

Review Articles

CREATIONISM IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICA

by Donald W. Dayton

Creationism in Twentieth Century America: A Ten-Volume Anthology of Documents, 1903–1961. Gen. ed. RONALD L. NUMBERS. New York and London: Garland Publishing Co., 1995. 10 volumes. \$812.00.

Abstract. The author surveys and reviews the ten-volume reprint anthology *Creationism in Twentieth-Century America*. The editor, Ronald L. Numbers, places special emphasis on the Adventist roots of creationism in the work of George McCready Price and provides the documentation to trace the rise of antievolutionist thinking and its “evolution” into the “scientific creationism” of the 1960s. The author suggests that Numbers underplays the role of dispensationalism in the shaping of antievolutionist thinking.

Keywords: antievolutionism; creationism; dispensationalism; eschatology; evolution; fundamentalism; Seventh-Day Adventism.

According to a 1991 Gallup poll, 47 percent of Americans—including 25 percent of college graduates—believe humankind was created by God at one time within the last ten thousand years. This figure probably includes a sizeable constituency (millions?) that follows a footnote in the dispensationalist Scofield Bible to postulate a “gap” between an original creation and a recent supernatural creation of the human race (to allow for the fossil record) but may not include another group of “creationists” who reconcile the biblical accounts with “evolution” by equating the biblical “days” with “eons” or “ages” to allow a form of “theistic evolution”—perhaps punctuated with supernatural creative acts to separate the “days” or initiate new “species.” Thus, at least half the American population might be classified as “creationist” in some sense, though perhaps without enough sophistication to make these distinctions—or to recognize the extent to

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which a particular form of creationism (the so-called scientific creationism based on a “flood geology” attributing fossil records to the recovery of the earth from a cataclysmic worldwide flood in the time of Noah) has erupted into popularity since the 1960s to preempt the field and claim to be *the* creationist position.

It is the latter movement that is the focus of this ten-volume set of facsimile reprints that document the twentieth-century rise of creationism. The general editor is Ronald L. Numbers, William Coleman Professor of the History of Science and Medicine at the University of Wisconsin—Madison and author or editor of over a dozen books, including especially and most recently the award-winning book puckishly entitled *The Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism* (1992)—the subtitle appears only on the dust jacket and not on the title page. (This book won the 1991 Albert C. Outler Prize in Ecumenical Church History of the American Society of Church History.) In a sense this ten-volume set of reprints provides the documents to sustain the argument being made in that book—documents sufficiently esoteric in nature as generally not to have been collected by mainstream libraries. Numbers and Garland Publishing have done us a great service by making these materials available again.

If *The Creationists*—an encyclopedic survey of the rise of creationism in this century—may be said to have a thesis, it is that modern scientific creationism is just that—modern and more narrow than earlier forms of creationism that preceded it (i.e., the “gap” theory and the more subtle “day/eon” theory). Numbers himself rejects creationism but believes even such unpopular views should be taken seriously and expounded sympathetically.

An interesting subtheme of both the book and the documents is the role of members of the Seventh-Day Adventist church in the emergence of modern scientific creationism. Numbers comes by this insight naturally. Though now accepting somewhat reluctantly the label “agnostic,” Numbers is the son of an Adventist evangelist who publicly lectured against evolution. Nearly two decades ago Numbers created a stir in that church with his first book, *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White* (1976). (The 1992 revised edition has the title *Prophetess of Health: Ellen G. White and the Origins of Seventh-Day Adventist Health Reform*.) That book put the founder of the Adventist church in the context of nineteenth-century health reform movements and thus raised questions about the gift of prophecy she claimed.

The adventist hero or villain (depending on one’s point of view) in this story is George McCready Price, brought into prominence in the 1950s by Martin Gardner in *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science* (1957). Gardner describes Price thus:

Among twentieth century Protestant opponents of evolution one man and one alone stands head and shoulders above all others. He is the “geologist” whom Bryan cited as his chief authority at the famous Scopes trial in Tennessee, and almost every fundamentalist attack on evolution in the last three decades [i.e., before 1950] has drawn its major ammunition from his writings. He is, in fact, the last and greatest of the anti-evolutionists. (Gardner 1957, 127)

The basic claim of Price is that evolutionary theory is based on circular reasoning—fossils are arranged from simple to complex to date the strata, which are then used to date the fossils. For Price, the fossils are the remains of antediluvian flora and fauna buried in the cataclysm of the flood. He suggests that fossils

should—and in fact do—appear in orders other than the “evolutionary” one, but evolutionists resort to “artifices” of upthrusts and overlays to explain away cases that do not follow their presumed “developmental” pattern.

The ten volumes of *Creationism in Twentieth-Century America* are largely oriented to documenting the rise and influence of this position as articulated by George McCready Price. These proceed as follows:

1. *Antievolutionism before World War I*. Edited by RONALD L. NUMBERS. \$72.00 if purchased separately.

This volume reprints four antievolutionary tracts that predate the fundamentalist/modernist controversy and the work of Price: *The Other Side of Evolution* (1903) by Alexander Patterson, a Presbyterian evangelist and lecturer at Moody Bible Institute; *At the Deathbed of Darwinism* (1904) by Eberhard Dennert, a German evolutionist who rejected Darwin's particular formulation and cataloged the growing German objections to Darwin at the turn of the century; *The Collapse of Evolution* (1905) by Luther Tracy Townsend, a Methodist pastor; and finally, “The Passing of Evolution,” an antievolutionist essay from *The Fundamentals* (n.d.) by George Frederick Wright, an Oberlin College scientist/theologian who had moved from an early acceptance of a form of “Christianized Darwinism” to a later rejection that brought him into close identification with the emerging fundamentalist movement. Numbers, in his introduction, places Patterson in the gap theory tradition and Townsend in the day/eon tradition.

2. *Creation-Evolution Debates*. Edited by RONALD L. NUMBERS. \$95.00 if purchased separately.

This volume collects the texts of public debates during the 1920s and 1930s. Three articles comprise an exchange in the *New York Times* among William Jennings Bryan, paleontologist Henry Fairfield Osborn, and Princeton biologist Edwin Grant Conklin, all defending evolution. On the other extreme is another media event, the confrontation between atheist Charles Smith and Aimee Semple McPherson, the Pentecostal evangelist and founder of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. George McCready Price took to a London stage to debate ex-Franciscan turned rationalist philosopher Joseph McCabe. Another debate pitted two Adventists against Maynard Shipley, founder of the “anti-antievolutionist” Science League of America. Fundamentalist leaders John Roach Stratton and William Bell Riley took on Unitarian Charles Francis Potter and Charles Smith, respectively. Riley weighed in again to defend the day/eon theory against fellow fundamentalist Harry Rimmer, an advocate of a literal seven-day creation and the gap theory. A final exchange, which took place in the pages of the *Truth Seeker*, a magazine for freethinkers, matched D. J. Whitney, a follower of George McCready Price and the major force behind the creationist Religion and Science Association, with Edwin Tenney Brewster, representing the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism.

3. *The Antievolutionist Works of Arthur I. Brown*. Edited by RONALD L. NUMBERS. \$55.00 if purchased separately.

This volume reprints six antievolutionist tracts of the 1920s by a Vancouver physician much honored by fundamentalists and coveted as a faculty member by Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois. Most notable of these documents is probably *Evolution and the Blood-Precipitation Test* (1925); the others are more derivative and tend to be popularizations of other books (including those by Price) or responses to various defenses of evolution.

4. *The Antievolutionist Pamphlets of William Bell Riley*. Edited by WILLIAM VANCE TROLLINGER, JR. \$55.00 if purchased separately.

Baptist Riley from Minneapolis–St. Paul, Minnesota, was probably the most important of the fundamentalists and the major force behind the World's Christian Fundamentals Association, which engaged Bryan for the Scopes trial and gradually shifted its focus from battling theological “modernism” to routing evolution from the public schools. This volume is edited by a professor at Messiah College (Grantham, Pennsylvania), whose dissertation, *God's Empire: William Bell Riley and Midwestern Fundamentalism* (1990), is the best study of Riley to date. The nine pamphlets reprinted in this volume reveal Riley's increasing tendency to blame evolution for World War I, Bolshevism, anarchy, and Hitler (though Riley had earlier defended Hitler). If I had edited this volume, I would have included Riley's pamphlet *Daniel vs. Darwinism* (no date, but probably during World War I). I will suggest its significance momentarily.

5. *The Creationist Writings of Byron C. Nelson*. Edited by PAUL NELSON. \$100.00 if purchased separately.

This volume reprints four books by a Lutheran disciple of Price who joined him in the founding of the creationist Religion and Science Association: *“After Its Kind”: The First and Last Word on Evolution* (1927)—originally a Princeton Seminary Th.M. thesis; *The Deluge Story in Stone: A History of the Flood Theory of Geology* (1931)—claiming Philo, Tertullian, Chrysostom, Augustine, and especially Luther as precursors; *Before Abraham: Prehistoric Man in Biblical Light* (1948); and *A Catechism on Evolution* (1937). All four were originally published by Augsburg, the Lutheran publishing house in Minneapolis. This volume is apparently edited, if I read the footnotes correctly, by a grandson of Nelson who is associated with Toronto's Pascal Centre for Advanced Studies in Science and Faith. This strand of Lutheran creationism is perhaps not surprising in light of a 1929 survey cited by Numbers that suggests that of seven hundred Protestant pastors polled, 89 percent of Lutherans took the first chapter of Genesis literally—Baptists came in second at 63 percent (Numbers 1992, 45). I longed for a more precise analysis of Nelson's theological background (he crops up in meetings at Moody church in Chicago, for example), but editor Nelson attributes his grandfather's antievolutionism to a doctrine of “biblical infallibility” and even more to the conviction that Jesus seemed to have accepted the creation account

literally. I would like to know if the elder Nelson was influenced by such fundamentalist currents as dispensationalism, but there is no hint of this in his grandson's introduction.

6. *The Antievolutionist Pamphlets of Harry Rimmer*. Edited by EDWARD B. DAVIS. \$84.00 if purchased separately.

Harry Rimmer was the most prominent antievolutionist fundamentalist between the world wars. This volume, introduced by Edward Davis of Messiah College, reprints sixteen pamphlets (apparently all he wrote on this theme) given as lectures around the country by this popular itinerant speaker. A Presbyterian pastor, he was fundamentalistic and baptistic in style. These tracts were later gathered into books that were extremely influential about the time of World War II and to a large extent represent the negative baseline against which the progressive "evangelical" scientists of the 1940s "neo-evangelicalism" reacted. Davis distinguishes Rimmer from later scientific creationists by his commitment to a gap theory of the Scofield Bible and a local rather than a universal flood.

7. *Selected Works of George McCready Price*. Edited by RONALD L. NUMBERS. \$75.00 if purchased separately.

Somewhat out of chronological order is the centerpiece of this series: three works by Seventh-Day Adventist George McCready Price, for Numbers the real founder of modern creationism. Price's college text on geology was probably judged too long for this project. Instead, we have his early maverick manifesto *Illogical Geology* (originally published by the Modern Heretic Company in 1906), his very widely read *Q.E.D.; or, New Light on the Doctrine of Creation* (published by Revell, the publisher associated with evangelist D. L. Moody, in 1917), and *The Phantom of Organic Evolution* (also published by Revell, in 1924, at the height of the antievolutionist thrust of fundamentalism). In these pieces, Price reveals his own self-understanding as providing the "scientific basis" of the "fundamentalist" attack on "modernism." Numbers also reprints an esoteric pamphlet from the intra-Adventist controversies, as Price's Adventist protégés began to move out from under his positions and quit using his text. Price characterized their positions as *Theories of Satanic Origin* (1946 or 1947).

8. *The Early Writings of Harold W. Clark and Frank Lewis Marsh*. Edited by RONALD L. NUMBERS. \$93.00 if purchased separately.

Two of Price's students were among the first of the creationists to get advanced scientific degrees. Harold W. Clark is represented by *Back to Creationism* (1929) and *The New Diluvianism* (1946), and Frank Lewis Marsh by *Fundamental Biology* (1941). From Price's viewpoint, both students began to deviate from Price's position by accepting certain forms of evolution—at least within species—and finding the reigning stratification of the fossils by mainstream geologists more convincing than Price.

9. *Early Creationist Journals*. Edited by RONALD L. NUMBERS. \$100.00 if purchased separately.

This volume reprints very difficult to obtain early creationist journals dominated by Price: the mimeographed *The Creationist* (1937–38) of the Religion and Science Association; *The Bulletin of Deluge Geology and Related Sciences* (1941–42)—continued as *The Bulletin of Creation, the Deluge and Related Science* (1943–45); and *The Forum for the Correlation of Science and the Bible* (1946–48).

10. *Creation and Evolution in the Early American Scientific Affiliation*. Edited by MARK A. KALTHOFF. \$83.00 if purchased separately.

This volume reprints forty-eight documents from publications and materials associated with the American Scientific Affiliation, which was founded in 1941 at Moody Bible Institute. Its purpose was to continue, implicitly at least, the antievolutionist crusade of fundamentalism, but increasingly it got caught up in the revisionism of the emerging neo-evangelicalism of the 1940s and became the arena in which many evangelical scientists began to rethink their attitude toward evolution to move in the direction of a form of “theistic evolution.” The documents include articles from the *Journal* of the ASA, chapters from books, papers from conferences, pamphlets, and even correspondence.

The result is a useful collection of materials related to creationism, though probably more detailed than most would require. But, as they say of the Sunday *New York Times*, it’s nice to know it’s all there in case you need it. Combined with *The Creationists* as a narrative history and a few key books of the modern scientific creationism of the 1960s, perhaps *The Genesis Flood* by John C. Whitcomb and Henry M. Morris (1961) and *A History of Modern Creationism* by Henry M. Morris (1984), this set would provide a relatively comprehensive library for research on creationism in the last century.

One is reluctant to second-guess Numbers, who knows this material extremely well. I know from editing other series for Garland the difficulty of making the choices involved. I would like to have seen some other documents mentioned in *The Creationists*—and could have done with samplings of Rimmer and Riley rather than a whole book devoted to each. But this is a minor quibble.

My major concern with the series and the associated history by Numbers is that both fail to answer a lingering question—and both fail to exploit the theological significance of the point made by Numbers about the decisive influence of Adventism in the emergence of the modern form of scientific creationism. The lingering question is, Why the burst of antievolutionism in the 1920s, more than sixty years after the key publication of Darwin? Does it take more than two generations for scientific theories to trickle down to the general populace? Various answers have been given to this question. Evolution became increasingly more naturalistic in the nineteenth century and thus more difficult to reconcile with any doctrine of creation. The extension of “evolutionary” thinking into Social Darwinism increasingly raised ethical and moral questions that troubled some. Numbers even suggests that the Scopes trial occurred when it did because

of the rapid expansion of high schools and the proliferation of science teachers and texts that brought the issues to the general populace. I find all these answers not fully adequate.

The question is sharpened by recent studies of the interaction of Darwinism with Protestantism in the late nineteenth century. Conditioned by his seminary training in American fundamentalism (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School), James Moore was prepared to accept the common assumption that there was “warfare” between science and religion in the late nineteenth century. While preparing his doctoral research, published as *The Post-Darwinian Controversies* (1979), he was surprised to discover the ease with which the “orthodox” tradition had assimilated Darwinism before the turn of the century. A similar point is made by David N. Livingstone in *Darwin’s Forgotten Defenders* (1987), a historical tract against emerging creationist institutes around the world. Livingstone argues that earlier generations of evangelicals had been much more receptive to Darwin.

I have become increasingly convinced that a missing clue is suggested but not exploited by Numbers when he indicates that the founders of modern creationism were Adventists. What he fails to make clear is the extent to which most of the authors he includes in the Garland series were advocates of “dispensational premillennialism,” a related form of eschatology. Adventism is “historicist” and correlates Biblical prophecies with current events and thus predicts the return of Christ (as did William Miller of Adventism). Dispensationalism is “futurist” in orientation and looks for an imminent but unpredictable return. But both forms of premillennialism challenged the reigning forms of postmillennialism dominating nineteenth-century Protestantism. Both used apocalyptic texts of the Bible (especially the books of Daniel and the Revelation or the Apocalypse) as hermeneutical keys for interpreting the Christian vision. Apocalyptic thinking emphasizes cataclysm, divine intervention, and discontinuity in history to produce a “hyper-supernaturalism” that disrupts the synergistic views of divine/human interaction more characteristic of post-millennialism. In the apocalyptic vision, divine activity exists apart from and usually in opposition to human action. There is a historiographical debate over the extent to which fundamentalism may be identified with dispensationalism.

Ernest Sandeen argued in *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800–1930* (1970) that fundamentalism could not be understood just as a form of “conservatism” or “orthodoxy” but should be understood theologically as the rise of “dispensationalism” in the nineteenth century, especially in America. This theology was articulated in a series of “prophecy conferences” that began after the Civil War with an increasing crescendo at the turn of the century. It was popularized early in this century by means of the rise of the Bible School movement and the notes provided in the very popular Scofield Bible. Most mainstream and neo-evangelical students of fundamentalism have not favored Sandeen’s proposal, but “continuing fundamentalists” have increasingly lionized his work. I think that the continuing fundamentalists have the better case and that Sandeen’s suggestion has been undervalued, especially with regard to its *theological* explanatory value.

The point is that postmillennialism implicitly carries ideas of progress, and as it was increasingly secularized in the late nineteenth century, it may have helped produce the “eschatology” of that progressive era. Dispensationalism, on the other hand, sees decline and degeneration as the fundamental motif. It is easy to see how an orthodox postmillennialism could more easily assimilate Darwinism than dispensationalism. The latter was a populist movement, while postmillennialism was more comfortable in the universities and established churches. And the rise of dispensationalism rather clearly correlates with the rise of populist antievolutionist sentiments.

This suggestion may not explain everything, but it does seem to help more than other explanations. The historical evidence is striking. Sandeen describes the evolution of the prophecy conferences into the World’s Christian Fundamentals Association that engaged Bryan for the Scopes trial and suggests that “fundamentalist” was the new name for “premillennialist.” Some sources make the issue quite clear, especially Riley’s pamphlet *Daniel vs. Darwinism*, which for some reason, as indicated above, was not included in this series. The issue is especially clear in the modern creationist literature. John Whitcomb teaches at the seminary of the Grace Brethren—the dispensationalist wing of the Brethren movement (the German “Church of the Brethren” rather than the dispensationalist British “Plymouth Brethren”). *The Genesis Flood*, which he co-authored with Henry M. Morris (1961), explicitly argues that one must choose between the “biblical” view of “decline” or the “evolutionary” doctrine of progress—and that the Second Law of Thermodynamics took effect only with the Fall of humankind in the Garden of Eden.

Though Numbers makes little or nothing of the point, both his narrative history and the documents would seem to provide the evidence that this issue is much more important than he suggests. The two volumes of Adventist materials are by definition in this line. Fundamentalist Baptist William B. Riley was an ardent dispensationalist. Harry Rimmer, after his conversion, retreated to the woods with his (dispensationalist) Scofield Reference Bible for an extended period of study (Numbers 1976, 61). Numbers comments as well that Arthur I. Brown “assiduously sought to decipher biblical prophecies that seemed to foretell the imminent return of Christ” (p. 58). The use of the word *imminent* here should indicate dispensationalism—as well as Brown’s popularity at Moody. All the antievolutionist debaters in volume 2, with the probable exception of William Jennings Bryan, are either Adventists or dispensationalists. The early creationist journals were Adventist dominated, and the early members of the ASA were surely predominantly dispensationalists, given their identification with fundamentalism and the Moody Bible Institute. I am not sure about the prefundamentalist antievolutionists of the first volume (Patterson probably fits my pattern)—but then I would not expect them to be dispensationalist because the point of their inclusion in this series is precisely to show that the pre-World War II antievolutionists do not fit the later pattern. The only possible exception is Lutheran Byron Nelson. I am inclined to think he was probably not a dispensationalist (Lutherans are less likely to be so than, say, Baptists—though Joseph Seiss, one of the most influential dispensationalists, was a Lutheran)—though I wonder about Nelson’s

speaking at Moody Church. Deciding whether he fits the rule or is the exception that proves the rule would require further research.

This point illustrates the extent to which our unexamined assumptions often determine the results of our research. If we assume that antievolutionism is a form of conservatism resisting the liberal “acids of modernity,” we are likely to conclude from our research that it is. Unless we are conditioned to look, we may never realize the extent to which other issues—like eschatology—may be determinative.

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