After the Monkey Trial: 
Evangelical Scientists and a New Creationism 
by Christopher M Rios 
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reviewed by Michael Roberts 

One of the major problems in discussing evolution and creationism is the poor understanding among the public of the wider relationship of Christianity and science. With regard to Evangelicals and evolution, the understanding is even worse! Inaccuracies and misconceptions abound. Hence After the Monkey Trial, Christopher M Rios's book on how both British and American Evangelical scientists approached evolution in the era before creationism took center stage among Evangelicals, is most useful. Rios focuses on two groups founded in the 1940s, the American Scientific Affiliation (ASA) and the Research Scientists' Christian Fellowship (RSCF), exploring how they and their members dealt with the broader issues of science as well as evolution, taking the story up to 1985, shortly before the RSCF mutated into Christians in Science (CIS).

When I was asked to review this book, I stressed my unsuitability to write an unbiased review, since I have been involved with both British and American Evangelical discussions of creationism for over four decades. Some of those mentioned in the book have been my mentors; some have been, dare I say, anti-mentors to me. Thus this review is not a dispassionate account by an outside observer of the events, but a reaction by a participant, one who has had an uneasy relationship with Evangelicalism during those decades, and not only over creationism. Rather than a strict review, then, this is a reflection both on Rios's book and my own involvement in Evangelicalism's wrestling with evolution going back to 1968.

Both the ASA and the RSCF started as tiny groups, the ASA in 1941 and the RSCF in 1944. Initially, the ASA was old-earth and non-evolutionary, whereas the RSCF was almost entirely pro-evolution, reflecting the different histories of Evangelicals in the two countries. To put it simplistically, the ASA sought to correlate the Bible with science, and the RSCF/CIS aimed to justify Evangelicalism with an evolutionary perspective. Over time, the two approaches coalesced. Both, too, came to be plagued by creationism.

It is a tricky task to present thirty years of historical development of two Evangelical science organizations, which began so differently both in locality and belief and culture, and trace the internal controversies of each and the ultimate convergence (losing some members en route) of both on the same position. Rios appropriately discusses the groups separately, noting how the ASA was originally a group “breaking out of fundamentalism” and somewhat hostile to evolution, whereas the British RSCF was pro-evolution from day one.
In Britain, evolution was largely unquestioned until the 1970s. When I was at Oxford University in the mid-1960s, the subject was never raised in evangelical groups. (I often wonder how I would have reacted if a YEC had told me that my geology was all wrong!) What I had not realized was that the problem of natural evil, which is a primary motivation of YEC, had been rumbling for years. (YECs typically hold that pain, suffering, and death are the result of sin and therefore could not have preceded the creation of Adam.) The issue began to surface in the RSCF conference in 1956 on “The Problem of Pain, Suffering and Evil,” and in two articles published in 1958 which accepted that animals died millions of years ago and which were promptly accused of endorsing “nineteenth-century liberalism, deism, and pantheism, of displaying theological immaturity, and of failing to take the Bible seriously,” as Rios summarizes the complaints.

The main accuser was JI Packer (one of my theological mentors), who in 1955 claimed that “disease and much else ... would never have appeared but for Adam's sin.” I was unaware of this incident before reading this book. Oliver Barclay, who helped to found the RSCF, smoothed the incident over, but I think his niceness actually swept the issue under the carpet, only for it to pop out in the 1970s. To me, this apparently insignificant episode shows how fertile soil for YEC was developing below the surface. In 1971, Packer interviewed me as a student for a position at a seminary where he was principal. I turned his offer down, in part because I had got caught in an argument with several YEC students, which I thought no more about until I read this account! Packer has always seemed to be old-earth, but now I am not so sure, especially with his involvement in the Chicago Declaration of 1979, which I consider to be the theological cause of “intelligent design” when historically considered.

The ASA had different roots. Instead of largely Anglican Oxbridge graduates, the founders of the ASA were mostly from inter-war Fundamentalism, shakily old-earth and anti-evolution, yet seeking to break out of that straightjacket. It is easy for an American liberal or a typical Briton to smile at them, but the account of their first twenty years shows much intellectual and spiritual rigor combined with guts and a willingness to take risks. The focus of the ASA was how to accept old-earth geology, how to make the vast age of Earth acceptable to evangelicals, and here the geochronologist J Laurence Kulp was utterly invaluable in arguing against the young-earth views of George McCready Price and Harry Rimmer. From the late 1950s onward, there was a growing openness to evolution, which created further tensions. Quite possibly this openness gave rise to Whitcomb and Morris's *The Genesis Flood* (1961), which some see as a reaction to the ASA and Bernard Ramm, the Evangelical theologian who influenced the ASA's rejection of flood geology.

Part of Rios's narrative relates how the issue was dealt with by leaders in both organizations, principally by avoiding confrontation. Some of this comes out in the book, but my observation is that both organizations were rather equivocal, the result pleasing no one. In the RSCF, I found that Oliver Barclay was too much of a gentleman to deal with creationism, which (in my view) requires not impeccable manners but a left hook. The “softly softly catchee monkey” strategy was a weakness both with the RSCF and the ASA, as Rios often points out. In fact, much of his story is about how the organizations sought to placate YECs. If you adopt a totally antagonistic (and perhaps atheistic) approach to creationism, you will not understand why evolutionist Evangelicals do not resort to such pugnacity. Those like Barclay, and probably most mentioned in this book, have creationist friends and
connections, which makes pugnacity most painful. The result is that Evangelicals rarely face creationism head-on. Those of us who do have lost friends.

Yet I would argue that both the RSCF/CIS and the ASA allowed YEC to fester and were too kind and overly “Christian” towards it, unwilling to tackle it head on in the hope that a gentle academic discussion would sort it out. (My view is that Christianity is not incompatible with vigorous critique of the sort that YEC warrants. The day before writing this, I preached on Jesus throwing the moneylenders out of the temple!)

Rios’s chapter on creationism in the 1980s is welcome. In the United States, that was the decade of new “monkey trials,” beginning with *McLean v Arkansas* in 1982, while in Britain, it was the decade in which the wider society and churches suddenly became aware of creationism in their midst. Before that, creationism was not taken as seriously. By then, both the ASA and the RSCF/CIS had parted ways with young-earth creationism. But, from the 1960s onward, the two societies had grown together, with an ever-increasing interchange, both formal and informal. It is disappointing that the book stopped its narrative in 1985, just as “intelligent design” was coming to prominence and as the aggressive creationism associated with Ken Ham was becoming the dominant force in creationism worldwide, but that is another story.

Rios has succeeded in giving a very accurate portrayal of the way Evangelicals on both sides of the pond developed in their understanding of Christianity in relation to science and in their approach to the problem of creationism, and in assessing their strengths and weaknesses in doing so. This book gives an excellent historical perspective on Evangelicals who were not creationists from 1940 to 1985, and will enable a better understanding of and thus engagement with issues of creationism and evolution, whatever one’s perspective. Too often, critiques of creationism are marred by a total ignorance of the diversity of Evangelicals and the setting up of a series of straw men. This book should counter some of that ignorance.

**About the Author**

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