

Creationism

Creationism, broadly understood, includes the whole range of (usually conservative) Christian attempts to reconcile nature and the Bible on origins. In a narrower sense it means a specific subset B the view that God created the world just a few thousand years ago. As the broader use includes the narrower, we discuss both. For the theology related to origins, see *Creation*.

1. Historical background
2. The fundamentalist-modernist controversy
3. Basic models to reconcile nature with Scripture
 - a. Young-earth creation
 - b. Old-earth creation
 - c. Theistic evolution
4. The intelligent design movement

1. Historical Background.

Traditional Christian interpretation of the biblical account in Genesis by such theologians as Ambrose (339-97), Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), Martin Luther (1483-1546), and John Calvin (1509-64) saw the cosmos as created in a literal week only a few thousand years ago. Though a few had speculated with Augustine (354-430) that the creation may have been instantaneous and the week just God=s way of explaining this to humans, no one had seen any need for a more ancient creation nor a longer time-span for this to happen.

But in the late 1700s systematic study of the geologic record by Abraham Gottlob Werner (1749-1817), William Smith (1769-1839) and James Hutton (1726-97) began raising problems for this traditional view. By the 1840s most geologists had concluded the earth was far older than a few thousand years, and a number of Christian thinkers had proposed models for interpreting the Genesis account along these lines. Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847) and William Buckland (1784-1856) proposed what came to be called the Gap or Restitution theory. Here the earth and universe are very old (as evidenced by geology), but the biblical creation account narrates a recent restoration of the earth and the recreation of life following a great catastrophe which had desolated the planet. As modified by George H. Pember (1837-1910), this view came to be widely disseminated in the older editions of the *Scofield Reference Bible*. It was probably the dominant view among evangelicals until the 1960s.

Another old-earth model was the Day-Age theory. Here the biblical account and the geologic record refer to the same events, but the days of Genesis are long periods rather than 24 hours. A number of geologists, including James Dwight Dana (1813-95), J. William Dawson (1820-99) and Hugh Miller (1802-56) came to advocate this view, along with numerous theologians such as Franz Delitzsch (1813-90), John Peter Lange (1802-84), Charles Hodge (1797-1878) and Alexander Maclaren (1826-1910).

Others, however, resisted these moves as unnecessary accommodations to scientific speculation and abandonment of the plain teaching of the Bible. Theologians Robert L. Dabney (1820-98), Presbyterian, and Francis Pieper (1852-1931), Lutheran, are representative of this response.

Meanwhile, by the early 1800s, philosopher David Hume (1711-76) had convinced many that

miracles were incredible, that enlightened people should seek to understand nature and history without them. In his *Origin of Species* (1859), Charles Darwin (1809-82) presented a theory to eliminate miracles from biological origins. His proposal produced a storm of controversy which has continued to this day. But by the end of the 19th century, most biologists accepted some form of evolution, though many had reservations about Darwin's particular mechanism. Darwin thus added another factor to the origins debate: What parts did God, miracle, and evolution have to play in all this? A number of evangelical Christians sought to harmonize evolution with the Genesis account, producing models invoking both evolution and God. Early proponents of such theistic evolution included botanist Asa Gray (1810-88), geologist James Dwight Dana (1813-95), theologian-geologist George Frederick Wright (1838-1921), and theologian Augustus Hopkins Strong (1836-1921).

2. The Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy.

The impact of Hume and Darwin widened the rift between conservatives and liberals in Christendom, leading to the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy of the 20th century. This struggle pitted Modernists, who sought to reshape Christianity along non-miraculous lines, against Fundamentalists, who believed that God really had done such miracles as narrated in the Bible. In response to liberal teachings, conservatives issued a series of pamphlets entitled *The Fundamentals* (1910-15), which were sent to every pastor in the US. One of the teachings to which the series reacted was Darwinism. Yet the main threat seen here was clearly atheistic forms of evolution, as two of the four authors responding to Darwinism were the theistic evolutionists James Orr (1844-1913) and G. Frederick Wright. From about 1890 to 1940 the mainline denominations in the US were the battleground between the two camps. But by the outbreak of World War 2, most of these denominations had come under the control of the Modernists.

The famous Scopes Trial of 1925 was one battle in this war, but it was fought in the public square rather than in the churches, for the fight concerned how biology should be taught in the public schools. Though the trial resulted in a technical victory for the conservatives, its long-term effect was to establish a Darwinian monopoly on teaching biology in public education.

The Fundamentalists retired to lick their wounds, but proceeded to found a number of organizations concerned with science and Scripture on origins. Several groups lasted for a few years, but the two which have survived to the present are the American Scientific Affiliation (ASA) founded in 1941, and the Creation Research Society (CRS) founded in 1963. The ASA had a broadly evangelical statement of faith and included proponents of all the basic models noted below. But by the early 1960s, its leadership had come to be dominated by theistic evolutionists, so a number of young-earth creationists withdrew to form the CRS. Other current organizations which promote one of the basic models include the Institute for Creation Research, the Bible-Science Association (both young-earth), the Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, and Reasons to Believe (both old-earth).

3. Basic models to reconcile nature with Scripture.

The major views by which evangelicals and fundamentalists have sought to relate the biblical data to that of modern science can be classified in various ways, but a threefold division (with considerable variety within each) is the most common: (1) young-earth creation, (2) old-earth

creation, and (3) theistic evolution.

a. Young-earth creation.

Sometimes called recent creation, creation science, or scientific creationism, this view proposes that the universe and all its contents were created a few thousand years ago (suggestions range from six to twenty thousand years). Everything was created in the span of six consecutive 24-hour days, the simplest reading of the Genesis account. The geologic strata and the fossils found in them are not a history of millions of years, but the result of a worldwide flood at the time of Noah which destroyed all animal life not on the Ark. Proponents of this view differ on what part of the current diversity among animals was originally created vs. what has developed since the flood. An important early proponent of the idea that the flood could explain the geological strata was George McCready Price (1870-1963). Henry M. Morris (1918-) and John C. Whitcomb (1924-) popularized this approach in *The Genesis Flood* (1961), and within a decade it had nearly replaced the Gap Restitution theory as the preferred evangelical view on origins. Other recent proponents of this view include Stephen A. Austin, Thomas Barnes, Leonard Brand, Wayne Frair, Robert Gentry, Duane Gish, Ken Ham, Russell Humphreys, Paul Nelson, and Barry Setterfield.

b. Old-earth creation.

Sometimes called progressive creation, this view accepts the standard dating provided by geology for the earth and its strata, and by astronomy for the universe, so that the cosmos is seen as some 15 billion years old, the earth perhaps 4.5 billion, with the earliest living things appearing as soon as the earth has cooled enough to support life, perhaps 3.8 billion years ago. Proponents disagree on how to understand the days of Genesis (whether ages, days separated by long gaps, days on which the account was revealed to Moses, or a literary device with no chronological significance). Old-earth creationists differ from theistic evolutionists (below) in denying that the scientific evidence favors macroevolution B the gradual development of all life=s diversity from a single primordial creature, feeling instead that God has intervened in some way or other at various times in history to provide new life forms that would otherwise never have arisen. Small-scale evolution (microevolution) of varieties within the created kinds is typically affirmed. Old-earth creationists agree that Adam and Eve are special creations of God rather than natural developments from the apes, but disagree considerably on how far back in the past humans were created. Recent proponents of this view include Gleason L. Archer, James Montgomery Boice, Norman L. Geisler, Alan Hayward, Russell W. Maatman, Robert C. Newman, Pattle P. T. Pun, Hugh Ross, John L. Wiester, and Daniel E. Wonderly.

c. Theistic evolution.

One proponent calls this view Afully-gifted creation.@ Like old-earth creation, this view accepts the standard scientific dating for the universe, the earth, the various geologic strata and the fossils within them. Unlike old-earth creation, theistic evolutionists believe that macroevolution (gradual, natural change to produce all the variety of living things) has actually occurred, but that this was not a random, mindless, unguided process as many secular evolutionists (such as Stephen Jay Gould, Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett) believe. Instead God guided the process by means of his providential oversight of all that happens. Theistic evolutionists disagree whether creation involved any miraculous intervention besides the origin of the universe, but a number put such intervention at the creation of life and of humans,

while others see the origin of life and the development of humans from the apes as divinely guided natural processes. Proponents of this view include Henri Blocher, Richard H. Bube, Michael Denton, Keith B. Miller, George L. Murphy, John Polkinghorne, Howard J. Van Till, and David L. Wilcox.

4. The Intelligent Design Movement

A recent development in the controversy over origins has come to be labeled the intelligent design movement. Following a resurgence of conservative Christianity beginning in the 1960s, a culture war has been heating up between materialists and theists. Materialists believe that reality is basically matter-energy and impersonal forces, with minds being only a late development in the history of the universe. Theists believe that behind physical reality is a Mind which has designed and produced all that we see.

In 1982 and 1985, a pair of court decisions in Arkansas and Louisiana struck down new laws in those states which permitted teaching of creation alongside evolution in public schools. The US Supreme Court concurred in 1987. Yet a number of observers felt that these decisions were flawed. (1) A narrow definition of creation was used in the decisions which made creation a religious view while evolution was not; and (2) a narrow definition of science was used which ruled out in advance any evidence that might point to agency from beyond nature.

Meanwhile, evidence had been accumulating that our universe and the life within it looks strangely designed. As early as 1913 Lawrence J. Henderson's book *The Fitness of the Environment* noted many unusual features of chemistry that were just right for life to exist. By the 1950s, physicists had noticed a number of unusual relationships between the basic constants of nature. This picture has sharpened since then as many striking examples of fine-tuning have been discovered in cosmology, physics, chemistry and biology, summarized in such books as Paul Davies' *Accidental Universe* (1982), John Barrow and Frank Tipler's *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle* (1986), Hugh Ross' *The Creator and the Cosmos* (1993) and Michael Denton's *Nature's Destiny* (1998). To many these features point to a Mind behind the universe. To others, they merely indicate that intelligent life will only exist in those universes where everything is just right, so there must be a lot more universes where everything is not all right and consequently there is no life.

In biology, Darwin's theory has long been thought to have explained away apparent design. It is merely the result of natural selection rather than the work of a Designer. But Michael Denton's *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis* (1986) and Michael Behe's *Darwin's Black Box* (1996) drew attention to numerous features in living things that suggest they could not have arisen by chance. Materialists have responded that perhaps nature itself has (impersonal) forces that produce the kind of order needed.

Berkeley law professor Phillip E. Johnson has been a prime mover in the intelligent design movement, beginning with his book *Darwin on Trial* (1991), followed up with additional books and extensive speaking and writing. Mathematician-philosopher William A. Dembski has provided a rigorous account of how to distinguish design from randomness or law-bound behavior in his book *The Design Inference* (1998). A sketch of this approach may be seen in Dembski (1998, 1999) in the bibliography following.

How everything came to be is one of the most basic and debated questions we can ask. Evangelicals and fundamentalists contend that both the Bible and nature indicate the universe is created and God is its creator. When this occurred and how it happened are disputed. That the universe has not always been, and that the universe and life are strikingly designed, continues to look more and more certain as scientists probe to the edges of the universe and to the depths of cells, molecules and elementary particles.

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