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The Cultures of Creationism: Anti-Evolutionism in English-Speaking Countries

Edited by Simon Coleman and Leslie Carlin

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0-7546-0912-x.

[1] Creationism is a peculiar movement which has something of a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Many biblical scholars look at creationist's literalist readings of biblical texts in disgust. Many scientists regard creationism as a threat to their profession or to science in general, as a moving backwards towards a pre-modern way of thinking. And many people – especially in Europe – are just puzzled by the ideas of creationists: How on earth can one take *that* seriously? And yet, there is also something fascinating in creationism, which is due to the fact that, although its claims apparently contradict fundamental facts of modern science, there are still many people who accept them. Rudolf Bultmann once argued that one cannot use electric light and radio, or, in case of illness, use modern medicine, and believe in the spirit world and miracles of the New Testament at the same time¹ – yet this seems exactly what creationists are doing!

[2] The phenomenon of creationism may be approached from different perspectives. One may investigate the use of science in creationist discourse, study the way creationists integrate religion and science or analyze the way creationists interpret Scriptural texts and the rhetoric involved in doing so. The present book under review contains a number of essays in which the authors look at creationism from a social-science perspective. The two editors of the volume, both anthropologists, state that the purpose of the book is 'to understand the significance of context (social, cultural, historical) in the articulation of creationist and anti-creationist ideas...' (3). In order to master this wide area of research, the editors have chosen to restrict their survey to creationism in English-speaking countries. However, not every English-speaking country is represented in the book, for the editors have chosen to limit the territory of research further:

[W]e have focused upon contexts for which extensive research data are available, and across which creationist networks can be shown to have existed for much of the past century. Examining such contexts provides an excellent

1. R. Bultmann, 'Neues Testament und Mythologie. Das Problem der Enthmythologisierung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung,' in: H.W. Bartsch (ed.), *Kerugma und Mythos* I, Hamburg 1967, 17f.

means for tracing historical and contemporary connections among the relatively manageable set of institutions, actors and ideologies. We show how (crudely described) an Anglo-Saxon, conservative Protestant package of ideas about creation has been adapted and reshaped in different national contexts. Contributors therefore consider internal debates among creationists, but also the interactions between creationists and defenders of evolutionary theory in natural scientific, legal, anthropological, philosophical, theological and religious arenas (3).

[3] Basically, this means that the essays address creationism in the USA, Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Kenya. The book does not advocate creationist ideas, and even though between the lines one can occasionally sense something of the author's personal opinions towards creationism, overall the essays collected in this book treat creationism with a professional openness and fairness. There is one exception, to which I will return below.

[4] One should be warned that the book is no easy read, and some prior knowledge of creationism is helpful.² The Introduction by Coleman and Carlin presents a concise but good overview of the different strands of creationism and their roots. Coleman and Carlin conclude that 'creationism is not just an isolated intellectual system, even though courts, theologians and sometimes even believers might sometimes wish to present it in this way. It is usually part of a wider religious cosmology and set of practices that touch on issues of identity, morality, ritual and social belonging' (20).

[5] After the Introduction, two essays by David Knight and Simon Locke present an overview of creationism in Britain. Knight focuses on the history and context of creationism in Darwin's England, and Locke analyzes creationist discourse, focusing specifically on the style of argumentation which consists of a mixture (or, as Locke calls it, a 'discursive syncretism') of 'interpretative readings of science through the Bible and of the Bible through science' (45). In a joint essay, Francis Harrold, Raymond Eve and John Taylor look at the ideology, tactics and rhetorical strategies in American creationism. Not only do the authors of this essay give a wonderful overview of the strategies that creationists have used since the 1920s to promote their case, they also describe the social-cultural context in which the rise of neo-creationist movements and movements such as Intelligent Design makes sense. In the next essay, John Barker explains why creationism has never been successful in Canada, mainly because of the social-cultural and religious differences between Canada and the USA (as well as the Canadians' lingering antipathy to influences from the USA). Ronald Numbers shows how and why creationism is gaining popularity in Australia. He argues that, ironically, the increasing importance of creationism in Australia is due to the attention anti-creationist movements have given to creationism, putting creationism directly in the spotlights. Next, Ronald Numbers and John Stenhouse show that the context

2. See e.g. R.L. Numbers, *The Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism*. Berkeley, etc.: University of California Press 1992, and J.A. Moore, *From Genesis to Genetics: The Case of Evolution and Creationism*. Berkeley, etc.: University of California Press 2002.

of creationism in New Zealand was created by a decrease of influence from the UK on the one hand, and an increase of import of ideas from the USA and Australia on the other. Robert Layton describes the link between the creation stories of indigenous people of Australia and the Judeo-Christian creation narratives. Peter Fulljames and Leslie Francis present research done in Kenya and Scotland into the reception of creationist ideas among young people.

[6] The final essay, by philosopher of science Michael Ruse, explicates the philosophical dimensions of the 'new creationism.' By 'new creationism' is meant the Intelligent Design movement, a movement which has become a prominent member of anti-evolutionism in America and elsewhere. This essay stands out because of Ruse's explicit hostility towards Intelligent Design, which he presents in this essay without nuance as a creationist movement. He argues specifically against three advocates of the Intelligent Design movement: Phillip Johnson, Michael Behe, and Alvin Plantinga. Ruse presents his case often in a witty manner – which I noticed is often a rhetorical strategy of those opposing creationism and Intelligent Design – and with good philosophical arguments. And yet I believe Ruse's easy dismissal of Intelligent Design as creationism is debatable, for he never indicates in what sense Intelligent Design is creationistic. As Ruse knows well, not all adherents of Intelligent Design are anti-evolutionists, though many of them are anti-Darwinists (because of the materialist implications of Darwinism). Be that as it may, Ruse's essay does not fit in a collection of articles like this one. Arguments against Intelligent Design can be found with ease elsewhere. This book is not intended to criticize creationism or Intelligent Design but to describe some of the social-cultural dimensions of creationist movements. Ruse, however, sets out to summarize the positions of three adherents of Intelligent Design only in order to finish them off by philosophical arguments. In my view, it would have been better if Ruse's contribution would have been left out; it simply has no place in a book such as this one. Instead, a thorough analysis of the relationship between Intelligent Design and creationism and a comparison of their rhetorical strategies would have been a much more interesting and valuable contribution. Such an analysis and comparison would have been more in line with the rest of the articles contained in this volume.

[7] Overall, I think this book is a real asset to the growing pile of literature on creationism, especially because it is not a theological or scientific assessment of creationism but a collection of social-cultural analyses which show the impact of and interaction with the wider cultural setting in which creationist movements are embedded.