 2025, <https://marcwatkins.substack.com/p/an-open-letter-to-perplexity-ai>. See also Marc Watkins, "Can Educators Counter 'Agentic AI'?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 20, 2025, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/can-educators-counter-agentic-ai>.

⁵For the situation in early 2025, see Maddie Khaw, "This Year's Ph.D. Admissions Cycle Is Leaving Students in the Lurch," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 26, 2025, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/this-years-ph-d-admissions-cycle-is-leaving-students-in-the-lurch>.

⁶"Analyzing the 2024 Presidential Vote: PRRIs Post-Election Survey," Public Religion Research Institute, December 13, 2024, accessed on February 4, 2026, <https://www.ppri.org/research/analyzing-the-2024-presidential-vote-prris-post-election-survey/>.

⁷I am not aware of a poll which clearly links Christian voters' support of Trump to his administration's science policy. Currently, it also appears that many of the proposed cuts to science will be less severe as a result of congressional input. See

Rebecca Trager, "Dramatic Reductions Proposed for US Science Agencies by Trump Administration Evaporate," *Chemistry World*, February 3, 2026, <https://www.chemistryworld.com/news/dramatic-reductions-proposed-for-us-science-agencies-by-trump-administration-evaporate/4022868.article>.

⁸For example, Americans' mistrust in science (a) seems strongly correlated with political affiliation, as documented in M. Anthony Mills and Price St. Clair, "The Strange New Politics of Science," *Issues in Science and Technology* 41, no. 3 (Spring 2025): 40–48, <https://doi.org/10.58875/NDTQ1755>; (b) reflects deeply held assumptions about the importance of market fundamentalism more than mistrust of science per se, as argued in Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *The Big Myth: How American Business Taught Us to Loathe Government and Love the Free Market* (Bloomsbury, 2023); and (c) is fueled by a misinformation industry which functions to promote un-Christlike social norms and practices, as argued in Scott M. Coley, *Ministers of Propaganda: Truth, Power, and the Ideology of the Religious Right* (Eerdmans, 2024), a misinformation industry that (d) feeds off evangelicals' and fundamentalists' tendencies to adopt a "paranoid stance" toward secular learning and enterprises, as argued in Antony Alumkal, *Paranoid Science: The Christian Right's War on Reality* (New York University Press, 2017). Although to my knowledge this has not yet been attempted, I also suspect evangelical mistrust of science can be understood as continuous with the historical trajectories outlined in Mark A. Noll, "Evangelicals, Creation, and Scripture: Legacies from a Long History," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 63, no. 3 (2011): 147–58, <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2011/PSCF9-11Noll.pdf>.

⁹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "My Strength Is Made Perfect in Weakness," in *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Douglas W. Stott et al., ed. Isabel Best (Fortress Press, 2012), 169.

¹⁰For an account of the latter, see Robert P. Ericksen, *Complicity in the Holocaust: Churches and Universities in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹¹(a) Terry M. Gray, "The ASA Does Not Take an Official Position on Controversial Questions," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 68, no. 3 (2016): 177–90, <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2016/PSCF9-16Gray.pdf>, referring to (b) Richard H. Bube, "We Believe in Creation," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 23, no. 4 (1971): 121–22, <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/1971/JASA12-71Bube.html>.

¹²"Who We Are," About the ASA, American Scientific Affiliation, <https://network.asa3.org/page/ASAAbout>.

¹³The text is taken from the Nicene Creed as posted on the American Scientific Affiliation webpage at <https://network.asa3.org/page/Creeds> with the exception that the word "living" is substituted for the word "quick."

¹⁴C. S. Lewis, "Learning in War-Time," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Eerdmans, 1965), 53–54.

¹⁵Lewis, "Learning in War-Time," 54.

¹⁶Romans 13:11.

¹⁷"Disruption (n.), sense 1," *Oxford English Dictionary*, June 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8356862144>.

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