
Pro Rege

Volume 21 | Number 3

Article 4

March 1993

Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism (Book Review)

Richard G. Hodgson
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation

Hodgson, Richard G. (1993) "Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 21: No. 3, 24 - 25.
Available at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol21/iss3/4

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.



A quarterly faculty publication of
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

the objective side of the split. Scripture is objective truth in which human subjectivity plays little or no role in original authorship, editing, compilation, translating, and interpreting. Practicing obedience to this kind of scriptural authority leads to a ghetto mentality that seeks to protect ahistorical, objective statements of fact that have little relevance for the public life of the West.

Newbigin sees a solution to this fundamental split in the church in the work of Michael Polanyi, who struggled against the false objectivism of science. Newbigin draws on Polanyi's understanding of "indwelling." When we indwell some worldview we do not look *at* the worldview but *from* the worldview to the object of our attention. It functions below the level of consciousness, providing clues for understanding the meaning of particular objects. The use of a worldview is analogous to our use of language. I indwell language in the sense that it becomes a part of me, and is the means through which I try to understand the world. Newbigin believes that the liberal and fundamentalist traditions indwell the modern scientific worldview and look *at* the Bible rather than dwelling *in* the biblical story and looking at our culture. Newbigin believes that the rift will only be healed as the Bible becomes the living story of the people of God and they vigorously proclaim the gospel to Western society.

In his final lecture, "Speaking the Truth to Caesar," Newbigin addresses the issue of *how* the church can vitally impact the dominant non-Christian ethos that exists in the public life of the West. The Western church lives in a society that is neither a totalitarian regime whose public doctrine suppresses the gospel nor a

Christian state in which the gospel is the dominant plausibility structure for public life. We live in a democracy and are, therefore, one voice in a continuing conversation with many voices. Our task is twofold. Negatively, we are to recognize, unmask, and reject ideological demonic powers that bind our culture. Positively, we are to affirm the truth of the good news as a starting point for public life. To accomplish this task three things are necessary. First, the people of God must be equipped and nourished by the internal life of the institutional church for their callings in the world. Secondly, future leaders must be trained to participate vigorously in the public life of our nation. Finally, and most importantly, the church must embody the gospel herself, and as a counter community, challenge the reigning idols and ideologies of the day.

I find Newbigin's work to be informative, provocative, and helpful as I struggle with crucial questions. I would recommend reading this book, although I would steer an interested reader to *Gospel in a Pluralist Society* and/or *Foolishness to the Greeks* first. While I have been helped tremendously by these books, one nagging problem continues to haunt me. Newbigin seems to reduce revelation to the events of Jesus Christ. If he does not affirm that God reveals himself and his will through his creation and throughout the whole of Scripture, it is difficult to see where he finds the norms for Christian obedience. How is the gospel normative for society? The truth we are to tell—is it simply the events of Jesus Christ? It seems to me that robustly affirming the whole organism of revelation would shore up his whole project.

The Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism, by Ronald L. Numbers (New York: A. A. Knopf) 1992. 456 pages, \$27.50. ISBN 0-679-40104-0. Reviewed by Richard G. Hodgson, Associate Professor of Planetary Sciences.

For all who are seeking to understand the historical roots of current-day "Young-Earth" Creationism and its Flood Geology, Ronald L. Numbers, a distinguished historian of science at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, has supplied us with a masterpiece. Numbers is in a good position to write: he grew up in a family of Seventh-Day Adventist preachers, in a denomination that has had much to do with the origin and recent promotion of "Scientific Creationism."

Unlike many books that seem to have an axe to grind in the Creation/Evolution debate, Numbers' presentation of the historical facts is broad, comprehensive, extremely well-documented, and irenic. It is also a highly readable book that is very hard to put down.

Numbers deals with each contributor to the debate, whatever his or her position, in as positive and kindly

a manner as the historical realities permit. It is unusual to find praise for any book on this controversial topic coming from people of radically opposing views, yet such is the case. On its back cover jacket there is high praise from Walter R. Hearn, well-known theistic evolutionist, and from Henry M. Morris, a major figure in the promotion of Scientific Creationism over the past 35 years. In giving *The Creationists* the Albert C. Outler Prize in Ecumenical Church History, the American Society of Church History said, "This is a superb work of historical scholarship . . . a landmark book." This reviewer fully concurs.

As George M. Marsden rightly suggests in a recent review, *The Creationists* is in large part the history of a struggle between the orthodox and the hyper-orthodox. Much of this history is unknown to most

Reformed, evangelical, and fundamentalist Christians in North America today. It may come as a surprise to many that before 1960 there was very meager support among Bible-believing scholars for the idea that the . . . earth (and universe) was only a few thousand years old. Likewise, the notion that . . . earth's rock layers and sediments could be explained by the flood of Noah was largely confined to Seventh-Day Adventist circles. Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, Herman Bavinck, and Louis Berkhof (among other theologians), and William Jennings Bryan, leader of the anti-evolution crusade after World War I, all allowed, one way or another, that the . . . earth was very old. They did not argue with the fossil record or the great age the geological column implies.

It was George McCready Price, a Seventh-Day Adventist concerned to square . . . earth-history with some of the prophecies of Adventist Ellen G. White, who undertook to deny the realities of modern astronomy. Price's scientific background was minimal, but his devotion to his cause filled his life. He turned

his back on scientific information, and favored a populist reading of the Bible.

If there is one criticism I have of Numbers' book, it is its brief treatment of the views of the leading late nineteenth and early twentieth century Presbyterian and Reformed scholars. Charles Hodge is mentioned several times, but Warfield only once briefly. Bavinck and Berkhof, among others, are passed over. It should be said in defense of Numbers, however, that the development of Scientific Creationism is largely a fundamentalist movement, not one that grew in Reformed circles. And the book is full-length as it is.

Whatever your views on creation and evolution, if you are a teacher or preacher, a church elder, a scientist, or just a person who wants to be well informed, you will learn much from a careful reading of Ronald L. Numbers' *The Creationists*. It presents the historical record fairly, and should serve as a basis of any future discussions. I hope its irenic tone and fairness to all viewpoints will encourage constructive and peaceful discussion of these issues among Christ's people.

Made in America: The Shaping of American Evangelicalism, by Michael Scott Horton (Grand Rapids: Baker) 1991. 187 pages, hardback, \$13.99. Reviewed by Michael Williams, Assistant Professor of Theology.

Books are very much like people. That should not be too surprising, I guess, seeing that literature is a human cultural artifact. There are people whom you want to like: you agree with most of what they say; but there's something about their personal style or approach to things that simply puts your teeth on edge. That was my immediate response to this book. At the very same moment I found my head voluntarily bobbing up and down in agreement, I would also be muttering under my breath that Horton has gone about it all wrong.

In his dust-jacket blurb for the book, J.I. Packer calls Horton's book a Jeremiad. I think that's right, especially if we keep the Oxford Dictionary definition of the word in mind. A Jeremiad is a writing or speech given "in a strain of grief or distress; a doleful complaint; a complaining tirade." The plan of the book is simple enough. Horton has written a litany of the faults and foibles of modern American evangelicalism. For eight chapters he does nothing but gripe about evangelical subjectivism, pragmatism, consumerism, Arminianism, civil religion, secularism, individualism, and sensationalism. Yes, these are all realities within the evangelical ethos, and yes, they are all worthy of criticism, but Horton's whiny bombast is a long way from analysis. By the time he gets to chapter 8: "The Loss of Community," the "last problem on the list," I sent up a prayer of thanks that he was almost finished.

While Horton's book in itself does not merit much more than a notice, it does raise two issues regarding a Reformed response to popular evangelicalism that are worthy of attention. The first issue is one of style. Reformed thought has often, and rightly, been criticized for being too negative, for being long on criticism and short on construction. When we read a book or listen to an address we look for problems, faulty reasoning, facile acceptance of the popular. Heresy hunting is more than a past-time for us; it is part of our self-understanding as Reformed Christians. However, although we must contend for the faith, we are called to do so without being contentious. Being Reformed should not mean being intellectually quarrelsome or prone to theological and philosophical strife.

Horton is a good example of a bad Reformed trait. His book reads like a final exam for a course in Gerstner apologetics. He breaks the first rule of constructive theological polemic: describe your subjects in such a way that they will recognize themselves in the description. When this is done, you will speak to no one but the already converted. The truly good book is meant to persuade its readers, not merely give them ammunition for prior biases. Horton's rejection of adequate description and analysis in favor of lampoon and caricature is more reminiscent of Rush Limbaugh than some of the "heroes" of the faith that he alludes to in