

*Missing the Mark:
The Tragedy of the New Evangelical 'Intellectualism'*

The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind

by Mark A Noll,
Eerdmans (USA) Inter-Varsity Press (UK), 1994

Reviewed by Carl Wieland

Before this book came into my hands, I had already seen extracts indicative of its profound hostility towards creationism. I had heard, not without dismay, that it carried endorsements by such as J. I. Packer and, of all people, Francis Schaeffer's protege, Os Guinness.

Reading it certainly confirmed that dismay, but this book cannot be simply dismissed as one more anti-creationist tirade. There is in fact a great deal in it which Christian thinkers need to digest, in spite of its tragically wrongheaded approach to the authority of Scripture.

To call evangelicalism back to its heritage of intellectual rigour, to worshipping God with the 'whole man', heart **and** mind, is certainly commendable as such. The 'scandal' to which Noll refers is that *'there is not much of an evangelical mind'* (in the corporate sense, and not referring to evangelical theology *per se*). As the jacket blurb points out, evangelical protestantism, the largest and most active religious group in America, makes

'only a slight contribution to first-order public discourse in North America: it neither sponsors a single research university, nor supports a single periodical devoted to in-depth interaction with modern culture, nor cultivates attitudes that treat the worlds of science, the arts,

politics, and social analysis with the seriousness that God intends.'

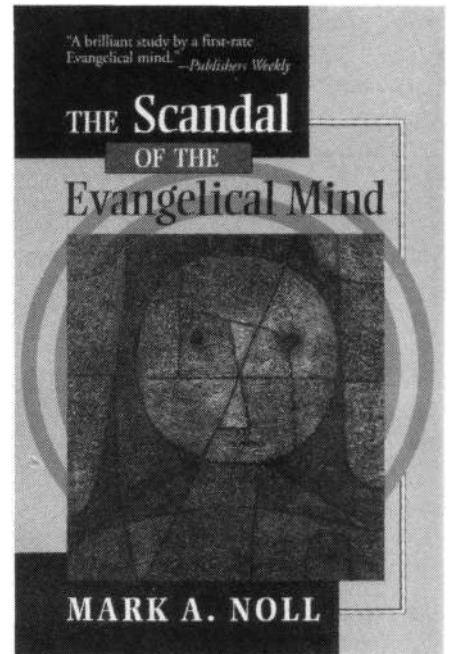
Which of us would not deplore, along with Henry Blamires (as approvingly quoted by Noll on p. 5), the way in which

'Except over a very narrow field of thinking, chiefly touching questions of strictly personal conduct, we Christians in the modern world accept, for the purpose of mental activity, a frame of reference constructed by the secular mind and a set of criteria reflecting secular evaluations.'?

Ironically, reading the book makes it clear that this is the very problem which afflicts Noll and his colleagues.

In spite of his lack of depth in the philosophy of science and epistemology, Noll is clearly a gifted historian and writer. His expert tracing of the historical background to much of modern American evangelical thought is both instructive and enjoyable.

Nevertheless, the book is fatally marred by the author's prejudices in the area of origins and science, an issue he acknowledges as crucial by devoting so much space to it. McManis Professor of Christian Thought at Wheaton College, Noll has dedicated his book to his colleagues at Wheaton, well known for their theistic evolutionist/progressive creationist antipathy to those who take Genesis as meaningful



history.

He spends much more time attacking creationism than he does on his other chief bogeyman, the 'prophecy movement' (for want of a better term).¹ He presents the idea of global Flood and recent Creation in six days as being some sort of quasi-heretical invention this century, traceable to the Adventist writer Ellen White,² but is substantially misleading in this. The modern movement is not an invention of creationism, but its revival. The evangelical flirtation in the latter part of last century with ideas such as local Flood, gap theories, day-age ideas and the like did not have its basis in exegesis. Rather, it arose in an attempt to 'harmonise' Genesis with the increasingly popular ideas of those such as Hutton and Lyell who were advocating a great age for the earth. Prior to that, evangelical commentaries, for hundreds of years, had no difficulty understanding, in agreement with modern creationists, the overwhelmingly obvious meaning of Genesis.

Noll's emotional involvement in the issue often surfaces from beneath a thin veneer of scholarly objectivity. His

assessments are occasionally so far 'over the top' as to border on the bizarre. For example, he claims (p. 14) that creationism rests on a

'fatally flawed interpretive scheme of the sort that no responsible Christian teacher in the history of the church ever endorsed before this century.'

Even his own colleague at Wheaton, biologist Pattle Pun, has admitted that there would be no doubt that the creationists were right about the fact that Genesis obviously teaches a straightforward creation of everything, recently, in six ordinary days, followed by a world flood *'were it not for the hermeneutical considerations of science'*.³

We see here, as in so many of the 'evangelical' books attacking creationism, that discussions of biblical interpretation are really a smokescreen. The real issue is one of authority — the words of God or the praises of men. As Dr Aw Swee Eng (formerly biochemistry professor at Singapore University) said to me recently, the reason why creation science ministries arouse so much hostility from those who have compromised on these crucial, foundational issues in their own thinking is because our very **existence** *'is a rebuke to their compromise'*. So Noll really puts the boot in, in no uncertain terms. Not only are the creationists, in his view, the most visible symptom of the problem, it is clear that he regards them (us) as the main 'scandal' for Christendom. Those who have been influenced by them are described as *'enslaved to the cruder spirits of populist science'* and as *'bereft of self-criticism, intellectual subtlety, or an awareness of complexity'*.

The author of **Scandal** does not grapple with creationist arguments — he treats them with an aloof disdain, as if everyone with a neurone in their skull would know that, by definition, such a position must be wrong. He is happy to acknowledge members of the generally theistic evolutionist American Scientific Affiliation as *'careful Christian thinkers'*⁴ whereas

on the same page (p. 197) the creationists are smeared with prejudicial reference to their alleged *'noisy'* approach.

Anyone involved with our ministry will have experienced some of the immense rage of the evolutionist establishment as expressed in some very savage distortions, even public ad *hominem* attacks based on demonstrated fabrication. It is therefore a very bitter pill that Noll is asking us to swallow when he blames **creationists** for pushing the religion-science issue *'to the brink of warfare'*.

Further, there is the issue of intellectual honesty. Noll says that if the consensus of modern scientists is *'that humans have existed on the planet for a very long time, it is foolish for biblical interpreters to say that "the Bible teaches" the recent creation of human beings.'*

Note the breathtaking arrogance. It doesn't appear to matter what the Bible text actually says — if it disagrees with the majority view of fallen humanity, it cannot be said to be teaching that. A more honest position would be to admit that, if the Bible were to teach something that is completely at odds with actual fact, then it has in effect been falsified. Instead, it seems, we should engage in an emperor's clothes charade, pretending it does not teach what it so clearly does.

One can wholeheartedly concur with Os Guinness⁵ as quoted in the Noll book (p. 23) that

'Evangelicals need to repent of their refusal to think Christianly and develop the mind of Christ.'

That is in fact what our ministry is all about — one can only think Christianly if that is based on biblical foundations. Evangelicalism will only regain its intellectual vigour when it puts its philosophical house in order. First, it needs to withdraw its support *en masse* from the Christian institutions which have sat back complacently and allowed their own faculty members to work at denying the foundations of the Gospel message, by teaching such things as death/bloodshed before sin, no global Flood judgment, etc. Such

institutions have, in effect, been pulling the intellectual teeth from Christianity by setting Christian thought onto pathways which have shown, over and over, to lead only in one direction. Whether in the history of Christian educational institutions, or even whole denominations, the 'cracks' of compromise in the Genesis foundations of doctrine have led to an increasingly liberal understanding of the rest of the Bible, and ultimately, via mysticism, to naturalism.⁶

Those concerned about the absence of Christian intellectualism should actually welcome the modern creationist movement (while not necessarily embracing all of its adherents) for grappling head-on with the most significant intellectual challenges to Christianity. In particular, they should welcome the increasing signs that there is a growing breadth and maturity to the movement, precisely in those areas of science related to the crucial issues of catastrophic geology and the age/dating question.

If that handful of scientists and intellectuals currently engaged in the task of building a sound creation model on solid biblical foundations were to be supported *en masse* by the evangelical community (this in itself would greatly swell their numbers), there could indeed be a basis for a true Christian cultural revival, encompassing all areas of human thought and endeavour. Somehow, I don't think Mark Noll would be pleased.

FOOTNOTES

1. The reader could easily get the (misleading) impression from Noll's book that extreme, sensationalistic premillennialism is somehow inexorably linked to the creation movement.
2. Presumably this particular name is dropped in to foster prejudice in the average evangelical's mind against creationism.
3. Pun, P. T., 1987. **Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation**, March 1987, p. 14.
4. Even vigorous anti-evolutionist Phillip Johnson is granted this label — but then, he is careful not to espouse a literal Genesis, which seems to be the cardinal sin according to Noll.
5. I believe his mentor, the late Francis Schaeffer, would be dismayed at Guinness's endorsement of this book. It's not only that Schaeffer (while

never quite going far enough in an area [science] in which he felt ill-equipped) gave an enormous amount of authority to the book of Genesis in his own writing (for example, **Whatever Happened to the Human Race?**). It is that the people that Noll upholds, directly or indirectly, have an approach to Scripture which Schaeffer recognised as disastrous — people such as Van Till, many of the American Scientific Affiliation, and Wheaton College's theistic evolutionists. Noll's own approach is highlighted on p. 244, where he appears to disparage inerrancy, then just afterwards seems to encourage the very 'retreat to the upper storey' that Schaeffer so frequently wrote against. That is, Scripture is only regarded as true and authoritative for the 'upper storey' — abstract areas, like good works and salvation. Schaeffer recognised that for the Bible to be relevant to the 'religious' areas, it must be accurate and reliable wherever it purports to

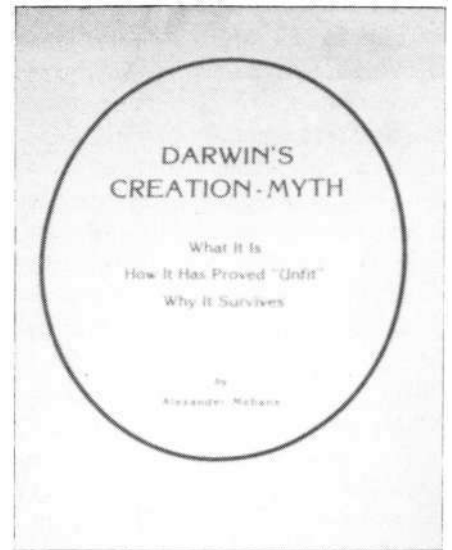
make statements pertaining to 'science, history and the cosmos'. The book is full of ironies. Noll extols the Christian intellectual virtues of the late Princeton divines Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield. However, it was precisely their willingness to accommodate ideas which did havoc to the natural sense of Genesis, and therefore to the entire Creation/Fall/Redemption framework of Christianity, which paved the way for Princeton becoming a bastion of liberalism, naturalism and atheism. Noll is co-editor of **Charles Hodge: What is Darwinism? And Other Writings on Science and Religion** (a compilation of Hodge's relevant works). Hodge clearly recognised that Darwinism was rank atheism. Nevertheless, the recent re-release of Hodge's anti-Darwinist polemic (the next in the series edited by Noll is to be B. B. Warfield's writings on science/religion/evolution) can be seen as

consistent with Noll's whole crusade against literal creationists. Hodge's onslaught was against the Darwinian mechanism. He seemed unconcerned at the way in which evolution's long ages denied the authority of Genesis as history, and postulated death before man, for example. If anything, Hodge was a 'softening up' influence, whose vigorous opposition to 'Darwinism' diverted attention from the extent of his compromise. B. B. Warfield had even less problems with Darwin — he was in a sense the archetypal evangelical theistic evolutionist. With this historical one-two punch, Noll presumably is hoping to demonstrate that if these 'great evangelical theologians' could oppose naturalism, yet not have any problems with the 'obvious facts of science' (such as long geological ages before man, and in Warfield's case, even evolution itself) how can modern-day creationists presume that such positions are not orthodox?

Darwin's Creation-Myth What It Is How It Has Proved "Unfit" Why It Survives

by Alexander Mebane

Reviewed by Michael J. Oard



I was looking through the book supplement from a recent issue of William Corliss's **Science Frontiers** and discovered the book with the above title. As I read the description, I came across the following:

*'But the booklet is not all negative. Mebane reviews some interesting alternatives to Darwinism: and we **don't** mean scientific creationism.'*¹

Naturally, my interest was sparked, and I was curious as to how the author of the book was going to pull off these claims.

The book certainly delivered on the second phrase of the subtitle; much of the first half read like a creationist book. Alexander Mebane rightly notes the following problems with neo-Darwinism:

- (1) natural selection is a tautology;
- (2) experimental evidence fails to

show 'microevolution' leading to macroevolution, as exemplified by the mutational experiments on fruit-flies;

- (3) Darwin's prediction of finding transitional fossils with further exploration has been proved false;
- (4) DNA sequences from a bald cypress '20 million years old' is identical to the living representative, showing no evolution;
- (5) the improbability of much, if any, change to a genome in billions of years;
- (6) the fact that if a 'good' mutation comes along, it has to occur in both a male and female;
- (7) likely 'half-finished' new species are not viable;
- (8) observed absence of transitional fossils;
- (9) the exploded belief in evolution

- from a soupy sea;
- (10) the extreme complexity of life, even at the 'beginning', as shown by the exceedingly complex eyes of the trilobite; and
- (11) the beauty in nature.

With all these (and he could have listed many more) one would think he would consider creation by an intelligent designer. Unfortunately, he does not.

He does examine several paltry alternatives, such as Lamarckism, Fred Hoyle's ideas of life from space (a kind of 'naturalistic theism' as the author puts it), sporadic productions by natural 'aliens', and even the hope for a new natural process. The author concludes:

'It would appear to be impossible