**Creationism in Europe**

Many people regard creationism as a typical North-American phenomenon. Indeed, polls over the last three decades have invariably shown that creationism is immensely popular in the United States. Between forty and fifty percent of the American population endorses the belief that God created the Earth and life on it more or less as it is today. The rest accepts the fact of evolution, but the large majority believes that God has guided the process. Only ten to fifteen percent accepts the scientific, naturalistic account of evolution. If we compare these numbers with the few figures that we have on Europe, it becomes immediately clear how exceptional the American situation really is. In some North- and West European countries, such as Iceland, Denmark and France, the acceptance rate of human evolution is higher than seventy, sometimes even eighty percent. In Eastern European countries, the acceptance rate is much lower, but still at least ten percent higher than in the United States (Miller, Scott, and Okamoto 2006). The only exception is Turkey, where no more than thirty percent accepts evolution. Furthermore, American creationists actively battle the (exclusive) teaching of evolution in public schools, politically, in the courtroom and in school boards, which has made them highly visible in the media. Hence, it seems only reasonable to associate creationism with the United States.

Nonetheless, recent research in the historical and sociological sciences indicates that creationism is spreading across the globe. Historian Ronald Numbers has documented creationist activities from Australia to Canada, from Brazil to Korea (Numbers 2006, 2009). Incidents in various European countries have suggested that creationism was gaining a following on this continent as well. As a result, an increasing number of European scholars developed an interest in the phenomenon and sometimes published on creationist activities in the country where they resided. However, most of this research was scattered across various magazines and scientific journals. Two Danish researchers, Hans Henrik Hjermitslev and Peter C. Kjærgaard, and I thought it would be a good idea to bundle everything we know about the recent history of creationism in Europe to get a good understanding of what exactly is going on in Europe. We joint forces with Ronald Numbers and invited experts from various countries to contribute. These efforts resulted in a recently published edited volume with the Johns Hopkins University Press: *Creationism in Europe* (Blancke, Hjermitslev, and Kjærgaard 2014). The book contains ten chapters discussing the situation in different countries or regions, and four topical chapters. This article gives you a taste of the content.

**What is this thing called creationism?**

It might be useful to start with an indication of what we mean by creationism. People tend to associate it exclusively with young-earth creationism, the belief that God created the Earth six to ten thousand years ago as told in the Book of Genesis. However, this is only one type of creationism, which has become the dominant view among American creationists only since the 1960s. However, there is also old-earth creationism, which reconciles the fact that the earth is millions of years old with the Biblical account of creationism. The most recent creationist variety is Intelligent Design (ID), a movement that purports not to be connected to a particular interpretation of the Biblical creation story. It merely claims that the world clearly bears the marks of an intelligent designer, without explicating the exact identity of that designer. The strategy is to circumvent the First Amendment to the US Constitution that states: “congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion”. By avoiding signs of explicitly religious commitments, ID proponents aim at introducing their beliefs in biology classes as a viable alternative to evolutionary theory. At the same time, ID is also intended to function as “a big tent” where creationists can put their theological disputes about the age of the earth aside because they all believe that an intelligent being created life on earth.

Phillip Johnson, professor-emeritus of Law at the University of California and godfather to the ID movement, wants to expand the tent even further. He defines a creationist as someone who believes that God creates. If by magic, he makes every religious person a creationist, and atheism becomes the only alternative. Many people would resist such a depiction of their religious beliefs. Moreover, in order to understand the phenomenon of creationism, Johnson’s definition is far too broad. It would be quite a stretch to put a deist, who believes that God created the universe but has not actively intervened since, or a theistic evolutionist, who accepts the scientific account of the evolution on the same footing as a fundamentalist who endorses a literal interpretation of the Bible. However, because it comes in various shapes and sizes, creationism is not very easy to define. Pragmatically, however, each variety of creationism shares two features. Firstly, a creationist believes that God (or an intelligent designer) actively and directly intervenes in the world and that we can find traces of these divine activities in nature. Biological adaptations such as the human eye are typical examples. For creationists, these instances of functional complexity constitute irrefutable evidence of the existence of a divine intelligence. In other words, this is the old design argument. Secondly, creationism is characterized by anti-evolutionism. Creationists oppose evolution because they believe it has terrible consequences for man and society and they want to defend the traditional norms and values, which they believe are divinely ordained. Practically, this entails that women should stay at home and take care of the family, no LGBT rights, no abortion or euthanasia, and so forth. Creationism is much more than a religion. It is a socio-political movement that strives for the return to a Utopia before the Enlightenment humanism in which God took central stage at all levels of society. Indeed, the creationist movement emerged from American Protestant fundamentalism that gained ground in the 1920s as a response to the Great War, which was regarded as an example of the devastating consequences of humanism.

These two features together, the design argument and antievolutionism, form a work definition that is precise enough to allow us to discriminate between conservative and liberal religious people. It is also broad enough that we do not have to associate creationism with a particular interpretation of the Bible, and not even with a particular religion. Hence, we can speak not only of Christian, but also of Muslim, Orthodox, and even Vedic creationism. As we will see shortly, this definition is very useful if one wants to study and understand creationism in Europe.

**Creationism in Europe**

In the course of the first decade of the twentieth century it became undeniably clear that creationism in Europe was becoming an issue. Particularly telling and alarming were the incidents involving ministers of Education. In 2004 the Italian minister intended to delete any reference to evolutionary theory from the textbooks for primary and secondary education. One year later in 2005 the Serbian Minister of Education had to resign after she had decided that teachers were no longer allowed to teach evolution without also discussing creationism. In the same year, the Romanian Ministry of Education allowed teachers in Christian and public schools to use a creationist handbook in biology classes. In 2006 the Minister of Education of the German state of Hessen, sided with evangelical schools that taught creationism. The same year the ultra-Catholic Polish deputy Minister of Education openly questioned evolutionary theory, which he considered to be “a lie” and “the feeble idea of an aged non-believer.” (Kjærgaard 2008) In both Ukraine and Russia the Ministry of Education has supported creationist conferences. And in the Netherlands the Minister of Education declared that ID could perhaps be used in the classroom to bridge science and religion. Because of the political and media upheaval her statement caused, she had to put these plans to rest (Blancke 2010, Blancke et al. 2013).

Support also comes from official religious instances. In 2007 a fifteen-year old girl from Saint Petersburg and her parents filed a complaint to the court because they felt that the teaching of evolution had violated the girl’s religious rights. Both the Russian Ministry of Education and the Russian Orthodox Church supported her case because they welcomed the teaching of alternative ideas. After the fall of the Soviet Union, a large and influential conservative fraction within the Russian Orthodox Church has sought to extent its impact on Russian society. Opposing evolutionary theory, which is often associated with atheist communism, is an important part of their strategy. In the Greek Orthodox Church, a conservative fraction has strived for the deletion of evolutionary theory from textbooks, which explains why the theory hardly receives any attention in Greek education.

However, the involvement of state and religion is nowhere as large as in Turkey where creationism is simply in the textbooks. This situation is partly the result of active missionary work by American young-earth creationists during the 1960s and 70s, when they were looking for the remains of Noah’s ark on mount Ararat. It is therefore unsurprising that Turkey is home to group around one of the most active and influential creationists in Europe, Harun Yahya, which is the *nom de plume* for indoor architect Adnan Oktar. In 2007 the organization sent numerous unsolicited copies of the *Atlas of Creation* to schools, universities, clergymen, and journalists in countries such as Denmark, France, Switzerland, Spain and Belgium. This lavishly published and monstrous book contains only one argument. By putting pictures of extant species next to similar looking fossils, it intends to show that evolution has never taken place. Naturally, this event drew massive attention of the media, and thus made Europeans aware of the existence of Islamic creationism. However, Harun Yahya does not only spread his message via books, but also, and probably more importantly, via the Internet. Through his websites he reaches the Muslim youngsters who live in European cities and are looking for an Islamic identity within a secular society, where they do not always feel at home. They make an appreciative audience for Harun Yahya’s antievolutionary rhetoric. As a result, biology teachers are frequently confronted with students that protest, make a fuss or simply leave the classroom when evolutionary theory is taught.

The activities of Harun Yahya were one of the incentives for the Council of Europe (not to be confused with the European Council, which is one of the main political bodies in the European Union) to issue a resolution in 2007 that warned against the dangers of creationism for education and society at large. The report that was drafted in preparation of the resolution also tallies several other creationist incidents that had occurred in various European countries the years before. Some of them we already mentioned above, but for instance, the report also refers to a creationist museum in Sweden and an incident in the UK where a school had rented out classrooms to the organizers of a creationist conference with American speakers. Later a newspaper revealed that the students at this partly state-funded school were taught creationism. The school denied the accusations, but it quickly became clear that the director and the head of science were both young-earth creationists who were in favor of equal time (to teach as much creationism as evolutionary theory). After the report, creationists have not sit still. Also in the UK, an organization called *Truth in Science* dispatched unsolicited DVDs to secondary schools to promote ID. Later, a study showed that after watching this material, teachers were more inclined to doubt evolutionary theory. ID has also put its foot firmly on Scottish soil by founding the *Centre for Intelligent Design* in 2010.

In the Netherlands, in 2009 a group of Dutch creationists had a leaflet distributed through the mail to every Dutch household, with the title: *Evolution or creation? What do you believe?* The action was intended as a counter voice to the many celebrities in the public sphere on the occasion of the Darwin year. One of the organizers, entrepreneur Johan Huibers, has built an ark as a traveling museum to spread the word of God. On a debating show on Dutch national television in 2008, he was asked whether there were dinosaurs on the ark, to which he replied: “Only the little ones”. One year later, some of these creationists established a “scientific” creationist magazine, *Weet Magazine*, which looks just like a popular science magazine such as *Scientific American*. They also published Dutch translations of German creationist books, including the sixth edition of *Evolution. Ein kritisches Lerhbuch* (Evolution. A critical textbook). The authors of this book are Reinhard Junker, a theologian and former biology teacher, and Siegfried Scherer, a microbiologist at the Technical University of Munich. The book has been translated into several European languages, including Serbian, Portuguese, Italian and Russian. Both authors are member of the *Studiengemeinschaft Wort und Wissen* (Study Community Word and Knowledge), a small but very active German creationist organization. with ties to the American ID movement. In 1999, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) referred to the works by Scherer and Junker to substantiate his doubts about macroevolution. Hence, it seems that they have managed to turn a typical brand of American creationism into a European version that is digestible and usable for religious conservatives who do not want to be associated with American creationism.

Clearly, creationism in Europe is a complex phenomenon. Not only does the popularity of creationist beliefs differ from one European country to the next, but also there are many different types of creationism. Sometimes Europeans (e.g. evangelicals) simply adopt American-style creationism. Creationism, however, also easily adapts itself to new environments by mixing with local varieties. There are Islamic, Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox and in some places even Jewish and Vedic creationists. In Russia and other former Eastern Bloc countries evolutionary theory is associated with communism, whereas for Muslim creationists the theory is a symbol for Western decadence. Dutch creationists regard evolution as the cause of the undesirable modernizing developments since the 1960s. Hence, local factors determine the form and the success of creationism, which makes it impossible to speak of one European creationism or creationist sub-culture.

**The future?**

Because of this complexity, it is difficult, if not impossible, to predict the overall fate of creationism in Europe. The situation is completely different from the US where creationism is part and parcel of a substantial and politically influential sub-culture. In Western- and Northern Europe, creationism does not seem to stand much chance, except perhaps in small Protestant communities and among Muslim populations in the cities. In Eastern Europe, however, decades of communist regime have resulted in a religious wasteland, where the traditional religious beliefs of conservatives and fundamentalists find a welcoming soil. Creationists seem to have the biggest chance of exerting societal influence when they can align themselves with right-wing parties who share the same moral agenda, as in Poland; or, when they are the dominant fraction within the official church, as in Russia. This means that we cannot drop our guard. When creationism spreads, it does not only pose a threat to science education, but also to the many achievements of modern society.

**Stefaan Blancke** is a philosopher at Ghent University. His interests include pseudoscience and the way it reflects underlying intuitions. He has also published on the history of science, public understanding of science and science education, often from evolutionary and cognitive perspectives.

**References**

Blancke, Stefaan. 2010. "Creationism in the Netherlands." *Zygon. Journal of Religion and Science* 45 (4):791-816. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9744.2010.01134.x.

Blancke, Stefaan, Hans Henrik Hjermitslev, Johan Braeckman, and Peter C. Kjærgaard. 2013. "Creationism in Europe: Facts, Gaps, and Prospects." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81 (4):996-1028. doi: 10.1093/jaarel/lft034.

Blancke, Stefaan, Hans Henrik Hjermitslev, and Peter C. Kjærgaard, eds. 2014. *Creationism in Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Kjærgaard, Peter C. 2008. "Western front." *New Humanist* 123 (3):39-41.

Miller, J. D., E. C. Scott, and S. Okamoto. 2006. "Public acceptance of evolution." *Science* 313 (5788):765-766. doi: 10.1126/science.1126746.

Numbers, Ronald L. 2006. *The creationists. From scientific creationism to Intelligent Design*. Expanded ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Numbers, Ronald L. 2009. "Myth 24. That creationism is a uniquely American phenomenon." In *Galilei goes to jail and other myths about science and religion*, edited by Ronald L. Numbers, 215-223. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.