

Creationism in the colonies: science, religion and the legacy of apartheid in South Africa

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Introduction

Calvinism is often portrayed as being science-friendly and several authors have claimed that Western science benefited by its positive attitudes towards higher learning and research. That may be true of Europe, but in South Africa the Reformed churches, especially the Dutch Reformed Church, evolved such a peculiar mix of attitudes towards science that it ultimately led to the denigration of science and injustice to biology education in schools and at certain centres of higher learning.

With the democratisation of South African society in 1994 biology curricula in state schools, for the first time in the history of the country, came to accurately reflect the state of scientific knowledge in, especially, the biological sciences. In effect it meant that organic evolution, including the evolution of humans, became an integral part of biology curricula at school level.

The immediate result was a spate of anti-evolution pronouncements in the media, in hastily written books and ill prepared talks. The question why certain sectors of the population, irrespective of socio-economic affiliations, find some areas of science acceptable, whilst other established areas (e.g. organic evolution) are scorned remains intriguing. The common denominator amongst anti-evolutionists often appears to be their association with some form of fundamentalist religious belief. In South Africa the main players in the long-standing campaign against evolution have been a wide spectrum of fundamentalist Protestants, more often than not clergy of the dominant Dutch Reformed Church (DRC).

This paper is an initial attempt to clarify the origin and politico-historical development of current creationist attitudes in South Africa and trace the possible reasons for excluding the process of evolution from school handbooks.

Historical background

The search for a meaningful explanation of the origin of life and the descent of humans is an important part of our earthly existence. Believers across the world are generally convinced that the particular deity they worship created everything, including humans. Unbelievers, on the other hand, have no interest in religious convictions and many of them regard the earthly presence of humans as the result of millions of years of evolution totally devoid of supernatural intervention.

A large group of people, however, acknowledges the existence of a deity, who is the focal point of their religious activities, but is also aware that science has revealed particular truths about the natural world and the origin of humans. Broadly speaking their viewpoint is that God created the cosmos through a process of evolution. From a Christian perspective this means that the Bible, and especially Genesis 1-11, cannot be regarded as historically accurate.

Within the framework of, especially, Protestant religion there are also those who regard the Bible *in toto* as the unfailing, factually correct Word of God. Everything written in it is accepted as literally true and not an iota may be changed or read differently from what appears on the page. This view equates the Bible with a science handbook and all scientific findings are subjugated to what are conceived of

as biblical truths. In the modern idiom such individuals are usually described as evangelicals, fundamentalists or creationists.

Evangelicals consist of loosely associated groups of conservative Christians which, according to Marsden (1991), comprise a variety of fundamentalists. It is a movement, especially in British and North American Protestantism, which insists that the Bible is the only authority on religion.

In Christendom fundamentalists are usually associated with literal interpretation of the Bible. They take their name from a series of booklets, *The fundamentals*, published at the beginning of the 20th century by conservative Protestants in the USA, in an attempt to stem the tide of modernism in the Reformed churches. More recently the term has acquired a broader significance in that it is often applied to any militant traditionalist religion, hence the term 'Islamic fundamentalism'. In this paper the word 'fundamentalism' refers only to those Christians who are opposed to liberal theology and changes in culture and morality.

Believers that regard the universe and all it contains as the work of a creator can by rights be called creationists. However, in the modern idiom the expression has acquired a far narrower meaning. Currently it applies only to those believers who insist on an absolutely literal interpretation of the Bible. In their view the earth is at most 10 000 years old, the biblical flood covered the entire planet and all living animals are descendants of those that found sanctuary in the ark. Noah's three sons and their wives then become the forebears of all the six and a half billion people that currently inhabit the earth. Believers claiming that such convictions can be scientifically proven with the aid of biblical texts often describe themselves with the oxymoron, 'scientific creationists'.

Despite the fact that creationists are at odds with mainstream Reformed theology, they have a significant influence on Protestants across the world. In the United States, where church and state are separate, they have evolved into militant, politically conservative pressure groups. They adamantly insist on the factual contents of the King James I translation of the Bible and total negation of the process of evolution. These convictions are reflected in their ongoing campaign to integrate their religion with the biology curriculum in American schools.

In South Africa, where the state and the Afrikaans Reformed churches were sleeping partners for many years, the situation was the exact opposite. Under the prevailing system of Christian National Education evolution was banned from school curricula. To all intents and purposes it was done specifically because the process of evolution underlines affinities between all life forms, especially when it came to humans.

Genesis 1-11 is not a correct representation of the origin and development of the universe. Creationists, however, are clearly blind to the use of metaphor in the Bible and are unwilling to acknowledge the beauty of allegorical tales. As a natural scientist I am worried that their naive misjudgement of scientific findings is still propagated at schools and universities, where it is purveyed as the only truth. It is manifestly dangerous to our continued existence to be ignorant about the origin of the universe, its evolution and our position in it.

After the political turn-about in 1994 school curricula in South Africa underwent drastic changes. One of the positive aspects was that the foundation of biology, namely evolution, was, for the first time in the history of the country, incorporated into the biology curriculum in state sponsored schools. Scientifically this was a particularly welcome change, but it was not well received by all, as many religious groups blithely ignore the findings of science if, according to their judgment, these contradict their particular interpretation of the Bible. Parents with such convictions may decide to enrol their children at alternative schools or educate them at home. In either case it may contribute to further unwanted division in educational and religious matters.

Modern or neo-creationism as a political and social phenomenon is a feature of the second half of the 20th century in the USA. Although creationism has a long history in the United States, it has been especially active in that part of the world over the past forty odd years and it is from this region that most creationist speakers and media (tracts, magazines, books, videos and television programmes) emanate. Creationism in North America dates back to the early 17th century, when the first Europeans from England and Holland settled on the east coast of that continent.

In North America creationism eventually developed into a complex mix of religious, social and cultural elements. As in South Africa, it is an offshoot of Protestant fundamentalism. Whilst the development of creationism in North America and South Africa ought not to be directly compared, there are interesting historical parallels between fundamentalist societies on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Because of this link South African Protestants were often willing targets for creationist propaganda from North America from the second half of the 20th century onwards.

Fundamentalism in South Africa

Western civilisation was permanently established on the shores of Southern Africa by commander Jan van Riebeeck in April 1652, the year of the arrival of the Dutch East India Company. The Dutch at the Cape were Puritans and staunch supporters of the Reformation of Martin Luther and John Calvin. In practical terms they were biblical literalists, as were the Puritans deported from England to North America during the 1600s. The arrival of the French Huguenots at the Cape reinforced the Puritan presence, as the Huguenots were Protestants who had fled France to escape Catholic persecution. Direct comparison of the life and times of the American settlers with those at the Cape is unwise, but some broad similarities can be identified.

Both groups settled in a totally foreign environment inhabited by a unique indigenous population. The North American deportees could not return to England, whereas the Dutch settlers could theoretically relocate to their homeland. Both groups survived in difficult circumstances in the interior of their respective countries and were involved in major wars threatening the very fibre of their culture. In both cases the aspirations of the fundamentalists came to nought.

It was only after the British occupation of the Cape that those inhabitants that were to become an important sector of the future Afrikaner nation decided to join the Great Trek, a migration comprising about ten percent of whites in the Cape Colony and twenty percent of those in the eastern districts, with the intention of settling as far away as possible from any British influence.

Setting off into the hostile interior in ox wagons demonstrated a particular mindset with regard to freedom and self-determination. These *Voortrekkers* had virtually no reading matter except the Bible and there was no time for deep philosophical or theological discussions. The time and place demanded a practical religion, largely based on the straightforward pronouncements in the Old Testament. Comparisons between the relationship of the biblical Israelites with their God and that of the *Voortrekkers* came easily and would have been an obvious ploy to sustain morale and a sense of purpose and to guide these travellers in tough day-to-day life in the wilds, punctuated by periodic hostilities by and against the indigenous population.

Even the eventual establishment of the two republics of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal did not secure permanent freedom from Britain, as the discovery of gold precipitated the Anglo-Boer war, a watershed in Afrikaner history.

Actions that contributed to a very real hatred of the British were the establishment of concentration camps to accommodate Afrikaner women and children forcibly removed from their farms, and the wilful destruction of buildings and domestic cattle. The high mortality rate amongst women and particularly children in the camps left permanent emotional scars in many instances.

There was even criticism from the British side. Dr Henry Becker, a British physician, commented on conditions in the concentration camps as follows. "First they chose an ill-suited site for the camp. Then they supplied so little water that people could neither wash themselves nor their clothes. Furthermore they made no provision for sufficient waste removal. And lastly they did not provide enough toilets for the overpopulation they had crammed into the camps."

David Lloyd George, the British statesman, commented thus on the Anglo-Boer war: "The fatality rate of our soldiers on the battlefield, who were exposed to all the risks of war, was 52 per thousand per year, while the fatalities of women and children in the camps were 450 per thousand per year. We have no right to put women and children in such a position." Many Afrikaners perceived these events as a clear indication that the women, and especially the children, were being systematically exterminated.

In the aftermath of the war Afrikaners were subjected to the full implications of the scorched earth policy. With their farms destroyed they had no option but to relocate to towns and cities, with the result that urban populations expanded considerably. Ill equipped and unqualified for commercial enterprise, landowners by force of circumstance became labourers to keep body and soul together. Ultimately Afrikaners in the cities were held together by faith and determination. The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 further consolidated their national identity, as they were now required to join a recent enemy in a war against a recent ally. This in turn contributed to total cultural warfare aimed at establishing Afrikaans as an official language in government, churches and schools. The demands included the implementation of a system of Christian National Education.

The First World War and the influenza epidemic of 1918 greatly exacerbated the problem of unemployment. According to Deist (1994) the social and political problems of the Afrikaner were so dire that at that time 'academic' theology was considered a luxury. The need was for a practical religion to provide assurance and hope without questioning the Bible as the basis of the belief system.

A practical theology based on a literal reading of the Bible and applied to society at large in the form of prescriptive pronouncements appears to have been the norm in the historical development of the Afrikaner. A case in point is the discussion of the evils of dancing in the *Handboek by die katkisasie* (Handbook for catechism) by G.B.A. Gerdener (1927), which reads as follows. "And then the Dance! Twin sister of Drunkenness, ally of Darkness and Death! One thing is certain: it is no coincidence that the words, *Dobbel* (gambling), Drunkenness and Dance begin with the same letter as Darkness, Death and Devil." [Our translation.] One cannot but wonder whether anybody took the trouble to point out to Dr Gerdener that the words '*Dominee*' (Reverend), 'Dogma' and 'Deacon' also start with the letter D.

Such a naïve and superficial approach to matters of ostensibly theological importance, proclaimed by a respected theologian of the time bewilders the modern reader and often results in total rejection of the theology of that period. It does, however, have a weird logic if read as an aspect of a larger mission, dedicated to the survival of the Afrikaner against all odds by preserving, promoting and eventually attaining a specific political and religious goal. This appears to have been the fusion of state and church in a single functional unit, thereby claiming a divinely ordained political ethnicity and mission for Calvinist Afrikanerdom. Deist (1994) correctly points out that ideological frameworks were embedded in the larger socio-historical problems. The mindset underlying this mission appears to have been similar to that of the later National Party, where the idea of a total onslaught on Afrikaner ideals was useful for maintaining coherence and fuelling the drive towards the ultimate political goal.

At that time the infamous witch hunt perpetrated on Prof. Johannes du Plessis of the Theological Seminary at Stellenbosch for daring to suggest that the creation story in Genesis might not be a factual report was in full swing and testifies to the fact that the fundamentalist view sanctioned by religious leaders of the time was an all-

inclusive, prescriptive worldview with a particular goal in mind. The eventual dismissal of Du Plessis, his victory over the church in the Supreme Court, his reinstatement and his death shortly afterwards have been well documented by, amongst others, Gerdener (1943) and are now common knowledge.

During the Second World War the political aspirations of the Afrikaner were being forged with a religious paradigm in mind, evidenced by the speeches of P.J. Meyer, later to become chairman of the Board of Control of the South African Broadcasting Corporation, as quoted in De Klerk (1975; our translation).

To Afrikanerdom belong only those who by virtue of blood, soil, culture, tradition, belief, calling form an organic unitary society.

This nation (Volk) is by nature organically vested with authority (gesagskleding) with the patriarchal leader as its chief wielder of authority, and with the members of the nation as active and cooperative workers.

The future Afrikaner national state is therefore the political embodiment and ordering of the whole of Afrikanerdom as an organic articulation of authority, and in this sense also a medium for Afrikanerdom to protect and promote its own vocational fulfilment (roepingsvervulling).

The Afrikaner national movement as vehicle of the future national state of the Afrikaners is thus at the same time a people's institution by means of which a natural national leadership will be formed, the inwardly directed organic interaction of the nation can be assured and individual members of the nation (volkslede) can be disciplined by constructive service to the nation (volksdiens) as an organic whole.

In the future Afrikaner national state (volkstaat) the undivided power granted by God rests with the Afrikaner state authority. This undivided state power is limited in its exercise by the sovereignty in one's own sphere (soewereiniteit in eie kring) ordained by God in his original creation; in organic human entities such as the church, the individual, the family, and the nation. Furthermore, power shall only be exercised in accordance with the principles of law contained in the Word of God, and the natural legal ordinations (regsgegewenhede) as consistently revealed in history

Thus the positive and God-given rights of the individual, the family, the nation, and the church are protected and promoted by the Afrikaner nation in the sense of mutual duties to society which may not be shirked.

The future national Afrikaner state will be a leadership state, an authoritative state, and a corporative state.

At the start of the Second World War Oswald Pirow, a prominent figure in political circles, was strongly influenced by the ideal of National Socialism. The belief at the time that Germany would win the war prompted Pirow (1940) to publish his ideas on a new social order for South Africa in a strongly worded political tract entitled *Nuwe Orde vir Suid-Afrika* (New Order for South Africa); in September 1940 he founded a New Order Group (*Nuwe Orde Groep*) within the HNP (*Herenigde Nasionale Party*). Strong criticism from the party leadership caused Pirow to go his own way, forsaking parliamentary politics and eventually, according to Grobler (2007), disappearing into the political wilderness. The HNP eventually evolved into the NP or National Party, which was to be the political voice of the Afrikaner for the next forty odd years.

With hindsight the rejection of the social reforms suggested by Pirow seems only natural, as his stance was outspokenly anti-Semitic and anti-British. Instead of a democratically constituted government he visualised a Christian National Socialist Republic, in which there was ostensibly room for other groups but which favoured white Afrikaners and the Afrikaans language. Looking back on the policies that were

eventually adopted by the National Party, it almost seems as if Pirow was gifted with foresight of events to come.

Erasmus (1946) pointed out that a local, Afrikaans version of Calvinism had developed in South Africa, which lacked the stamp of imported Calvinism and neither copied the Calvinism found in any other country nor wished to be a mouthpiece for Calvinists overseas:

But if we want to follow our own *Boer* road, [it] is a Calvinism adapted to national differences in aptitude, temperament, national character, history and circumstances. This was what preserved our people in the last century, one the one hand from anglicisation, on the other from hybridisation. [Our translation.]

This view of Calvinism was diametrically opposed to the views of early Protestantism, as evinced in Calvin's response to 16th century astronomers' conclusion that Saturn was larger than the moon, contrary to what was previously accepted. Instead of summarily rejecting the science of his day, Calvin responded that it was all the more reason to praise God. According to Deist (1994) the specific form of Calvinism developed in South Africa was narrow, prescriptive and did not allow for a wider interpretation of the biblical text. Thus religion was tailored to support a political master plan and became colloquially known as *Boere Calvinisme*. In this context the DRC became a *volkskerk* (church of the people) and handmaiden to Afrikaner political aspirations.

Two pivotal publications were those by the University of Pretoria sociologist Geoffrey Cronje (1945, 1947). These two books attempted to define apartheid or separate development in its totality and delved into the minutiae of the proposed future political system, segregating people socially and economically on the basis of the colour of the human skin.

Cronje (1947) included chapters by Dr W. Nicol, then moderator of the DRC, and Prof. Dr E.P. Groenewald of the University of Pretoria, substantiating the system of apartheid on biblical grounds. The perception was that if support for separate development could be found in Holy Writ, there would be no need to pay attention to criticism from abroad. In the event biblical sanction of apartheid boiled down to a few examples like the myth of the tower of Babel. These books were distributed amongst Afrikaners and, according to De Klerk (1975), were intensively discussed in the *Broederbond* (a secret society of Afrikaner males to promote Afrikaner cultural and economic interests).

So strong was the hegemony of this alliance that blatant falsehoods could eventually be blandly stated without fear of contradiction. This led to the infamous quotation from the Reverend J.D. (Koot) Vorster, future moderator of the DRC, in *The Star* newspaper of 21 September 1955, to the effect that "the theory of evolution is in direct conflict with the teaching of the Bible and should not be included in school textbooks".

This startling revelation reinforced the official viewpoint of the DRC in the catechism by Greyling et al., first published in 1950, shortly after the DRC minister and former editor of *Die Burger*, D.F. Malan, of the National Party was elected prime minister, one of the pre-election promises being the removal of the so-called Cape coloureds from the voters' roll.

Up to 1966 this catechism saw seventeen reprints, totalling 200 000 copies. That it reflected the DRC's official position on evolution at the time is patently clear. It was aimed at impressionable young people about to become responsible DRC members, explaining the parameters of the faith and how to conduct themselves within the flock. The text was authored by eight ministers of the church and scrutinised by a further nine individuals, including professors of theology, ordained ministers and one doctor.

Evolution is given short shrift under the main heading of "Sects and fallacies". In this section the process of evolution is incorrectly confused with evolutionism, and fish, birds and insects are, surprisingly, considered separate from animals. Finally it is claimed that evolutionism (sic) considers living beings (plants, fish, birds, insects, animals and humans), through the process of descent, to belong to the same group or family. In the light of the fact-based findings of a large number of scientific disciplines at the time, not the least of which was the discipline of systematics, this cavalier attitude towards factual evidence and the stunning level of scientific ignorance of one of the greatest advances in human understanding, surely attest ulterior motives and hidden agendas.

It also makes the following statements:

- 1 Everything was created, there was no development.
- 2 God's ordinance is fixed, for example the laws of procreation, multiplication and growth of plants, animals and humans. The concept of evolution is thus, quite incorrectly, reduced to development within fixed kinds.
- 3 Everything was created by God according to its kind and is not the result of developmental processes.
- 4 Humans were specially created to reign over God's creation and did not develop from animals. Consequently qualities and institutions peculiar to human existence (intellectual ability, soul, language, religion, morality, marriage and method of creation) represent an unbridgeable divide between humans and animals. Particular attention is paid to the position of Eve. It is stated that she was created perfect by God from a portion of the male. Hence she did not develop from lower animals, neither did she develop from Adam, because he was asleep at the time. (With hindsight it is perhaps time to graciously concede that the examiners of this passage were also asleep at the time.)
- 5 God's work is finished to perfection. There is no place for a concept of development from lower to higher.
- 6 Perhaps the most damning revelation is the conclusion that the concept of evolution is judged to be unscriptural and irreconcilable with the Word of God, because the believer bows his head in child-like fashion and accepts the Word of God as the truth through *faith*, which is *solid proof* of things which are not seen or have not been seen. Evolution therefore has *no basis of proof*. [Italics in the original.]

At the time those words were written there was already ample proof of the process of evolution in nature and that it functioned on a scale that readily explained the relatedness of all life forms and the development of animal and plant life from simple to complex. *Archaeopteryx*, displaying a mixture of reptile and bird characteristics and known from the time of Darwin, was clearly an intermediate form between reptiles and birds.

Even more telling was the work of the German embryologist Reichert, who, during the first half of the 19th century, elegantly demonstrated, with an extensive series of histological sections of recent vertebrates, including humans, that the unique combination of ear ossicles found in mammals derived from the ancestral reptilian jaw articulation. This was followed by the discovery and description of a large number of mammal-like reptile fossils from the Great Karoo in South Africa. The upshot of this development was that in 1912 the German anatomist Ernst Gaupp provided, through his research on mammal-like reptiles, the palaeontological basis for the reptile-mammal link in the evolution of mammalian ear bones. This is now known as the Reichert-Gaupp theory and is quite correctly described by Novacek

(1993) as one of the milestones in the history of comparative biology. In addition, fossil hominids from South Africa, like the famous Taung child, *Australopithecus africanus*, had been known since 1925 and by 1950 additional specimens from Africa and elsewhere were unequivocal evidence of the evolutionary origins of modern humans.

Totally disregarding the available scientific evidence for evolution, the authors of the catechism failed to offer an alternative scientific exposition. This readily invites the conclusion that they had an ulterior motive for denying the relatedness of life forms and especially the fact that all living humans belong to a single species. High school biology textbooks of the time and well into the 1960s underlined this approach in the treatment of vertebrates such as fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals by pointedly omitting underlying evolutionary relationships and, instead, concentrating on those characteristics which ostensibly highlight differences between the various forms.

I experienced the inner workings of the system in the 1970s when the Afrikaans translations of a whole series of hard-cover children's biology books, published by Archon Press, were refused placement in school libraries by the then Cape Provincial Department of Education. Reasons given by the departmental representative was that the books were badly bound, over coloured and that the snippets of text accompanying the illustrations were too long. The South African publisher lost a substantial amount of money and it was only after repeated enquiries that a departmental representative finally admitted that the series was actually turned down because the text was too 'pro-evolution'.

That the policy was effectively pursued over the years is shown by an article in the Dutch Reformed Church's mouthpiece, *Die Kerkbode*, of 27 May 1981, in which Reverend Dr S.J. Eloff, a synodal expert on tuition, admitted that selected professors perused school and university handbooks from time to time in order to ensure that the texts do not include views that support evolutionism. He also added that the church had never argued against evolution if it is understood as development within kinds.

It must be noted, however, that in 1987 the then Western Transvaal synod of the Dutch Reformed Church accepted, with a large majority, the scientific validity of the process of evolution provided it did not deny the existence of God. The decision was forwarded for discussion at the next meeting of the National Synod but was apparently never tabled.

This kind of behaviour partially explains why such information does not reach members of the various congregations via their ministers and may be the reason, according to Moore (1992), why members of the Dutch Reformed Church still employ creationist arguments as if they represent the Reformed viewpoint.

Changes in the South African political landscape after 1994 and the accompanying insecurity in some circles apparently boosted fundamentalist convictions. The establishment of different groups amongst the religious right wing, including Afrikaners, who support a literal interpretation of the Word bears testimony to this. In addition, as early as 1992 O'Neill noted signs of a powerful fundamentalist movement in black churches as well.

The eventual inclusion of evolution, and especially human evolution, in high school biology curricula after 1994 triggered a spate of anti-evolution pronouncements by fundamentalists. This trend is readily apparent at universities where young people are specifically targeted by creationist groups like Shofar at the University of Stellenbosch.

Universities are democratic institutions and cannot deny individuals access on the basis of their religious convictions. Currently nothing prevents creationists from keeping quiet about their religious convictions and obtaining even a PhD in the natural sciences. They can then present themselves as scientific fundi and claim science to be a false view of the natural world, based on their fundamentalist convictions. This was in fact the advice offered to BSc

undergraduates at the University of Stellenbosch on 5 March 2008 by the Australian creationist Don Batten after his talk, "Evolution, a dark age for science and society?" Batten has a PhD in horticulture and is employed by Creation Ministries International (CMI) in Australia. He is also author of the article, "Where are all the people?", in which he claims that our current world population of six and a half billion humans is descended from Noah's sons and daughters-in-law over the past 6000 years.

Another CMI employee, Emil Silvestru, propagated the biblical flood as a worldwide historical event in a talk entitled "Waters of contention" at the same venue on 27 August 2008. Despite his PhD in geology, and an enormous body of research-based evidence to the contrary, Silvestru, the creationist, still insists on the literal truth of the Genesis flood myth.

Currently creationism has been completely refuted scientifically, biblically as well as on legal grounds, the latter as a result of a series of court cases in the USA. Yet creationists in the USA, South Africa and Australia still openly fly in the face of reason. Fry (1983) has outlined the general attitude of the mainstream churches as follows:

In addition to the successful ecumenical challenge of creationism in the Arkansas case, doctrinal statements have been made on the highest ecclesiastical levels during recent years within the Roman Catholic, the Episcopal and the Presbyterian churches. Each of these denominations affirms God's creation of the universe, but on the basis of that affirmation they deny the eccentric interpretations of creation which creation-science seeks to impose ... In rejecting the religious bases of creationism, the General Assembly explicitly cited the theological consensus of Protestant, Roman Catholic and Jewish understanding. Suggesting that the dispute over creation science is not really over biology or faith, but is essentially about biblical interpretation, particularly over two viewpoints regarding the characteristics of biblical literature and the nature of biblical authority, the Resolution proceeded to affirm that the imposition of a literalist viewpoint about the interpretation of biblical literature – where every word is taken with uniform literalness and becomes an absolute authority on all matters, whether moral, religious, political, historical or scientific – is in conflict with the perspective on biblical interpretation characteristically maintained by biblical scholars and biblical schools in the mainstream of Protestantism, Roman Catholicism and Judaism. Such scholars, and we believe, most Presbyterians find that the scientific theory of evolution does not conflict with their interpretation of the origins of life found in the biblical literature.

Conclusion

In South Africa the naive claims of creationists appear to be at least partially associated with strong historical ties to a previous, unjust political dispensation. The fact that it also appeals to young people who had no part in the erstwhile political system is an interesting phenomenon, because it produces and sustains individuals that are ill-equipped to deal rationally with a complex science-driven world. One explanation might be that to embrace the naïve and superficial assurances of the creationist worldview may represent a misguided attempt to escape from the complex realities and insecurities of a postmodern world. Mainstream churches should therefore consider how appropriate their message still is for young people who flock to the quick-fix approach of fundamentalist groups.

In the aftermath of 1994 the DRC finally condemned the system of apartheid and the leadership has noticeably softened its attitude towards science and

especially the process of evolution. These developments should, however, be rationally communicated to members and especially young people. How to do so effectively is as yet unclear, in light of the adverse experiences of ministers who have actually attempted to do so.

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