Christopher M. Rios


To be fair, creationists do not call him “The History Guy.” Nevertheless, you would think Bill Nye “The Science Guy,” a leading pundit in the creation/evolution controversies in the USA, would have a better handle on the complexities of creationism. In recent years, Nye has made two egregiously fallacious statements about creationism: that creationism is purely an American phenomenon¹ and that only believers in a young earth count as creationists.² Nye needs to read Christopher Rios’s new book.

In his examination of the American Scientific Affiliation (ASA) in the USA and the Research Scientists’ Christian Fellowship (RSCF) in the UK, Rios explodes both myths. He demonstrates that creationism has always struggled to define itself. The young-earth creationists often get the most attention, but there are plenty of thoughtful creationists who agree with the science of evolution. Similarly, though the United States has tended to produce the biggest headlines in creation/evolution debates, creationism has always been an international phenomenon.

Rios splits his study in two ways. He gives one chapter each to the ASA and the RSCF, and one chapter each to the periods 1940–1965 and 1965–1985.

During the first period, both the ASA and the RSCF worked to define the intellectual boundaries of their creationist visions. In the United States, the ASA became what Rios calls “one of the most appreciated and most abhorred organizations within American evangelicalism” (p. 42). From the outset, the ASA vigorously refused to take a specific position on contentious issues, including the age of the earth. Rather, it hoped to maintain a big-tent evangelical organization dedicated to encouraging Christian participation in science.

As Rios tells the tale, after 1965 this task became much more difficult. The ASA leadership moved to an open embrace of evolutionary science. There need be no battle, leaders insisted, between good science and true religion. Evangelical Christians can agree that God used evolutionary mechanisms in His creation. Predictably, this shift caused adherents of young-earth creationism to split off, forming in the mid-1960s the Creation Research Society. In spite of

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ASA attempts to include all evangelical Christian creationists in its conferences and publications, the relationship soured.

From the beginning, the RSCF had a different goal. In Rios’s words, in the 1940s the RSCF planned “to provide a Christian witness to the scientific community” (p. 73). Unlike the situation in the USA, in the UK and continental Europe evangelical scientists almost always studied and worked in mainstream universities. At least partly as a result, the scientists in the RSCF focused more on issues of theism and methodological naturalism than on internecine debates about the age of the universe.

After 1965, as Rios relates, the RSCF grew more conservative. Its leaders began to feel more pressure from US-style young-earth creationists. At the same time, mainstream British society seemed to move in more secular directions; the message of religious witness seemed to become less relevant to science and society.

With each chapter, Rios captures the subtleties of debate among each group’s leadership as they struggled with a variety of questions. What did it mean to be an evangelical scientist? What issues besides evolution were of central interest to Christian scientists? How did these groups define a uniquely evangelical message about science, and how did they battle to remain part of mainstream scientific discussion?

Rios is not the first to argue that creationism has always had an international context. This book, however, offers a detailed look at the ways those international connections worked. Both the ASA and the RSCF were, themselves, international in membership. Many ASA members came from Canada, and the RSCF always included prominent leaders from the continent, especially from the Netherlands. And the two organizations maintained many connections. In early years, the RSCF functioned as a sort of older brother to the ASA, inviting select ASA leaders to European conferences and publishing in ASA publications. In more recent years, the two groups came to resemble one another more strongly, each holding internal debates that came to be more and more similar as young-earth creationists gained more influence in the UK.

Rios’s careful examination of the ways these connections unfolded in the twentieth century establishes beyond any question the international nature of this sort of scientific evangelicalism. It also demonstrates that creationism is not only restricted to those who reject the modern evolutionary synthesis in toto.

One weakness of the book comes in its middle chapter. In chapter four, Rios connects his chapters about the early and later periods in his study with a short look at the growing political power of young-earth creationism during the 1960s and 1970s. A chapter like this makes sense; it provides needed context for the