

YOUNG-EARTH CREATIONISM: A HISTORY

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PART I. EARLY HISTORY

Among the topics occupying us on this blog is the controversy over the interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis. Disagreements on this issue are as violent today as they have ever been and belong to the most divisive issues among conservative Christians. Having dealt with the topic on numerous occasions, I have noted that little is known about the history of the controversy. This is a pity, since the divergent views can be better understood and evaluated if one knows something about their origin. It is for that reason that I present this article, which concentrates on the conflict between Christians who, while agreeing on the truth of divine creation, disagree on the age of the earth and the universe.

I have divided the article into three parts. Part I gives a historical overview of orthodox Protestant views on creation up to about 1925; Part II focuses on the rise, nature, and spread of young-earth creationism, first in America and then worldwide; and Part III briefly describes the position of a number of Reformed churches on the issue. Special attention is given here to the Dutch Reformed Churches (liberated), the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC), and the United Reformed Church (URC).

Different schools

Specifically, then, the difference I am concerned with is between those who hold that the days of creation were 24-hours in length and that the earth is between 6,000 and 10,000 year old (the young-earth creationists) and those who hold to a much older earth and universe. Believing that a young earth can be scientifically proven, the former often refer to themselves as creation scientists (or scientific creationists). To provide the necessary scientific proofs, they rely on a number of strategies. Among them is the promotion of flood geology: the theory that the stratifications of the earth's crust and the fossils they contain were deposited by a worldwide Noachian flood and that the great age of the earth is only apparent.

The other group, consisting of believers who hold to a much older earth, has several subdivisions. One of them is that the days of creation must be interpreted as lengthy periods (the day-age theory). Other well-known theories are the gap-theory of Genesis 1 (also called the ruin-restoration theory), the intermittent day theory, the framework theory as developed by Reformed Dutch theologians A. Noordtjij and N.H. Ridderbos and their American colleague Meredith Kline, and the analogical day view as it has been promoted recently by Reformed theologians John C. Collins and Vern S. Poythress.

Gap theorists teach that creation took place in 6 ordinary days but that it was preceded by a much earlier creation which Satan destroyed and which accounts for most of the earth's geologic features. The "gap" was between the first two verses of Genesis 1. At one time widely accepted (it was promoted, for example, by the influential Scofield Reference Bible), the theory is now widely, although not fully,

discarded. According to the intermittent day theory the days were again 24 hours long but were separated from each other by intervals of great length. The framework theory separates days 1-3 from days 4-6. The first three were the days of *forming* (separation of day and night, sky and sea, land and sea respectively, with the creation of plants on the third day), and the second three described the *filling* of these forms (sun and moon, birds and sea animals, land animals and humans respectively, with the use of plants as food beginning on the sixth day). The days were historical, but not chronological, and of unknown length. According to the analogical day theory, finally, the days of Genesis 1 and our days are analogous but not identical and not of the same length. The days of divine work offer an analogy to the days of human work and rest, providing a structure of seven days as a pattern for humans to imitate.

In addition to these creationist positions there is theistic evolutionism (which holds to a God-guided evolutionary process). That theory was accepted by some conservative Protestant scientists and theologians around the time of Darwin, has been allowed by the R.C. Church, and today has an increasing number of followers among other Christians, also Reformed ones. Of more recent origin is Intelligent Design. Some members of this movement accept evolution but hold that God intervened throughout the evolutionary process. Well-known ID scholars are Phillip Johnson, Michael J. Behe, and William Dembski.

Luther and Calvin on the age of the earth

The divisions between young-earth and old-earth creationists are of relatively recent origin. Until the eighteenth century it was generally believed that the universe was about 6000 years old and that the days of creation were 24-hours in length. True, there had been diverging opinions, for example in the time of the church fathers, but it does not appear that they gave rise to real controversy or that they continued to be influential.

In any event, the Reformers inherited the tradition of a young earth and of “ordinary” creation days, and they accepted that tradition. Both Luther and Calvin held to a “literal” reading of the creation account, although especially Calvin warned against an excessively *literalistic* one. We must keep in mind firstly, he wrote, that the creation account deals with the “visible form of the world” and not with detailed astronomical and other technical aspects. He added the well-known warning, “He who would learn astronomy, and other recondite arts, let him go elsewhere.” Genesis did not give that sort of information. And secondly he pointed out that (here as elsewhere) God accommodates himself to the capacities of his people. The book of Genesis is “the book of the unlearned.” And therefore (for example) Genesis 1 calls the moon one of the “great lights” even though it derives [much of] its light from the sun and even though planet Saturn is much larger than the moon. But because of its greater distance from the earth, Saturn looks smaller and does not serve as a luminary for us.¹ According to Calvin, then, much of the language of Genesis 1 is what we today call phenomenological; that is, it describes things as they appear to the observer.

Ussher's chronology

In Calvin's days it was believed that the age of the earth was *approximately* 6000 years. Well-known among those who suggested a definite date was the Anglican Archbishop James Ussher, who around 1650 proposed that creation had taken place in 4004 B.C., beginning on October 22 of that year. He settled for these dates after a study of astronomical cycles and of various sources of biblical chronology, including the Genesis genealogies. When later it was discovered that these genealogies contained gaps, some extended the earth's life to 10,000 years. Most young-creationists today do the same, although some still insist on about 6000 years. Ussher's chronology would become especially influential because up to the early 20th century it was inserted in the marginal notes of the King James Bible.

Rise of old-earth theories

The Christian tradition of an older earth did not arise, as is often alleged, because of Darwinism or the work of atheistic scientists. It is true that it came after the rise of modern science, but that took place well before Darwin, and early modern science was not secular. The old-earth tradition had its origin among late-18th and early-19th century geologists, a great many of whom were Bible-believing Christians. Serious geological work had been going on already in the 17th century, but on the whole geologists at that time continued to believe that the layers of the earth's crust and the fossils they contained could be explained with reference to Noah's flood. In the course of the 18th century, however, some geologists began to suggest that the data seemed to point to an earth that was considerably older than 6000 years, and by the early 19th century this idea increasingly gained ground, also among Christian geologists.

These Christian geologists believed in the historicity of the Genesis account of both creation and flood, but discarded flood geology. Convinced that the geological evidence had shown Ussher's chronology and the theory of flood geology to be untenable, but determined to uphold Scripture, they looked for ways to harmonize revelation and science. Among the attempted harmonizations was the day-age theory. Those who adhere to this theory interpret the days of Genesis 1 as geological ages. Rejecting flood geology, they consider the possibility that Noah's flood was a regional one. Many old-age creationists further believe that the first two verses of Genesis 1 allow for acceptance of the so-called Big Bang theory of origins. (Christians, incidentally, often don't realize that this theory does *not* support atheism. On the contrary, because it admits a beginning and therefore by implication a supernatural Cause, many atheists at first fought it tooth and nail.)

Old-earth theorists tend to adhere, with modern geologists in general, to the principle of methodological uniformitarianism. According to this principle the present is the key to the past, although room is left for the role of catastrophes in the development of the earth's crust.²

After Darwin

The idea of an old earth based on the new geology did not imply evolutionism. Although developmental theories were in the air well before Charles Darwin, it was not until Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) that the theory of evolution came to be widely accepted. This meant a further challenge for Christians. From the late 19th century until the 1930s the majority of orthodox Protestants who published on the

issue rejected Darwinism while holding to the idea of an old earth. Among them were Princeton theologians Charles Hodge (1797-1878) and William Henry Green (1825-1900) as well as prominent Reformed theologians in the Netherlands (see my “Klaas Schilder on Creation and Flood”, parts 1 & 2 in the collection of papers at *Reformed Academic*). Hodge was among those who suggested that proper ways be sought to let science, where appropriate, inform Scripture, as had been done in the Galileo case.³

There were exceptions to this anti-evolution tendency. The Christian botanist Asa Gray (1810-88), a contemporary of Darwin, was willing to accept a modified form of evolution and asked Darwin to admit divine providence and to allow for “special origination” in connection with the appearance of humans.⁴ Darwin denied the request, but some conservative Christians, scientists as well as theologians, were willing to follow Gray in the direction of theistic evolution. Two impeccably orthodox theologians who considered the possibility of “large-scale evolution in order to explain God’s way of creating, plants, animals, and even the human body” were James Orr (1844-1913) of the Free Church of Scotland and his American colleague B.B. Warfield (1851-1921) of Presbyterian Princeton Theological Seminary (Noll, 189).

The attitude of these two men seems surprising. Warfield was among the most learned defenders of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy and contributed, with James Orr, Charles Hodge and various other scholars to the writing of *The Fundamentals* (1910-15), the series of booklets that affirmed the inerrancy of the Bible and that would soon give rise to the widespread American fundamentalist movement. In short, for Orr and Warfield old-earth creationism and some sort of theistic evolutionism were compatible with the confession of biblical infallibility and inerrancy. With respect to old-earth creationism, Warfield wrote, “The question of the antiquity of man has of itself no theological significance. It is to theology, as such, a matter of entire indifference how long man has existed on earth...” And with respect to evolution he declared that the really pressing question was not “whether the old faith can live with the new [evolutionary] doctrine... We may be sure,” he added, “that the old faith will be able not merely to live with, but to assimilate to itself all facts...” The truly relevant question, according to Warfield, was whether the theory of evolution was scientifically acceptable (Noll, 206, 208).

The Fundamentals

Although fundamentalism would later be so closely associated with young-earth creationism that the two terms became almost synonymous, the story of men like Orr, Warfield, and Hodge shows that the promotion of a young earth was not the movement’s original goal. The real enemy *The Fundamentals* were attacking was not evolution or old-earth creationism but historical criticism of the Bible, a movement that, spreading from Germany, regarded Scripture not as the revealed Word of God but as a human writing which could be critically analyzed like any other historical document. Fundamentalism’s battle against evolution came later. Some original “fundamentalists” saw eye to eye with Warfield and Orr and considered evolutionary theories as acceptable scientific hypotheses and as theologically indifferent.

The Reverend A.C. Dixon, for example, founder and first editor of *The Fundamentals*, did not accept theistic evolution but neither did he reject that position on theological grounds. As historian Ronald L. Numbers writes, Dixon “confessed to feeling ‘a repugnance to the idea that an ape or an orangutan was my ancestor’ but expressed a willingness ‘to accept the humiliating fact, if proved.’ ” A later editor (Reuben A. Torrey) announced he had given up believing in evolution “for purely scientific reasons” but insisted that one could “believe thoroughly in the absolute infallibility of the Bible and still be an evolutionist of a certain type.” The essays in *The Fundamentals* that touched on evolution (about one-fifth of the total) covered just about every evangelical position on the issue – from theistic evolution to the belief that evolution was an enemy of the Christian faith. “Fundamentalists may not have liked evolution, but at this time few, if any, saw the necessity or desirability of launching a crusade to eradicate it from the schools and churches of America” (Numbers, 53).

The Scopes Trial

The period of relative tolerance did not last. As early as the 1920s, less than a decade after the completion of *The Fundamentals*, various Christians began to organize campaigns against the teaching of evolution in the public high schools. A result of this activism was the famous (or infamous) Scopes “Monkey” Trial of 1925 – a court case that the anti-Darwinists won, but at the expense of being portrayed both at home and abroad as primitives and obscurantists. The negative effect was such that for some decades anti-Darwinist fundamentalism turned inward, focusing less on public crusades than on proclaiming their message via colleges, Bible institutes, and societies, and by means of publications and radio broadcasts.

What had been the cause of the preceding activism? An important factor was the militancy of anti-Christians scientists and their supporters who openly and persistently used Darwinism as a means to end all Christian influences in science. These militants dominated the teaching of science not just at the university level but also in the high schools, and they did so at a time when the number of these schools increased rapidly and attracted a far larger percentage of young people than in the past. Whereas earlier Christian discussions on Darwinism had been restricted largely to intellectuals, information about the implications of an anti-Christian evolutionism now, via the high school students, reached the wider evangelical community. Accounts of hostility toward Christianity by high school teachers abound. Even some non-fundamentalists openly objected to the attitude of “irresponsible and poorly informed teachers who delighted in shocking naive students with unsupportable statements about evolution” (Numbers, 54). Anti-Darwinism thus became a popular and populist issue.

Evolutionism as a worldview

Evangelicals began also to realize more clearly the possible social, cultural, and religious implications of Darwinism. Here again, militant evolutionists were instigators. Increasingly evolution was presented as not just a biological theory but as an all-encompassing worldview according to which everything on earth, including religion and morality, had developed from simple to complex in obedience to the Darwinian law of natural selection. The promotion of such “cosmic evolutionism” by every possible

means, including high school biology texts, served as a potent stimulus for Christians to reconsider their initially more tolerant view.

Among them were authors and prominent supporters of *The Fundamentals*. Well-known among the latter was William Jennings Bryan (1860-1925), a Presbyterian politician and three-time Democratic candidate for the American presidency, who became the great champion of American anti-Darwinism, up to and including the Scopes trial. That trial was a disaster. Bryan's presentation of the anti-Darwinist case was confused and contradictory and was used by his enemies to expose both him and the anti-Darwinist cause he represented to national and international ridicule. Yet he was not a fundamentalist in the narrow sense of the word. In fact, he believed the days of creation to have been geological ages and was even willing to consider organic evolution, "so long as it did not impinge on the supernatural origin of Adam and Eve" (Numbers, 7).

Bryan's increasingly strong opposition to Darwinism, writes historian Mark Noll (153), "arose not so much from a threat to traditional interpretations of Genesis 1 but because evolution threatened human dignity. A godless theory of evolution was 'an insult to reason and [shocked] the heart. . . . It would, if generally adopted, destroy all sense of responsibility and menace the morals of the world.'" The horrors of World War I especially convinced him of the danger of evolutionism, which he blamed for the tendency of "substituting the law of the jungle for the teaching of Christ" and which "threatened the principles he valued most: democracy and Christianity" (Numbers, 56). In short, it was not Darwinism as a biological or geological theory that he opposed, but the cosmic evolutionism with its implied philosophical materialism. This evaluation Bryan shared with other Christian leaders of the period.

In defense of the Bible

Not in the last place, there was a strong sense of religious crisis. Protestant Christianity had been dominant in America and had seemed secure until the disruptions wrought by the American Civil War (1861-65) and the socio-economic and cultural upheavals that followed in its wake. These included massive immigration (leading to a great increase in the number Roman Catholics and unbelievers), rapid industrialization and urbanization, the establishment of secular universities (threatening the influence of the church-related colleges), the ever-growing power of a socially merciless capitalism, the influx of Bible-critical attitudes from Europe, and the emptying of mainline churches.

Protestants who had long considered America to be a Christian nation, a "City on the Hill," now feared the loss of their heritage and felt the need to respond to the challenges. The work on behalf of biblical inerrancy by the authors of *The Fundamentals* was one answer. Another was the rise, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, of new sects, churches, and other religious groups, such as the various Holiness Movements, Pentecostalism, Premillennialism, and Dispensationalism. Although not all would promote young-earth creationism, all would unite in the struggle against theological liberalism, biblical criticism, and secular science. Opposition to an atheistic evolutionism grew very rapidly. Apocalyptic movements like Dispensationalist Premillennialism would be especially influential in anti-Darwinist campaign.

PART II: CREATION SCIENCE

Old-earth creationism was the dominant position among leading orthodox Protestants in much of the nineteenth century and during the first half of the twentieth. Modern young-earth creationism gained some ground in the 1920s and '30s but had to wait until the 1960s to begin its great advance in the world of evangelical Protestantism. Although in a sense a revival of the historic young-earth position, it differed from that tradition in its claim to scientific credentials and its militancy.

How is one to explain its very rapid success in conquering the evangelical world? The factors that had given rise to the fundamentalist movement of the 1920s played a role, such as the aggressiveness of dogmatic evolutionists, their dominant position in schools and universities, the rapid secularization of society, the decline of public morality, and the wars and economic and political dislocations of the 20th century. New religious movements and churches, many of them insisting on a “plain,” or “normal,” or “literal” reading of the Bible, also continued to exert an influence. So did a widespread belief in Christ’s imminent Second Coming and attempts by the increasingly influential dispensationalist movements to explain political developments with reference to biblical prophecies. In order to use the Bible as a “crystal ball,” a literalistic hermeneutics was needed. A stimulus of a different kind came with the Soviets’ successful launching of the Sputnik satellite (1957). This caused government and scientists in America to re-examine their relative tolerance for diverging views and to insist on the teaching of undiluted evolutionism in the nation’s schools, a policy that invited a massive creationist reaction.

Adventist roots

All these elements contributed to the success of the young-earth movement. No less important, however, was its endorsement of a version of flood geology that would give rise to the belief that young-earth creationism could be scientifically proven. That version had a rather surprising provenance. It originated with Seventh-Day Adventism, one of the many recently established sects. Seventh-Day Adventism was an offspring of the 19th-century Millerite sect, an apocalyptic movement whose founder, the farmer-preacher William Miller, had concluded from studies of Old Testament prophecy that Christ’s Second Coming was imminent and who had announced various dates for that event. After the Great Disappointment of 1844 (when a prophecy that Christ would return remained again unfulfilled), the movement dissolved into different sects, one of which was that of the Seventh-Day Adventists, founded and led by the charismatic Ellen G. White (1827-1915).

White was convinced that the Bible must be explained literally and that the first Sabbath must be seen as the conclusion of a normal week, just like every subsequent Sabbath. Celebrating it on the seventh day was required by the Fourth Commandment, it served as a memorial to a literal six-day creation, and it was a condition for meeting Christ on his return (which White also believed to be imminent). A symbolic reading of the days was therefore out of the question. White claimed to have received divine confirmation of her beliefs by means of trance-like visions, in which she had been brought back to the

time of creation and Noah's flood and learned that (1) creation had taken place in six ordinary, 24-hour days, and (2) the upheavals of a universal flood had sculpted the mountains and the earth's geological layers and deposited the fossils these layers contained. According to her followers, White was divinely inspired and her sacred writings (collectively called the "Spirit of Prophecy") had the same authority as the Bible. It was left to her followers to prove that science ("properly so called") agreed with her writings (Numbers, 88-106).

From Ellen White to George McCready Price

The challenge was accepted by George McCready Price (1870-1963), who had been personally mentored by White and for some years made a living selling her books door to door. Price concluded that Darwinism was persuasive because of modern geology's assumption of an ancient earth. Therefore, although he had very little training in geology, he focused on studying the earth's layers and proved to his own satisfaction the truth of flood geology and a recent earth.

His best-known work was *The New Geology*, published in 1923, just in time for the Scopes trial. Many evangelical intellectuals were embarrassed by what they considered Price's "folk-science." William Jennings Bryan, however, welcomed it and quoted Price at the trial, even though he continued to believe in an ancient earth as well. This type of mix-up happened often. While the appeal of Price's flood geology steadily grew, a simultaneous belief in an antique earth was quite common. For a consistent belief in flood geology as proof that the earth was young (or at least that there had been no earthly life before Eden), the small Seventh-Day Adventist community remained Price's most reliable constituency (Numbers, 59f, 119, 331).

The Genesis Flood

Although he was certainly not ignored, Price's influence among non-Adventists continued to be relatively limited. The great conversion to flood geology had to wait until the 1960s. It happened thanks to the work not of Adventists but of evangelicals, namely Old Testament theologian John C. Whitcomb (born 1924), a member of the fundamentalist Grace Brethren Churches, and hydraulic engineer Henry M. Morris (1918-2006), a pre-millennial Baptist. The catalyst was their book *The Genesis Flood* (1961), a refurbishing of Price's *New Geology*. In spite of its future success, the authors met with some initial obstacles. They had difficulty finding a university-trained geologist to endorse their work; the review in the evangelical periodical *Christianity Today* was not enthusiastic, and the *Journal* of the Christian American Scientific Affiliation (ASA) ignored the book for three years and then came with a negative appraisal. It also proved difficult to find a publisher. Evangelical publishers Eerdmans and Moody Press had expressed interest, but in the end both withdrew. Help came at last from Rousas J. Rushdoony (1916-2001), founder of the American Reconstructionist (Theonomist) Movement. He recommended the small Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, whose owner, Charles H. Craig, had long been an admirer of Price and accepted the manuscript (Numbers, 211-234).

Once published, the message spread widely. Flood geology conquered not only fundamentalism and much of American evangelicalism as a whole, it found adherents also in conservative Protestant

churches of different signature. Although it was especially popular among Seventh-Day Adventists and Southern Baptists, there had been from the very beginning many Missouri Synod Lutherans who chose for young-earth creationism. In time flood geology was also accepted by several members of Reformed and Presbyterian churches. The movement even had adherents among Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses (Numbers, 330-39, 348).

Creation Research Society (CRS)

The spread of creationism was aided by the founders' organizing talent. Already before the publication of *The Genesis Flood* attempts had been made to bring dominant creationists together, and in 1963 the attempts culminated in the establishment of the Creation Research Society (CRS). The original steering committee consisted of 18 members – six Missouri Lutherans, six Baptists, two Seventh-Day Adventists, and one each from the Reformed Presbyterian Church, the Christian Reformed Church, the Methodist Church, and the Church of the Brethren. The majority of these men had, according to Numbers, turned against Darwinism for biblical, rather than scientific reasons (Numbers, 258f.). Perhaps with the debacles of the 1920s in mind, the founders agreed that the society would not be involved in attempts to ban the teaching of evolution in the schools but to concentrate on the propagation of creationism by means of publishing. The immediate aim was the preparation of a periodical, the so-called *CRS Quarterly*, and of a high school biology text, which was published by Zondervan in 1970.

Scientific Creationism and ICR

In the early 1960s, when answering Christian opponents, Morris and Whitcomb said that they were less concerned about scientific evidence for their position than about what they believed to be the witness of the Bible. "The real issue," they insisted, "is not the correctness of the interpretation of various details of the geological data, but simply what God has revealed in His Word concerning these matters" (Numbers, 232f.) They further defined science as limited to the study of "present and reproducible phenomena," which meant that historical geology was not really science. The fact, however, that many a young-earth creationist, from Price onward, concentrated on a study of the earth and considered his findings to be scientifically valid could not be denied, and the movement soon taught that there was scientific (especially geological) evidence for flood geology and a young earth. Scientific prestige was in any event badly needed. Educational requirements showed it, especially after the Sputnik episode.

The new direction became evident with the establishment in the early 1970s of what became known as the Institute for Creation Research (ICR), directed by Henry Morris. In 1974 Morris further published his influential *Scientific Creationism*, a handbook for high-school teachers. Scientific creationism (or creation science – the terms are used interchangeably) was, as Morris described it, biblical creationism dressed in non-biblical garb; that is, it was to be taught "without reference to the book of Genesis or to other religious literature or to religious doctrines" (Numbers, 269). Accepting this definition, creationists agreed that their customary attacks on the "unscientific" nature of evolution would cease. Henceforth scientists would be presented as working according to two "models" of equal scientific standing – a creationist and an evolutionist one. The two, Morris suggested, were equally 'scientific' and equally 'religious' (Numbers, 272). Each was to be judged according to the effectiveness with which it accounted

for the available data. “Instead of trying to bar evolution from the classroom, as their predecessors had done in the 1920s,” Numbers writes, “they fought to bring creation into the schoolhouse and repudiate the epithet ‘antievolutionist.’ Instead of appealing to the authority of the Bible, as John C. Whitcomb, Jr., and Morris had done in launching the creationist revival, they downplayed the Genesis story in favor of emphasizing the scientific aspects of creationism” (Numbers, 269f.). Whitcomb was unhappy with the divorce of creationism from the Bible, but Morris and a majority of leading creationists believed the sacrifice had to be made.

Spreading the message at home

Creationist societies did some independent scientific research but tended at first to concentrate primarily on searching evolutionist writings for both Darwinist “fallacies” and references that could be interpreted as supporting creationism. Another major project was the publication of creationist literature – books, textbooks, pamphlets, as well as the popular Newsletter *Acts and Facts*. They further spread their message by radio and television, by means of a best-selling series of Sunday School Lessons and by equally successful “Back to Genesis” seminars. These seminars taught the traditional *biblical* defence of creationism. The same was true of the enormously influential “Answers in Genesis” (AiG), a radio program organized by the charismatic Australian creationist Ken Ham (born 1951). Morris and soon various others travelled across America to spread the message by means of public lectures. Baptist churches and colleges were his first target, but Morris visited Presbyterian, Lutheran, Reformed, Episcopal, Wesleyan, and Pentecostal institutions as well. He often experienced a warm welcome and managed to secure the support of influential evangelicals, including the fundamentalist leader Jerry Falwell. Other prominent evangelical leaders, such as Billy Graham and Jimmy Swaggart, stuck to the old-earth interpretation of Genesis (Numbers, 237, 329).

Although the number of American creationists expanded very rapidly after the appearance of *The Genesis Flood*, the increase may in part have been the result of mobilizing those who had already been anti-Darwinists before 1961. Some of these, Numbers points out, may have supported the movement without accepting flood geology or even a recent earth (Numbers, 329-31). Premillennial Adventists and Baptists continued to lead in the acceptance of flood geology, but a large number of converts came also from evangelical Lutheran and Calvinist churches “which put a premium on correct belief” (Numbers, 335). In some churches and sects, on the other hand, loyalty to the gap or day-age theory prevented large-scale conversions to flood geology.

Creationism world-wide

American creationists were mission-minded. By 2005 creationist literature had been translated into some two dozen languages, including Chinese. Creationist programs were broadcast worldwide, and public lecturers like Duane Gish, Henry Morris (and later his sons John and Henry III) visited every region under the sun – South-East Asia, Australia and New Zealand, Africa, Latin America, and practically every country in Europe. Creationism attracted not only Protestants but also a number of Roman Catholic and Eastern-Orthodox believers. It even attracted some Jews, Muslims, and Hindus (Numbers, 399), although at times religious differences necessitated important changes to traditional creationism.

Among Asian nations Korea assumed leadership. Korean Christians spread the message to neighbouring countries and in time would even send creationist propagandists back to America to strengthen the brotherhood in the movement's land of origin.

Among Western nations that experienced a flourishing of young-earth creationism were England and its former colonies Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, and on the European continent the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Australia became, with the USA, a leader in the English-speaking world. In continental Europe leadership was assumed by the Netherlands. Here as elsewhere the movement conquered not only churches of a fundamentalist or evangelical background but also a majority of orthodox Reformed believers.

PART III: CREATIONISM IN REFORMED CHURCHES

Dutch leadership

That the Dutch assumed leadership is rather surprising, particularly in view of the prominent position of Reformed believers among orthodox Protestants here. Since the time of Darwin, Reformed theologians had generally rejected evolutionism while at the same time allowing for an older earth and for a regional flood. Well-known among those who were willing to consider an older earth* were A. Kuyper, H. Bavinck, K. Schilder, G. Ch. Aalders, and the proponents of the framework theory A. Noordtjij and N.H. Ridderbos, but there were many others. Reformed theologian G. van den Brink writes that at least one Reformed publication (*De Waarheidsvriend*, official magazine of the conservative *Gereformeerde Bond*), went further. Its editor wrote (in 1926) that although it is impossible to explain the origins of the universe by evolution, “an evolutionary explanation of the connections among the many forms of life on earth can very well be reconciled with the belief in God as the Creator, Maintainer, and Governor of the entire cosmos”⁵

It does not appear that any of these theologians was accused of heresy and called to order. Today, however, in orthodox Reformed churches, including the Reformed Churches liberated, this happens routinely to proponents of an older earth. The issue plays a major role in the divisions that have been plaguing the latter churches in recent years. Here as elsewhere, the change in opinions was due to the import of American young-earth creationism. In the Netherlands it was propagated by the widely influential evangelical broadcasting organization *Evangelische Omroep* (EO) and the educational institution the *Evangelische Hogeschool* (EH), both of which were established in the seventies. Since their inception young-earth creationism – i.e., belief in a six-day creation and flood geology – has been widely promoted across the evangelical and orthodox Reformed spectrum as the one and only acceptable interpretation of the Genesis account.

I should add here that the past year has witnessed a change in the EO. The organization, led by biologist, philosopher, and theologian Willem J. Ouweneel (undisputed leader of the Dutch evangelical movement, one-time editor of a creationist magazine, and one-time creationist missionary to Germany)

* Correction made 27 May 2010: The words “those who were willing to consider an older earth” replaced “the proponents.”

has begun to tone down its creationist message. Today, Ouweneel tells his audience, he is no longer a young-earth creationist. He adds that he is not an evolutionist in the Darwinian sense either, although he believes in “a measure of evolution.” Evolution, he says, offers an interesting explanation of the great anatomic and genetic similarities in plants and animals. But he doesn’t know “if the presently-known genetic mechanisms make an evolution from microbe to human possible in principle. If such is not the case, one may not say that general evolution is a scientific fact.” In view of these uncertainties he prefers to call himself an “origins-agnostic.”⁶

The EO turn-about is not an isolated development in the Netherlands. Increasing numbers of Reformed and other conservative Christian scientists, theologians, and philosophers now openly reject young-earth creationism. Some have chosen for Intelligent Design, others for theistic evolution, while many continue to hold to a version of old-earth creationism such as the day-age theory. The Dutch developments are of interest for the creationist movement as a whole. They are especially instructive for immigrant offshoots of orthodox Dutch churches which have been strongly influenced by positions in the mother churches.

Creationism in Reformed America

I am concluding with a brief overview of the situation in a number of Reformed Churches on this side of the Atlantic. For much of the information I am indebted to Dr. Tony Jelsma of Dordt College who kindly sent me the (unpublished) material of a presentation he made on the issue at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, in 2002. It has not always been easy to gather the detailed information. We may have made mistakes and welcome corrections.

The Canadian Reformed Churches

One of the offshoots of Dutch Reformed churches is the Canadian Reformed federation (about 50 member churches), with which I personally am best acquainted. As in the Netherlands, some memory of the approach followed by Kuyper, Bavinck, and Schilder is still alive there, at least among older members. There is no official position on the issue (neither is there in the Dutch mother churches). None of the Reformed confessions speaks about the length or even the number of the days of creation or the age of the earth, and no Synod has ever made a pronouncement on the issue. Nevertheless, young-earth creationism appears to be the dominant theological stance, even though in the past there have been some Canadian Reformed theologians who questioned that position. A comparable situation probably exists among the federation’s pastors, but it is hard to verify this. A non-creationist position is generally not made public.

Although still very vocal, Canadian Reformed young-earthers are not opposing old-earth positions as stridently as has been the case in the past. One of the most violent attacks happened some years ago when a press review in the periodical *Clarion* commented on the decisions of the RCUS and OCRC to affirm a literal (young-earth) interpretation of Genesis 1. The author, a professor at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary, mildly criticized the decisions, not because he disagreed with the position of these churches, but because the statements were binding the believers’ consciences and went beyond the confessions. The resulting flurry of angry letters to the editor lasted for several months. An increasing awareness that an old-earth position is in accord with the Reformed tradition as

established by Kuyper and Bavinck and upheld by Schilder has, I believe, caused a more tolerant attitude among church members in recent years, even though young-earth creationism still appears to be the default position.

Officially, there has always been freedom of expression in the Canadian Reformed churches on the issue. It is true that *Reformed Perspective*, one of the two periodicals with a nation-wide circulation, gives no room to authors questioning young-earth creationism as the only biblical view, but *Clarion*, which functions as the unofficial “Canadian Reformed Magazine,” has traditionally been more even-handed. It is true that the editor lately refused to publish any articles that either question or promote young-earth creationism (a decision that led to the establishment of this blog), but it was made clear that the prohibition would be temporary. Although I regret the moratorium, I understand the difficulties the editor faced, and I continue to be grateful for the opportunities he has given me in the past to write on the issue.

The Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches (the federation’s seminary) does not take an official position on the matter. Some professors are young-earth creationists whereas others have, at least in the past, adhered to the traditional Reformed position of allowing for an older earth. There is, however, little or no official promotion of the latter. Writings associated with the College are generally in support of the young-earth position. In view of the creationist default position in the federation at large, this one-sidedness is perhaps to be expected, although I doubt that it is either wise or responsible to maintain it indefinitely.

There are no statistics about the situation in the Canadian Reformed schools, but I think it is safe to say that many (most?) teach young-earth creationism and even creation science, although I know that there is also some interest in Intelligent Design. The subject is now being discussed, especially on behalf of the secondary schools and in connection with a nation-wide Reformed apologetics project. Information on the project and the discussions can be found on this blog (follow link International Apologetics Project - see side-bar).

The URC

The federation of the United Reformed Church of North America, which has some 80 member churches, was established in the 1990s after secessions from the Christian Reformed Church. Fear that the CRC was officially allowing the propagation of evolution was one of the reasons for the secessions. Here too, although there are exceptions, the young-earth creationism seems to be the default position. The dominant URC magazine, *Christian Renewal*, does not take an official stance but has promoted young-earth creationism and refrains from publishing old-earth material.

Adherence to the young-earth position is very strong in some URC regions. It has led to a heated discussion at the Synod of 2001. This Synod declared, “God created all things good in six days defined as evenings and mornings (Genesis 1 & 2 and Exodus 20:11). This means that we reject any evolutionary teaching, including theistic evolution, concerning the origin of the earth and of all creatures (Heidelberg

Catechism, Lord's Day IX.)" The statement was made in response to an overture asking Synod to reject any interpretation of Genesis 1 as non-literal and to reject any non-chronological or non-historical view of the days mentioned in Genesis 1. The response may have been indirect and a bit unclear, but Synod did reject the overture and allowed for old-earth creationism.

As to the position of the seminary attended by most URC theological students (Mid-America Reformed Seminary or MARS), all faculty members officially adhere to and teach the young-earth view but the students are free to hold different positions. As it happens, Westminster also admits theological students from the URC and its faculty hold predominantly to an old earth (framework hypothesis) position.

Other Reformed/Presbyterian churches: position statements

Christian Reformed Church (CRC). This church does not impose an authorized interpretation of specific passages in Scripture, nor does it canonize certain scientific hypotheses. Instead, it insists that all theological interpretations and all scientific theories be subject to Scripture and the confessions. Stating that humanity is created in the image of God, it rejects all theorizing which minimizes this fact and all theories of evolution which deny the creative activity of God. The clear teaching of Scripture and the confessions rules out views that support the reality of evolutionary forebears of the human race. The CRC also states, however, that further investigation or discussion regarding the origin of humanity should not be limited.

Orthodox Christian Reformed Church (OCRC). This small denomination, consisting of churches that broke away from the CRC in the early 1980s, has made an official statement that affirms a strictly literal interpretation of Genesis 1.

Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC). The OPC has no definite position statement on the days of creation but refers back to the doctrinal standards (Westminster Confession and Catechisms). Statements by officers of the OPC that clearly contravene these standards are not permitted. Evolution is rejected.

Presbyterian Church of America (PCA). The PCA also rejects evolution. There is no consensus on the nature and duration of creation days. Most prominent are the 24-hour day, the Day-Age, the Framework, and the Analogical Day theories.

Reformed Church of the United States (RCUS). The 253rd Synod of the RCUS affirmed a strictly literal interpretation of the days of creation and consequently requires all officers to teach, defend and promote this interpretation. In three documents, entitled "The Hermeneutics of Genesis One" by Warren Embree, "Unbiblical Theories of Creation" by Frank Walker, and a Concluding Statement, the justifications for this position are outlined. This collection of documents does not address the scientific evidences. The first document contrasts the positions of Meredith Kline and Gerhard Hasel, a former Old Testament professor at Andrews University, and decides in favour of the latter. The second document reviews and critiques "unbiblical" theories of creation and argues for a six-day literal

interpretation. The Concluding Statement claims that the Bible expressly teaches a literal six-day creation. It further argues that the Heidelberg Catechism, when discussing the Ten Commandments, clearly understands the days to be literal days.

4. Summary of Positions on Creation-Evolution Debate

Canadian Reformed – no official position, but generally young-earth

Christian Reformed Church – allows for theistic evolution, but not of man (a significant number of members is young-earth creationist)

Free Reformed Churches of North America – official position is young earth

Netherlands Reformed Church – no official position; young earth not questioned

Orthodox Christian Reformed Church (OCRC) – official position: only a strictly literal interpretation is allowed

Orthodox Presbyterian Church – does not allow evolution

Presbyterian Church of America (PCA) – allows for non-literal days but not for evolution

Presbyterian Church (USA) – allows for evolution

Protestant Reformed Church – no official position; young earth not questioned

Reformed Church of the United States (RCUS) – official position: only a strictly literal interpretation is allowed

United Reformed Church – no official position, but generally young-earth

*5. Positions of Reformed Seminaries on Creation Days (from *Christian Renewal*, Jan. 29, 2001, p. 3)*

Calvin (CRC): limited by decisions of Synod, denying atheistic evolution; views must be subject to Scripture and confessions

Canadian Reformed (Hamilton, ON): no official position beyond the confessions, but tends to hold to literal view

Covenant (St. Louis, PCA): A variety of interpretations has been taught, except an evolutionary one

Greenville (NC, independent): faculty statement affirms literal interpretation based on exegetical, historical and confessional grounds

Knox (Fort Lauderdale, Coral Ridge PCA): no official policy but professors hold to literal view

Mid-America (MARS) (Independent/URC): all faculty members officially adhere to and teach literal view but students' views may differ

New Geneva (Colorado Springs, independent): no official statement, faculty members hold to literal interpretation, but this is not an acid test for visiting speakers

Protestant Reformed (GR): teaches only literal view

Puritan Reformed (GR, Heritage Netherlands Reformed): adheres to literal view

Reformed Presbyterian (Pittsburgh): no official position, mostly literal, but some may hold non-literal views

Reformed Theological (Orlando, Charlotte, Jackson, independent): no official policy, holds diversity of views that adhere to historicity and authority of Genesis account

Western Reformed (Tacoma, WA, RCA): no official position, freedom allowed, Framework hypothesis is discouraged because it minimizes historical value

Westminster (Escondido): any view permitted that understands Genesis 1 to be accurate, historical; denies evolution of man. Most hold to Framework hypothesis

Westminster (Philadelphia): a variety of views are allowed, "Creation is a matter on which the Scriptures do not speak decisively."

Endnotes:

¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis*, I (see comments on Gen. 1, vs. 6, 15, 16).

² On the history of Christian thought on the age of the earth and the conflict between young- and old-earth geologists see Davis A. Young, *Christianity and the Age of the Earth* (Zondervan, 1982).

³ Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Eerdmans/IVP, 1994), pp. 183f. (Henceforth references to this book will be given in the text with author's name and page number.)

⁴ Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists: From Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design*, Expanded Version (Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 16. (Henceforth references to this book will be given in the text with author's name and page number.)

⁵ G. van den Brink, "6 x 24?," *Nederlands Dagblad*, 13 October, 2008.

⁶ Willem J. Ouweneel, "Van creationist tot kosmologisch agnost," *Nederlands Dagblad*, 30 January, 2009. (ND website: www.nd.nl)