

THE CREATIONISTS: FROM SCIENTIFIC CREATIONISM TO INTELLIGENT DESIGN. By Ronald L. Numbers. 2^d ed. Harvard University Press 2005. Pp. 624. Paper. \$21.95. ISBN: 0-674-02339-0.

This book is a revised edition of what has become a contemporary classic. The first edition was published in 1993 and became a well-regarded piece of scholarship on the history of the Creationist movement in the United States. It was praised by both critics and supporters of Creationism as well as a number of serious Christians and non-Christians who hold views somewhere in between atheistic evolution and Creation-Science. Not only was the first edition highly successful as a meticulous piece of scholarship, its readability was second to none. It is often rightfully held up as an example of what a historian dealing with a controversial topic can accomplish if he offers a fair-minded portrayal of the cast of characters and the issues that animated them. In this revised edition, Numbers adds two chapters. With the exception of some minor changes, the rest of the book remains identical to the first edition.

In 1859, Charles Darwin published his *On the Origin of Species*, a book that offered an account of the complexity and apparent design of the world's diverse life forms that relied on a purely natural mechanism that did not require an appeal to a divine agent. Darwin argued for two points that are central to his case. First, all life forms—whether human beings, butterflies, or amoebas—share a common ancestor; that is, they are the result of a single-cell organism that came to be at some point in the distant past. This is called *common descent*. Second, because there is a wide range of life forms that arose from this one cell, Darwin offered the theory of *natural selection* to account for this. According to this theory, all life forms, in their struggle for survival, gradually through small incremental changes develop new characteristics that are in turn passed on to their progeny. Consequently, over eons of time, different species—with different body plans, characteristics, and a wide range of complexities—develop as a result of the sorts of attributes that are needed for their survival in their particular regions of the globe and for the sorts of challenges they face in striving for survival. In the early to mid-twentieth century, Darwin's views were merged with the growing knowledge of genetics. This is called the “neo-Darwinian synthesis.”

Numbers takes the reader on a fascinating and well-informed voyage through the history of responses to Darwin's groundbreaking theory. What will surprise some readers is the wide range of views embraced by a variety of Christian thinkers who took seriously the challenge that Darwin's theory posed to their interpretation of Scripture and the role of God in the origin of species. The focus of Numbers's work is the rise of what today is called "Scientific Creationism" or "Creation-Science," the point of view that holds that the first twelve chapters of Genesis are to be taken as scientifically accurate. This view includes the special creation of all life forms including human beings, an earth no more than ten thousand years old, and a universal flood in which Noah's Ark safely floated. Numbers introduces us to a variety of personalities, associations, and institutions that have been in the forefront of the Creationist movement. The narrative is nothing short of fascinating, for Numbers presents his subjects as complicated, intelligent, and committed to their cause. To be sure, some are short on character, but most are devoted citizens who truly care about the common good.

Although they were initially victorious in the 1925 Scopes Trial, in which a law forbidding the teaching of evolution in Tennessee public schools was eventually upheld by the state supreme court, the Creationists' attempts to shape public education have not fared well in the courts over the past forty years. Numbers, of course, takes note of this. But he reminds his readers that a vast majority of Americans, and sizeable majorities and pluralities in other nations, embrace some form of Creationism. So, despite legal setbacks, Creationists have done well in the court of public opinion.

Although there are two new chapters in this edition, in this review I want to focus on Chapter Seventeen, which concerns the rise of Intelligent Design (ID). (The other new Chapter, Eighteen, deals with the global scope of anti-evolutionism). Numbers is careful to show that ID is not the same as Creationism, although the two points of view, Numbers notes, do share common allies, common foes, and an overlapping history. Nevertheless, for the ID advocate, the most important thing to do is to show the failure of philosophical materialism as a worldview. This may or may not involve a full-orbed critique of Darwinism. In fact, some ID advocates, including Lehigh University biochemist Michael Behe, believe in common descent, which is Creationist Kryptonite. On the other hand, Paul Nelson (a PhD in the philosophy of biology from the University of Chicago), is a young-earth creationist (YEC). Yet, Nelson makes a distinction between what he

believes theologically and which of those theological beliefs he can legitimately defend scientifically and/or philosophically by means of natural reason. So, when Nelson is defending ID, he is not defending YEC. For Nelson, and others like him, ID is consistent with and lends support to YEC, but it does not rule out the falsity of YEC. For if it did, then Behe, a type of theistic evolutionist, and Nelson, a young-earth creationist, could not be “on the same ID team,” so to speak. These subtle, though important, distinctions are sometimes lost on critics of ID, who often confuse an argument offered by an ID advocate with the ID advocate who offers the argument. Ironically, this mistake is likely the consequence of a wider Protestant culture that separates faith and reason in a way that influences ID critics to think of all theological (or theologically-friendly) claims as arising exclusively from a believer’s private interpretation of the Bible rather than in tandem and symbiotically with natural theology and/or philosophical reflection. It is not surprising, therefore, that Judge John E. Jones, a devout Lutheran, in his opinion in *Kitzmiller v. Dover*¹ should make this particular mistake the centerpiece of his judgment.

In this same chapter, Numbers tells the story of the immensely gifted William A. Dembski, an ID advocate who holds PhDs in mathematics (U. of Chicago) and philosophy (U. of Illinois, Chicago) and has published an academic monograph with Cambridge University Press, *The Design Inference*,² an extended argument on how one might go about detecting design. (384-386) Because this story concerns my home institution, Baylor University, I feel obligated to offer clarity to Numbers’s largely accurate account.

In 1999 Dembski was hired by Baylor’s then-president, Robert B. Sloan, to direct a center on religion and science that would be housed in the university’s Institute for Faith & Learning. Calling it the Michael Polanyi Center (MPC), Dembski’s hiring and center—which had initially gone unnoticed on campus—drew the negative attention of science faculty in early 2000 when links to the MPC were found on Creationist web sites.

In order to address concerns raised by MPC critics on the Baylor faculty, the administration put together a review committee consisting of mostly outside scholars of impeccable credentials in areas of scholarship relevant to assessing Dembski’s project. Numbers writes:

1. *Kitzmiller v. Dover* 400 F. Supp. 2d 707, 718-729 (M.D. Pa. 2005).

2. William A. Dembski, *The Design Inference: Eliminating Chance through Small Probabilities* (Cambridge U. Press 1998).

Although the committee recommended against continuing the center, it found no reason to quarantine advocates of intelligent design. Dembski initially praised the committee for making “the triumph of intelligent design as a legitimate form of academic inquiry,” but the president soon relieved Dembski of his position as director and ultimately closed the center. (385-386)

This is not quite right.

The committee’s final report (October 17, 2000) in fact recommended support for the center (albeit with an expanded focus) and concluded that Dembski’s scholarship is a legitimate area of academic inquiry. However, it recommended that the name “Michael Polanyi” be removed from the center. In response to the report, Dembski issued a press release (October 17, 2000) in which he praised the administration and the committee. He also made this statement:

Dogmatic opponents of design who demanded the Center be shut down have met their Waterloo. Baylor University is to be commended for remaining strong in the face of intolerant assaults on freedom of thought and expression.

Instead of offering an olive branch and conciliatory tone at the moment of victory, Dembski angered many faculty members and embarrassed his benefactors and supporters at Baylor. Nevertheless, the administration gave Dembski a chance to extricate himself from his imprudent epistle. He was asked to offer a public apology. He refused. It was at that point that the university dismissed Dembski as MPC director. In short, Dembski snatched defeat out of the jaws of victory.

Legal scholars interested in religious establishment, public education, and science will find that there is no better published history of Creationism and anti-evolutionism than this revised version of Numbers’s 1993 classic.

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