



Ronald L. Numbers. *Darwinism Comes to America.* Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1998. iii + 288 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), \$18.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-674-19311-6.



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Readers looking for the origins of contemporary Christian (Protestant) creationism will find Numbers' *Darwinism Comes to America* of particular interest; however, those seeking information about Darwinian evolutionary theory would best look elsewhere. The Darwinism referred to in the title is the impact that Darwin's theory had on "...discrediting the dogma of separate creation" (p. 22). Thus, the purpose of this book is to trace the history of creation ideas in the U.S. since Darwin and the debates surrounding the development of the dominant Christian (Protestant) belief about the origins of the earth.

Darwinism Comes to America opens with a succinct survey of political debates surrounding creationism in the 1990s, followed by an historical overview of the development of the current concepts and the, until now, unwritten history of their development. Only since 1960 have literal beliefs about creation in Genesis been dominant, prior to that other theories of creation, some in harmony with Darwin, competed within the Christian community. The two most important theories were the day-age theory, a belief that the

days in scripture refer to ages of time rather than twenty-four hour days, and the gap theory, which suggested that the Genesis account of the origins of the earth ignored a gap of possibly millions of years between the creation of the earth and mankind. Each of these theories allows for evolution and illuminates how Christians sought harmony between scientific and scriptural accounts of the origin of man.

Numbers recounts how literal creationism supplanted the day age and gap theories, and does so in some refreshing revisions to our understanding of the events of the Scopes trial, the ideas of Fundamentalists, and even the character of the American South. He traces literal creationism to the Seventh Day Adventists, whose core theology rested on a six-day creation. Numbers pinpoints Adventist George McCready Price as the source of the contemporary creation belief that fossils are the result of the Noahadic flood. Price's work received scant attention from mainstream Protestants until 1961 when John Whitcomb Jr. and Henry M. Morris revitalized and popularized this theory in their book the *Genesis Flood*. Since

then, growing numbers of Christians have been raised on literal biblical interpretations of creation.

Overall, the method is solid, consisting of material drawn from published material and dissertations, but somewhat stolid, lacking the flair of recent monographs in intellectual history that draw upon cultural theory. There is little socio-economic or even political depth to this book. In fact, *Darwinism Comes to America* is written as a traditional intellectual history à la Arthur O. Lovejoy, and Numbers eschews attempts to go beyond the history of ideas. For instance, while discussing the rise of anti-evolutionism across the United States and the world since 1980, he says, "Whatever the reasons for the efflorescence of antievolutionism in the late 20th century, the prodigious popularity of scientific creationism certainly relate more to theological than social impulses" (p. 6). Here the weakness of the isolated history of ideas is apparent, and one wonders if we should not place anti-evolutionism in the wider context of a postmodern suspiciousness on the part of Americans to organizations and to science in general. Numbers does include a prosopographic study, furnished as an appendix, of naturalists within the National Academy of Sciences, 1863-1900. Here he strays into psychohistory, influenced by the birth-order work of historian of science Frank Sulloway, suggesting that birth order may have played a role in NAS members' acceptance or rejection of Darwin's theory.

The title is also misleading. *Darwinism Comes to America* brings to mind the history of biology, but librarians will shelve this book with texts on the history of religion. In addition the title promises too much by referring to America: the reader of this book will find Protestant thought represented but scant attention paid to non-Protestant sources for creation ideas. Overall, the organization of the book is somewhat haphazard. At times, it reads almost as if unpublished material from

his previous work on Creationism had been pulled together for this book.

Still, this slim volume is useful for those interested in contemporary Protestant thought on creationism, and it's brief enough to be adopted as a supplemental text in a course on American intellectual history, religious history or the social history of American science.

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