

## Creationism - What is it?

Steve Howes, TCF member

All Christians, including such scientists as Newton and Kelvin, Pasteur and Mendel, have believed that God created the universe. Creationism, however, is a particular subset of Christian belief which was developed in the 1920s in USA by George Price, a Seventh Day Adventist who became a popular lecturer and writer though with very little professional training in Science. Its distinctive beliefs involve geology and biology.

### Creationism and Geology.

In 1923 Price published his major book, "The New Geology", which relied on a theory called 'flood geology' which was revamped in 1961. The two main assumptions of this theory are:

- The entire living world was created not too long ago, that is, a 'young' Earth only a few thousand years old. Therefore creationists cannot accept that, for example, the granite of Bathurst is 300 million years old.
- In the time of Noah a huge flood covered not only Mesopotamia but extended across the entire globe.

The waters picked up the various forms of plants and animals and deposited them, together with mud and sand, to form huge strata (layers). These strata have now dried out and hardened to produce the rock layers that we see today. To account for fossils, creationists claim that they are the remains of the animals and plants trapped in the flood's mud and sand. Therefore all fossils are only a few thousand years old.

### Creationism and Biology.

All the major species of plants and animals have been fixed by God and no major changes in species have occurred. Therefore creationists reject Darwin's theory of natural selection. Furthermore, natural selection is a process that requires a very long time, perhaps millions of years, during which a population may change into a new species whereas creationists believe that the world is too young for this process to have occurred.

### How did creationism become so influential, especially in the USA?

1. The weaknesses in Biology at that time, around 1920.

Leading scientists no longer doubted that species had evolved over millions of years but it was Darwin's explanation of evolution that was under challenge. The big difficulty for biologists at that time was to explain how there could be sufficient variation between one animal and another of the same species so that the environment could select one variation over another.

In the early 1900s, Genetics was only just developing as a new science after Mendel's work was re-published. Morgan was experimenting with fruit flies and making discoveries about mutations which are an important cause of variation. Sutton was gaining evidence for and acceptance of his theory that genes are found along chromosomes. So it was not until the 1930s that biologists could apply Genetics to Darwin's mechanism and so produce a convincing theory known as the Neo-Darwinian Synthesis that overcame the difficulties in Darwin's original theory of 1859.

2. Social forces that developed in the USA at that time.

People, especially in the southern states, were still getting over their Civil War. Technological changes in farming were destroying traditional farming community life. In government, a more centralized and distant bureaucracy

was starting to replace local decision-making. In the cities, new magazines, movies and jazz all added further fast and furious changes. Understandably, many people already felt threatened and unsettled when they heard about Darwin's theory and especially when they heard some vocal Christians claim that evolution undermined belief in the Bible.

In 1925, an otherwise ordinary Science teacher, John Scopes, was put on trial for teaching evolution to his High School Biology class in the small Tennessee town of Dayton. The film, "*Inherit the Wind*", supposedly is based on this trial however it does not report what in fact happened; it makes use of this trial only as a setting for safely depicting the hysteria generated in USA against Communists during the McCarthy period.

### **Christians and evolution.**

One of the ironies of history is that many of the original 'Fundamentalists' did NOT oppose evolution! Far from being red-necks they were Christian scholars who produced a series of pamphlets between 1910 and 1915 on basic Christian beliefs that were then being challenged by new ideas and they named their series 'The Fundamentals'. One of these theologians, B.B. Warfield, once said that he was "a Darwinian of the purest water", that is, an undiluted Darwinian!

## **Fundamental questions about knowledge**

From the Editor

I was hesitant to include Steve article in *TCFNews*, not so much because it might cause offense to members who hold a range of views on this issue, but because I believe that the creation-evolution debate is a very divisive one amongst Christians.

Being a social scientist and not a scientist by training I have never really been able to get too excited about this issue. To me it remains a question of knowledge related to two very different questions: Who created the world and how it was created? In my simplistic view theology answers the "who" question and science the "how" question.

Behind these questions are two sources of knowledge: revealed and scientific. What I know about God is revealed through the Scriptures, my experience of God and from the trust I put in other peoples knowledge and experience of God. Some of this knowledge and these experiences can be verified scientifically, but not all. Faith has a major hand to play in how I know and experience God.

Yet, in the midst of this, I am happy to accept scientific explanations of how the world might be created without falling back on a literal interpretation of the early chapters of Genesis. After all, the revealed knowledge and not the scientific knowledge is what is important in these chapters. It could be argued that the science of these early chapters was the best of its day, but science moves on whereas God's character and purposes remain the same *yesterday and today and for ever*.

In moving on, science continues to modify and expand on the theory of evolution and there are unanswered questions about aspect of evolution. In fact, some would argue that there are some "evolution fundamentalist" scientists who are in denial about the problems in evolutionary theory.

While many Christians remain skeptical about evolution, trying to get all Christians and a secular community to agree that the "creationist" view is the only correct

one is belittling of God who we acknowledge as the creator and sustainer of the whole universe. Just how he did this I will leave to the scientists and watch with interest the debates on evolution. I am much more interested in telling others about the good news we have in Christ than challenging their views on evolution and being distracted from the Gospel.

### ***Intelligent design.***

Recent debates about *intelligent design* have rekindled the evolution-creation debate. It seems that the concept of intelligent design originates from a group, including scientists, who want to acknowledge that complexity and order in the universe points to an intelligent designer.

In response, the Christian right has seized on the idea as a scientific approach to acknowledging the Creator. Unfortunately in the media, we now have *intelligent design* being promoted as a fundamentalist Christian approach obscuring the philosophy of science approach of the supporters who proposed it. As a result, *intelligent design* is not seen as being different from “creationism” and treated in a similar way. It will now be some time before the more philosophical arguments will get the coverage they deserve.

In NSW government schools, creationism and intelligent design can be discussed in class, but neither can be taught as science because they are not open to scientific method. The NSW syllabuses do not consider the philosophy of science, and therefore, *intelligent design* is irrelevant to the teaching of science in NSW. In the end, intelligent design may be no more than an updated version of the “God of the gaps” where what currently can not be explained by science is left to God. I believe that God is above and beyond such matters and not confined to the leftovers.

John Gore