

FAIR PLAY?

A REVIEW ARTICLE BY THE GENERAL EDITOR

The Revd Dr Nigel M. de S. Cameron

Creation and Evolution

Derek Burke (ed.)

When Christians Disagree series, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1985, £5.95.

One of the most important lessons evangelical Christians need to learn is how to disagree. When we find ourselves out of sympathy with another point of view we tend to one of two extremes. Either we anathematise those who hold it as heretics; or, since we want still to claim them as brothers, we dig a hole in the ground and carefully bury the subject too deep for further consideration. As to *why* this happens, there are several factors which may be responsible; but it is certainly easier and a good deal less painful than facing up to our differences in the context of our acceptance of one another's faith and sincerity.

So the 'When Christians Disagree' series from the Inter-Varsity Press, edited from what can hardly be called retirement by Dr Oliver Barclay himself, is a most healthy sign. The motto of the series is, we presume, intended to imply that When Christians disagree ... they should sit down together and talk it through. Amen! Whether this is ideally represented by the curious logo which is found three times on the jacket of each volume, and which seems to represent two large dogs chasing each others' tails with two smaller dogs doing the same thing in the middle of them (going round the other way), is another matter. Though this may be a better *de facto* understanding of the way it works.

Of course, the manner in which the talking-through takes place should not be dispassionate. It is because we reject subjectivist notions of truth that we find it hard to tread the line between 'don't-speak-to-them-they're-heretics' and 'it-doesn't-really-matter-let's-not-bring-it-up'. If we lose the passion of our commitment to truth then we have begun to be blighted by one of the worst features of the ecumenical movement. But if we allow that passion to overcome civility and respect we have lost something worse.

The format of the volume is sophisticated, with two introductions; eleven 'opening theses'; eight chapters, each with a response by another writer; and a conclusion. This all takes quite a lot of space (nearly 300 large-format pages), but is intended to allow justice to be done. It should be noted, however, that out of the eight contributors, *only three* would seem to be in the anti-evolution camp; and one is a distinguished though obvious import from the United States. This strange deficiency is partly made good by the fact that one of the three is allowed to write two chapters; and one of the five is responsible for the conclusion, which is offered as a balanced consideration of the foregoing discussion, although

both it and the rather ponderous 'theses' (which are unsigned, and which some contributors are castigated by Dr Barclay for ignoring) were plainly (to this reviewer at least) the work of someone on one side of the fence rather than the other. It is difficult to avoid the impression that there is an inbuilt imbalance in the book. Perhaps, since both editor and series editor were on the one side, this was inevitable. Perhaps, for the same reason, they should have been rather more careful in the way in which they put the project together.

Yet the major difficulty with this book is one of another kind. Who are its writers? '7 prominent Christians debate today's issues', proclaims the cover (one is immediately intrigued to know whether we have here an arithmetical error or if one of the eight - and, if so, which one? - is not considered 'prominent'! Can this be a needless exercise in modesty on the part of the editor or series editor? Their names feature prominently enough on the front cover.) Who are these men? They are scientists, each and every one - including Dr Barclay, who is billed as former General Secretary of UCCF, but whose background in zoology is well-known, and who continues to be secretary of the Research Scientists' Christian Fellowship. Eight *scientists* 'debate today's issues'. Why, one wonders, is that?

Well, perhaps it is because the issues under discussion are simply 'scientific' issues; or, more precisely, because the way in which they are to be tackled is simply a scientific way. Yet neither of these is true, as is evidenced by the substantial index of Biblical references which is helpfully appended to the volume. Writers on both sides of the central issue engage in a great deal of exegetical and theological discussion. Perhaps more important, the discussion is *set up* in such a way as to place strictly scientific questions in a broader and other context. So, the general introduction to the series by Dr Barclay opens its concluding paragraph in these terms:

The arguments, therefore, concern first of all whether the Bible does or does not settle certain questions and, secondly, how far we can go in confident application of those biblical truths that we are given.

Why then do we have a lengthy discussion carried on exclusively by men whose prominence lies in science rather than theology? It is an interesting question.

At one level its answer lies in the character of the creation-evolution debate as it has developed. Like so many others, it has been American-led and therefore American-oriented. As is well-known, the engagement of 'creationists' in the States in public debate has followed the lines of church-state separation that derive from current interpretation of the Constitution, and

that have led to the evolution of that very strange animal, 'scientific creationism', 'creationism' stripped of its Christian theological context. This is all very well as an *ad hominem* exercise, but the idea that the scientific questions can be finally segregated from the theological-biblical ones is sheer fallacy. Indeed it is precisely the fallacy upon which reposes the case for a Christian acceptance of evolution.

There is another factor which may be detected behind the way in which this volume is structured, and that is a refusal to take theology (in which we include exegesis) seriously as a discipline. That is to say, there are many evangelicals (including some who are rather 'prominent') who (often unconsciously) regard these as essentially amateur disciplines. The natural sciences, on the other hand, are for professionals. So while scorn would (rightly) be poured upon theologians who sought to discuss the *scientific*, as opposed to the strictly *theological*, questions arising in this debate, the traffic is one-way. Theology is fair game for the scientist.

Now to say that is not to suggest that the writers of these essays are all guilty of poor theology and exegesis. One or two of them may be, while others show considerable competence. There are theologians who are well able to engage in competent discussion of some of the scientific questions in this debate. The issue is whether they ought to be doing it in print. And it is no new problem. Over the years this particular publisher has given evangelical scientists many opportunities to stray across the borders of science into areas in which they have no professional training and only limited competence.

There is, of course, a specific reason for making this point here. While, as we have indicated, *Creation and Evolution* has been structured with some care to balance one view against another, the most important decision was taken by its editor - and, we may presume, the series editor - before ever the contributors were called in. Whether consciously or not, the question was asked: *how do we decide on the creation-evolution issue?* And the answer was given: *by letting the scientists argue it out.* When this decision is laid alongside the declared intention of the series (quoted above) and the way in which scientists do in fact present their respective cases, we find we must extend the answer to this programmatic question, and it becomes even odder: *by letting the scientists argue it out, and leaving them to deal with any theological or exegetical questions which arise.*

That is exactly the way in which (evangelical) scientists who accept evolution have all along approached the issue, but it is distressing to conclude that this same principle has been allowed to underlie a venture whose stated aim is to present both sides of the case. And the series editor, at least, can hardly claim that the alternative of a volume involving both scientists and theologians (which would have proved a far more productive and original exercise) had never entered his head. Several years ago the present reviewer was involved (in his capacity as the then Chairman of the Biblical Creation Society) in a private conference of evangelicals on both sides of the debate. Dr Barclay was involved too, as Secretary of the RSCF. Each 'side' invited a given number of theologians

and scientists to debate the issue for the day, under the firm and impartial chairmanship of the late Raymond Johnston; and several of the contributors to *Creation and Evolution* were among the scientists who participated. That did seem a much more satisfactory way of dealing with the subject.

The present writer has on various occasions sought to make a very different kind of case against evolution than that which is the focus of theological and exegetical discussion here.¹ The introduction to *Creation and Evolution* suggests that the 'nub of the debate' is 'whether ... large-scale changes have taken place over a period greater than 6,000 years, and whether Genesis 1 excludes or allows that possibility' (p12); and the conclusion lists the interpretation of Genesis 1 as the sole exegetical issue of importance in the debate (p271). These remarks are sad indications of the aridity of so much discussion in this field, and rather suggest that the symbolism of the logo (dogs chasing each other's tails) may be not entirely inapt. The real questions are not unanswerable ones about Genesis 1, they are already answered ones about Genesis 3 and the sin-death-redemption nexus which lies at the heart of our evangelical theology. It is here that theistic evolution meets its Waterloo. Until these issues are adequately and competently addressed, Christians will continue to disagree about *Creation and Evolution*. It is a pity that the publisher and editors of this volume have chosen not to grasp the nettle of the real theological and exegetical issues at stake. Someone else is going to have to do their job over again.

Note

1. For example, *Evolution and the Authority of the Bible*, Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1983; 'Why Evolution must stay on the Agenda', *Evangelicals Now*, September, 1986; 'A Theological Case against Evolution', *Epworth Review*, forthcoming, 1987.

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