Creation as Meaning Filled: Key Symbols in the Study of Creationism

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Creation as Meaning Filled: Key Symbols in the Study of Creationism

Keywords
creationism, symbolism, Clifford Geertz, Sherry Ortner, young earth

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According to a 1996 poll, only 44% of adult Americans agreed that “[h]uman beings, as we know them today, developed from earlier species of animals” (National Science Board 1996: 8). Cultural anthropology is uniquely positioned to offer an understanding of Creationism; whereas a geologist would critique the Creationist’s geology or a philosopher would critique the Creationist’s philosophy the cultural anthropologist can bracket out such questions and ask “How is the Creationist constructing his or her reality?” This paper will use the symbolic theories of Clifford Geertz and Sherry Ortner to
examine one particular form of anti-evolutionism known as “Young Earth Creationism” from an anthropological perspective. It will be argued that creation and ‘the Bible’ are key symbols which unite the Creationist ‘community’; hence any ideas which seem to contradict these symbols are perceived threaten the conceptual cohesiveness of the Creationist’s reality. The strategies employed to defend the key symbols will also be considered.

**Key Terms Defined: What I Mean When I Say What I Mean**

A number of context-specific terms will be used in this paper. In order to avoid ambiguity it is important that these terms be clearly defined. First to be considered is the term “Creationism.” Scott (1997: 266) offers “the idea that a supernatural entity(s) created the universe and humankind” as a minimal definition of Creationism. However, this is not sufficiently clear for the purposes of the present paper; after all, this term could be equally applied to a much larger range of belief systems then will be considered here; Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Iroquois traditionalism, Wicca, etc., could all be considered forms of “Creationism” according to this minimal definition. The Creationists which are being considered in this paper all identify themselves as ‘Christian’ and locate their Creationism within their religious faith. This paper still requires an ever more nuanced definition of Creationism which recognizes that all Creationists agree that “God created the universe and all that is in it – including human beings – as a special act, or as a series of special acts” (Scott 1997: 266); this belief is often referred to as “Special Creationism” (Scott 1997: 266-71). Further precision is required; thus this paper will further distinguish between “Old Earth Creationism” and “Young Earth Creationism” (Scott 266-71). Old Earth Creationists imagine a special creation event that took place millions or billions of years ago while Young Earth Creationists insist on a literal, six-day, creation event occurring only several thousand years ago (Scott 1997: 266-71).

To maintain a clear focus, this paper will focus upon Young Earth Creationism; this decision is primarily made because Young Earth Creationism is the form of Special Creationism which the present author finds the most interesting. This preference is entirely biographical in nature; the author has known many Young Earth Creationists but almost no Old Earth Creationists. Consequently, throughout the rest of the paper, “Young Earth Creationism” should be understood to be prototypical Creationism; hence any reference to “Creationism” or “Creationist” without any sort of adjective should be taken to mean “Young Earth Creationism” or “Young Earth Creationist” respectively.

It is also important to recognize what Creationists mean when they talk about evolution. A significant number of Creationists (i.e. Hovind 2003, Wieland 2003) distinguish between microevolution and macroevolution (Scott 1997: 271). Microevolution is understood to be intra-specific change whereas macroevolution is understood to be inter-specific change (Scott 1997: 271). The former is accepted by most special Creationists as a recombination of the existing genetic diversity created by God; the latter is rejected as logically impossible since it would require entire novel structures to come into existence via natural processes (Scott 1997: 271). Unless otherwise specified any references to ‘evolution’ in this paper should be assumed to refer to ‘macroevolution’ as defined above.

Having defined “Creationism”, “Creationist” and “evolution” for purposes of this paper, the final term to be defined is “Creationist culture”. Precisely what will this term mean in this paper? Here I intend to follow Geertz’s (1966: 3) suggestion that we think of a culture as a “historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols by forms of which men [sic] communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life.” Following Geertz (1966), Creationist culture can be said to be historically transmitted; it is a pattern of meanings; these meanings are embodied in symbols; Creationists use these meanings and symbols to understand and explain life. This understanding of Creationist culture serves to highlight four intertwined themes in this paper: The history of Creationism; Creationism as meaning-filled; Creationism as symbol-filled; and the relationship between meanings, symbols and life as lived.

**The Context: The Genesis of Creationism**

Although there had been popular resistance to Darwinian thought since the publication of Origin of Species in 1859, there was little organized opposition to evolution until the 1920s (Numbers 1987: 391-394). During this decade, various antievolution laws were passed and John Scopes was convicted for
teaching evolution in the now-famous 1925 trial (Numbers 1987: 394-403). By the late 1920s, however, the special Creationist efforts towards legislative change slowed to a halt and Creationists focused their attention on lobbying local school boards to eliminate evolution from their curriculum (Numbers 1987: 403). Although this garnered some success, Creationists turned inward over the next few decades; this time was primarily spent building up their own institutional base, with Creationist organizations such as “the American Scientific Affiliation” and “Religion and Science Association” being founded during this period (Numbers 1987: 404). By the early 1960s it appeared that the golden age of special Creationism was past (Numbers 1987: 407).

This appearance was short-lived, however. In 1961 Henry Morris and John Whitcomb published The Genesis Flood. Intended to offer scientific proof for the global flood recorded in Genesis 6 (Morris and Whithcomb 1962; see also Numbers 1986: 408) and Scott (1997: 268), the book ignited a controversy amongst North American conservative Christians and helped fuel a “Creationist revival” (Numbers 1986: 407-410). The publication of The Genesis Flood coincided with a resurgence of evolutionary teaching in public schools and corresponding repeals of several state laws prohibiting such teaching. For example, “new evolutionary biology textbooks reached the Little Rock, Arkansas, public school system in 1965” (Larson 1985: 98); after a series of intricate legal disputes and court rulings over the evolutionary content of these textbooks, the Supreme Court declared the Arkansas anti-evolution law unconstitutional in 1968 (Larson 1985: 98-108). Around the same time, in 1967, the Tennessee legislature repealed its own antievolution law (Larson 1985: 104); this repeal had particular symbolic weight, given that this was the same law under which John Scopes was successfully prosecuted for teaching evolution in 1925. In response, Creationists began articulating an “equal-time” strategy (Numbers 1986: 411). Whereas earlier Creationists had sought to outlaw evolutionary teaching in public schools, these Creationists now began to demand equal amounts of public classroom time devoted to the teaching of both evolution and special creation (Numbers 1986: 411). This strategy garnered success throughout the 1970s, leading to “equal-time” laws in several states (Numbers 1986: 411-12); for instance, in 1973, Tennessee introduced new legislation requiring equal treatment to both evolution and special creation within the public school system (Larson 1985: 134-7). However, this new Tennessee law was immediately challenged in the courts by various groups (Larson 1985: 137-8); in 1975 it was declared unconstitutional by both a Tennessee court of appeal and the Tennessee Supreme Court (Larson 1985: 138-9). In 1982 a similar law, which had been passed in 1981, was struck down in an Arkansas federal court (Larson 1985: 151-162); Judge William Overton, in his ruling, declared that special Creationism was not science but religion and consequently violated the constitutionally-mandated separation of church and state (Larson 1985: 162).

The Problem: My key symbols are not your key symbols

Why are Creationists so concerned about evolution? Why does it matter whether or not present species evolved from earlier species? Although Creationist objections to evolution are certainly commentaries on scientific thought, the vehemence and determination with which these objections are made would seem to suggest that they stem from more than then objective considerations of empirical evidence. To explain this vehemence I would like to turn to Ortner’s (1973) idea of “key symbols.”

I have previously defined “Creationist culture” as pattern of meanings embodied within symbols. However, not all symbols are equal. In Ortner’s understanding, particularly “key” symbols are “certain key elements which...are crucial to [a particular culture’s] distinctive organization” (Ortner 1973: 1338). These are symbols which are an especially integral part of a particular cultural pattern. Consequently, the identification of key symbols in actual Creationist literature will provide significant insight into the symbolic system employed by Creationists.

Ortner (1973: 1339) suggests several criteria for identifying these “key symbols”: most relevant for the purposes of this purposes is that “[t]he natives seem positively or negatively aroused about X, rather then indifferent” and that “[t]he natives tell us that X is important.” In our study, it is clear that “the natives” — i.e.

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1 During my research I have found three different dates for the publication of The Genesis Flood. Numbers (1987: 408) says it published in 1961 and Scott (1997: 268) says 1963. The only copy I have access to gives a 1962 date which is the one I will follow.
Creationists are aroused about the idea of special creation; the very fact that they lobby governments about the issue makes that clear. On the first page of the foreword to his 1974 book, *Scientific Creationism*, Henry Morris tells us the following:

According to the Biblical record, God Himself wrote with his own hand these words: ‘For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them...’ (See Exodus 20:11; 31:17-19). That being true, it follows that real understanding of man and his world can only be acquired through a thoroughgoing Creationist frame of reference (Morris 1974: iii).

Here Morris explicitly tells us that creation is important; it is only through a “Creationist” framework that human reality can be properly understood. This is similar to what Ortner (1973: 1340) calls the “elaborating mode” of key symbols, which “provid[e] vehicles for sorting out complex and undifferentiated feelings and ideas, making them comprehensible to oneself, communicable to others, and translatable into meaningful action.” In this worldview, reality cannot be structured outside the framework of divine creation. This lines up nicely with Geertz’s (1966: 13-14) observation that people fear chaos and disorder; more than anything, key symbols help order one’s life and reality. For the Creationist, the fact that God created the heavens and the earth means that the universe—and thus one’s own life—is properly ordered.

However, creation is not the only key symbol evident in the above quotation. There is also, and perhaps more fundamentally, the “Biblical record”. Morris’ argument rests upon the assumption that the Biblical record was written by “God Himself...with his own hand.” Here, “the Biblical record”—or simply the Bible, for short—can be understood as what Ortner (1973: 1339-1340) calls a summarizing symbol; these are symbols which “synthesize an entire symbol of ideas...under an unitary form which, in an old-fashioned way, ‘stands for’ the system as a whole.” Morris’ commitment to the divine origin of the Biblical record provides a focus for his symbolic thought; the Bible itself represents and summarizes the overall symbolic system.

Embodied within the symbol called the “Biblical record” is a set of meanings which Crapanzano (2000: 2-3) refers to as “Biblical literalism.” Biblical literalism is a specific way of relating to the Biblical text. Crapanzano (2000: 2-3) gives a list of 10 features which distinguish this epistemological stance; Morris displays several of these features, particularly an insistence on the “plain, ordinary, commonsense meaning”, a priority of “the text...over experience” and a conviction that the text “ground[s] meaning.” Morris’ literalist epistemology determines his construction of reality; his commitment to the elaborating power of “a thorough-going Creationist frame of reference” depends upon his prior commitment to this epistemology. This is turn is summarized by his commitment to the unifying symbolism of the Bible itself.

Morris, of course, is not the only person whose symbolic system includes special creation and the Bible as key symbols; nor is he the only person committed to a Biblical literalist epistemology. The homepage of www.answersingenesis.org displays a banner which reads “Upholding the authority of the Bible from the very first verse”; on the same website, in a critique of theistic evolution, Gitt (2004) argues that

“The biblical creation account should not be regarded as a myth, a parable, or an allegory, but as a historical report...The doctrine of theistic evolution undermines this basic way of reading the Bible...Events reported in the Bible are reduced to mythical imagery, and an understanding of the message of the Bible as being true in word and meaning is lost...However, evolution knows no sin in the biblical sense of

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2 I have used websites as primary source material because I understand Creationism to be primarily a grassroots movement. Web-based material can thus offer the researcher insight into the worldview of the “average” Creationist.

3 Theistic evolution is “a theological view in which God created but relied more upon the laws of nature to bring about His purpose” (Scott 1997: 271). Speciation and various other aspects of evolutionary thought are accepted as long as God is held to be directing the processes (Scott 1997: 271).
missing one's purpose (in relation to God). Sin is made meaningless, and that is exactly the opposite of what the Holy Spirit does - He declares sin to be sinful. If sin is seen as a harmless evolutionary factor, then one has lost the key for finding God, which is not resolved by adding 'God' to the evolutionary scenario."

Here, then, we begin to see the conceptual problem facing the Creationist: If evolution is true then the Biblical literalist epistemology does not explain human origins or the human condition. If this is true then the "Bible", a key symbol in which this epistemology is embodied, becomes meaningless as a summarizing symbol. Following Geertz's (1966: 13-14) already cited thoughts on the ordering power of cultural symbols, this would result in conceptual and social chaos.

On one level, then, politically active Creationism can be read as a counterattack against a perceived threat to Creationist culture. Explicitly writing a "Creationist" textbook for use in public schools, Morris (1974: 4-10) describes evolution and creation as two equally valid scientific models for the origins of the universe and life. His argument rests upon the argument that "the essence of the scientific is experimental observation and repeatability" (Morris 1974: 4; emphasis mine). Consequently, if one cannot design a repeatable experiment by which to test competing hypotheses of origins one cannot prove any particular hypothesis correct (Morris 1974: 4); perhaps more importantly, one cannot use scientific authority to prove Creationism wrong. From this he argues that the best one can do is to build models to explain origins; the model of origins that best accounts for the available data should be assumed correct (Morris 1974: 4-10). It follows from this that both creation and evolution are equally legitimate scientific models; the question of which is correct should be determined solely by its ability to correlate the available data.

It is important to recognize that Morris (1974) is not attempting to prove Creationism; in fact, his strategy begins by arguing that one cannot do so. Rather he is concerned with demoting evolution from the status of unquestioned fact to competing model. By doing so he can argue that Creationism and evolution are both equally scientific. Why is this important? By showing that Creationism cannot be scientifically disproved and that evolution cannot be scientifically proven he has neutralized a critical threat to the Creationist worldview; 'science' cannot prove his religion wrong because his religion is as legitimately 'science' as any other model of origins.

One must remember that Morris (1974) is writing in the context of the equal-time movement of the 1970s (as discussed above; see also Larson (1985), Numbers (1986) and Scott (1997)). In the late 1960s a series of anti-evolution laws were struck down as an unconstitutional violation of the separation of church and state; at the same time there was a movement by science educators to increase the amount of evolution taught in public schools (Larson 1985: 98-108; Numbers 1986: 411-12). The equal-time movement was founded on the premise that, by presenting creation as a legitimate scientific alternative to evolution, it could be taught as such in public schools (Larson 1985: 134-8). Consequently, although the commitment to special creation and opposition to evolution may be a result of a prior commitment to a particular symbolic system which creates and maintains a particular imagined community, the precise form that a defense of this system and community takes is shaped by a larger context; the felt need to present divine creation as "scientific" is a response to the cultural authority given to scientific and legal discourses which prohibits "religious" teaching in public schools while allowing "scientific" teaching.

Bird (1978) makes very clear the ways in which the legal discourse is framed. Here he (1978: 518) argues that "exclusive public school instruction in the general theory of evolution...abridges free exercise of religion." This abridgement is a result of clear contradictions between evolutionary theory and Creationist beliefs; consequently compulsory and exclusive instruction in evolutionary theory would also be compulsory instruction in beliefs contrary to those held by members of Creationist religions (Bird 1978). Bird (1978: 570) argues that the preferred method of avoiding
this abridgement is what he calls "neutralization": The incorporation of "countervailing viewpoints" which would give students exposure to the range of opinions on a given subject (Bird 1978: 550-1). Further, although Bird acknowledges that the teaching of "Biblical Creationism" would be an unconstitutional violation of church and state, he argues that "scientific Creationism" would not do so (Bird 553-4); this argument rests upon his assertion that "[t]extbooks presenting scientific Creationism do not expound the Biblical text, but instead employ scientific discussion" (Bird 1978: 554). For Bird, scientific Creationism relies upon scientific discourse and evidence and thus is a legitimate theory that should be given equal-time in public schools; however, Biblical Creationism is situated within a religious discourse that is not appropriate in public schools. Here we can see clearly why Creationists feel the need to present their beliefs as scientific: By doing so they can argue that it is legally appropriate — even necessary — to teach Creationism in the public classroom.

The "equal-time strategy", resting upon the argument that evolution and creation are equally valid scientific models, have continued to be employed by Creationists (i.e. Ham 2003, Matthews 2003, Noebel 2003). For instance, Matthews (2003) argues that "[f]ar from living up to its title as the 'No Child Left Behind Act,' the new education bill has left every public-school child behind, totally in the dark about (a) the science that contradicts the weak theory of evolution and (b) the way in which the evidence can be interpreted to speak for creation—often more comfortably, naturally and directly." The argument is substantively the same as that employed by Morris and Bird more than two decades earlier: There is evidence which is incompatible with evolution but which Creationism can more "naturally" explain. Writing 25 years after Bird, Matthews too is responding to legislative decisions; he is concerned that the "No Child Left Behind Act" will leave students "totally in the dark" about evolution and creation (Matthews 2003).

Creationism is not simply pseudoscience or false consciousness. Indeed, there are some philosophical merits to the Creationist position. This paper has endeavored to show that Creationism is one aspect of a particular way of interpreting the world. Creationists often perceive evolutionary theory as a threat to this interpretative framework. In response, Creationists have articulated a strategy which argues that creation and evolution are of equal scientific merit; this seeks to avoid legislative attempts to exclude Creationism from classrooms due to its "religious" nature. In turn, this guards Creationist culture from perceived legal attacks. Such perceived attacks are seen not just as legal decisions but as attacks upon the very heart of Creationist culture and thus upon the way in which the Creationist orders the world. Debates about evolution and creation are mere academic discussions; they quite literally have cosmic import to the Creationist for an absence of creation would be an absence of meaning.

Bibliography


