

Science and Theology

MOLLEURUS COUPERUS

5

Recently the scientific community and a large segment of the public have been confronted again with the pros and cons of evolution and creation. This was occasioned by a controversy that started in 1969 over certain inclusions or omissions in the presentation of explanatory matter on origins in California elementary school science textbooks. The California discussion, which became especially active in 1972, was followed later by similar conflicts in several other states.

A number of the speakers at the meetings of the California State Board of Education, and some of the commentators, compared this controversy to the Scopes trial on evolution in Tennessee in 1925. There was one great difference, however, between the 1972 discussion in Sacramento and the Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee — and this was the presence in California of trained scientists who supported the creationists' position. In the Tennessee trial there were no scientists supporting William Jennings Bryan's defense of creation, whereas Clarence Darrow had several internationally known scientists aiding him in the vindication of evolution. Bryan, of course, was neither a scientist nor a trained theologian, but a politician.

This difference of open public support of creation by several scientists in 1972 no doubt resulted, to a large extent, from the founding after 1925 of a number of organizations of scientists who were also professed Christians. They studied, discussed, and wrote about the conflicts between science and religion, and particularly between evolution and creation. There had been such organizations before the Scopes trial: the Victoria Institute in England (founded in 1872), the Christian Society of Natural Scientists and Physicians in the Netherlands (1902), and the Keplerbund in Germany (1907), which is said to have had some 8,000 members in 1920 and which was dissolved by Hitler in 1941. All of these organizations published journals and (in some cases) books.

Also since 1925, the American Scientific Affiliation was founded (at present it has over 2,200 members); the Inter-Varsity Fellowship, with a special section called the Research Scientists' Christian Fellowship; the Creation Research Society; the Bible-Science Association; and the Creation Science Research Center. The Adventist church joined this movement of inquiry into the science-creation relationship through the establishment of the Geoscience Research Institute (1958). (All these organizations and centers have their own journals or papers, also.) Besides these, a number of smaller societies were formed, most of which are no longer active.

6

Through their regional and annual meetings and their periodicals, these societies encouraged investigations and discussions, and slowly the weaknesses in their own understanding and convictions (as well as in some of the claims of materialistic evolutionists) became evident. With awareness came greater freedom to state their views within the scientific community in regard to creation and evolution. Also, it became clearer that the views of these groups, and of individual members within each group, were far from uniform. This difference in perspective resulted in the formation of the Creation Research Society by former members of the American Scientific Affiliation, because the organizers of the new society insisted on one specific literal interpretation of the scriptural statement of creation.

At the 1972 meeting in Sacramento it became clear that at least one of the factors contributing to the tension between creationists and evolutionists was the failure to have had adequate dialogue earlier. This lack in turn prevented the formulation of a careful definition of the basic issues that separated them and likewise obscured recognition of the great variety of viewpoints present in each group, especially among the creationists. It is interesting that some of the evolutionists who contributed to the discussion before the Board of Education claimed to believe in some form of creation. In this connection it is worth noting that in 1951 Walter H. Belda said in the *Quarterly Review of Biology* (26:40):

It might be maintained that biology should be taught without religious implications. However, to assume the activity of a Creator is no more out of place in a textbook of biology than to defend a mechanistic interpretation of the origin of life, since biology as such offers evidence neither for nor against creation.

One may enthusiastically agree with Belda and still differ with him on his last statement — as I do, believing that the living world and the universe do indeed offer evidence for the existence of a Creator.

What should be the position of an Adventist scientist in such discussion? To some it may seem somewhat surprising that the answers by Adventist scientists will not always be the same — since besides being scientists, they are also indi-

vidual personalities with individual opinions, understandings, and beliefs, not to mention prejudices. I presume that the same could be said of Adventist theologians. The statements I will make, therefore, are my own and partake of the above limitations.

First, and perhaps self-evident, the scientist who is a Christian must know as clearly as he can the reasons for the beliefs he holds on creation, and he should have a thorough grasp, as well, of today's theory of evolution if he is going to participate in the current dialogue.

Second, he should ask himself regarding any point of controversy, "Is this point really valid? If it is, is it also important?" This self-questioning applies to details of the evolutionist's position as well as to the creationist's position. It is surprising how a problem sometimes loses much of its significance when one asks the question, "So what?"

7

Third, the Adventist scientist, as much as anyone, and perhaps even more, must bring all kinds of evidence to bear on any problem he deals with, both in his theology and in science. Here one's concept of truth is basic. If I believe that truth is consistent with all other truth, then I must test my view of a detail of creation theory by all available facts and lines of evidence. If these do not harmonize with my beliefs, then further study and research are needed. If after more investigation my position still proves incompatible with other evidence, then I must have the fortitude to modify it, no matter how much I may have cherished that position. Doing this is not easy for most individuals. Usually it takes considerable time, especially if one has held a particular view for many years before it becomes evident that the view lacks validity.

Truth is never debased or threatened by being compared or checked with other truths. If it is really valid, it is only made clearer and stronger. The history of the Christian church (as well as the history of science) shows how often we have held on tenaciously to beliefs even when the accumulating evidence against them was clear. Such manifest bias has been described by Andrew White as resulting in a state of warfare between science and theology. For many Christians it is uncomfortable to admit that this warfare has developed. It is even more difficult to realize that the war is still going on — and that we may be involved in it personally unless we are willing to check our beliefs against the totality of evidence.

Truth has nothing to fear from close investigation and comparison, be it a church dogma, a personal belief, or a scientific hypothesis or theory that is involved. Such self-criticism has certainly taken place among the proponents of evolution ever since the days of Darwin. There has also been a continual discussion and evaluation of the doctrines of creation within the Christian community, including the Adventist church. And is it not one of the hallmarks of being human

and alive, created in the image of God, that one thinks and weighs evidence, as Augustine has pointed out so beautifully in his *Confessions*?

It seems to me particularly important, even essential, that in all biblical interpretation and Christian doctrine we recognize and accept as basic the principle that such interpretation and doctrine must not be incompatible with any facts known by man, and that any kind of evidence, from even the most critical scholarship that might be brought to bear on any position we hold, must be welcome. If one rejects this fundamental right of all areas of human research to be heard with utmost respect on any theological position where their findings are applicable, then such rejection by the theologian or the lay Christian will make further dialogue almost meaningless. Such denial of existing evidence may well aid in the alienation of still more members of the world of scholarship from possible interaction with those who claim inspiration for Scripture, and from receiving the real message of those Scriptures. If biblical interpretation is to become as meaningful as it should, it must be attentive to all the facts available to modern man.

8

When I state that I believe Scripture teaches that our earth may be only six to eight thousand years old, immediately I put that statement in a category where it is exposed to evidence from other disciplines that point to an earth and the life upon it as much older, and I must expect critical reaction to my position by these disciplines. If I believe that my view of the earth's age is indeed correct, I should not be afraid to expose it to other evidence, since truth is holistic, in harmony with all other truth. If I shrink away from this principle, I am denying the unity of truth, of God's creation and its order. The universe then becomes irrational, God stands in jeopardy of being accused of deception, and the very foundation of belief and trust in him begins to disappear.

There are times when the data available on all aspects of a problem are insufficient to make an honest, intelligent choice between what the options appear to be, and I may have to suspend my judgment at that point and say, "I do not know." But I must not let my temporary inability to produce a harmonization of the facts, as I know them, become an excuse so that I avoid making an honest decision when further evidence becomes available. Time and further research may help me solve the problem.

To be able to live comfortably with such a situation and still continue to search for truth, I must be fully convinced that all truth is ultimately in unity, not contradictory in any of its aspects. I am not threatened, then, by new and perhaps unexpected facts, by differences of opinion, or by the appearance of seeming contradictions, since real contradictions do not exist. New facts and valid syntheses will always be welcomed — because they continually enlarge our understanding of the universe in which we live and of the God who made it.

If the harmony of all truth had been accepted as a guiding principle in the discussions between science and religion when the tensions between them began to develop, most of the heat, bitterness, and frustration that resulted would have been avoided. Working together toward the attainment of more and more understanding of all truth, theologians and scientists would have corrected and stimulated each other far more than has been the case generally. From a historical standpoint, I must say that dogmatic theology seems to have been more at fault in preventing this walking together in a common search than has dogmatic science — since by its very nature science has tended to become insatiably inquiring and investigative. Or perhaps the time was not yet ripe for such cooperation and understanding, and man needed more time to grow.

9

But certainly the day has now come for such a working together to obtain as clear a picture as possible of the truth about things as they are and of the God who is. One can hope that those who participate in the discussion of the conflicts that seem to exist between religion and science will base their approach to the problems on the concept of harmony and unity of all truth. If this occurs, it will indeed be a new day in the long warfare between science and theology.