

Article in The Daily Telegraph March 18, 2002

THE absurd row over Emmanuel City Technology College in Gateshead has raised an even more absurd confusion, which must be cleared up.

There are not two debating positions, but three. Actually more than three, and some of them could be represented as a shaded continuum, but for simplicity I'll stick to three.

1) Young Earth Creationists. They believe the world is only thousands of years old, based on a literal reading of Genesis (or the Koran, or whatever is their holy book).

2) Old Earth Theists. There is a broad church, embracing the great majority of educated religious people. They believe in a Divine Creator, but they read their creation myth allegorically rather than literally, and accept that the world is billions of years old.

With the exception of some Old Earth Creationists, they mostly agree that evolution happened, but may allow God some supervisory role. Many think evolution was God's ingenious way of accomplishing his creation. Some believe he helped evolution over the difficult jumps.

Others think God kept his hands off evolution, but set up the universe in the first place in such a way as to make it likely to happen.

3) Atheists and agnostics.

Within the broad middle group, you'll find the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Bishop of Oxford (who gave an admirable Thought for the Day on the subject on Friday) and, I would guess, most of the bishops and clergy of the Roman and Anglican churches.

You'll also find Tony Blair and those of his parliamentary colleagues of all parties who profess religious belief. You will not find the head of science at Emmanuel CTC, Gateshead.

I count myself in the third group, but it is not in that capacity that I object to what is happening in Gateshead. From time to time, I argue against Old Earth Theists, but not on this occasion.

On the Gateshead issue, scientists and theologians, bishops and atheists stand shoulder to shoulder. Young Earth teachers may do some damage to science education, but it's a pinprick compared with the damage they'll do to religious education if they get a grip on this side of the Atlantic.

Confusion is rife because commentators have failed to understand that the Gateshead row is about Young Earth Creationism. Wrongly presuming that we who have asked Ofsted for a re-inspection are attacking religion, they have rushed intemperately into print, not least in this newspaper, imputing to us all sorts of horrific Torquemadan motives.

Without bothering to read what we have said, and - worse - without bothering to read what the Gateshead teachers have said, they have assumed that we are attacking the middle group of mainstream religious believers.

As one retired contributor to The Daily Telegraph (letters, Mar 16) said: "I am a Christian and a scientist. I see no particular problem in reconciling the evolutionary and Creationist approaches to the formation of the Earth."

Well of course you don't see a problem, sir! You are a member of the large consensus in the middle. But the whole point of the Gateshead row is that the head of science at the school does see a problem. He is a Young Earth Creationist.

In the same issue of this newspaper, Tom Utley ("God knows what Professor Dawkins is talking about") tells me at insulting length what I already knew, namely that many Creationists don't think the earth is young. Why, Utley ponderously wonders, do I assume that the Gateshead teachers do?

For one excellent reason. I take the trouble to read what they say. Steven Layfield, the head of science at Emmanuel, gave a lecture on September 21, 2000 (which would therefore have been available to the Ofsted inspectors).

The full text is at: <http://www.christian.org.uk/html-publications/education3.htm>. Read it. If you love true science, or if you love true religion, the thought of what the children must be missing under this travesty of teaching may sadden you enough to provoke a letter to the Secretary of State for Education, urging her to reopen the case with Ofsted.

Layfield remarks that there is no immediate hope of evolution being removed from the national curriculum, and he lists ways in which Creationist science teachers can compensate.

For example: "Note every occasion when an evolutionary/old-earth paradigm (millions or billions of years) is explicitly mentioned or implied by a text-book, examination question or visitor, and courteously point out the fallibility of the statement. Wherever possible, we must give the alternative (always better) Biblical explanation of the same data."

For Layfield, then, the universe is not billions, not even millions, of years old. It is only thousands.

This head of science - this science teacher and mentor of other science teachers - blinds himself to the whole edifice of exciting scientific work, not just in biology and geology (fossils, the molecular clock, the geographic distribution of species in the light of plate-tectonic continental movements), but also physics (numerous independent methods of radioactive dating converge on the same answer) and cosmology (in a young universe, all stars would be invisible to us except the tiny minority within a few thousand light years).

Moving on in the lecture: "In view of the current inclusion of earth science into the Sc3 component of the national curriculum, it would seem particularly prudent for all who deliver this aspect of the course to familiarise themselves with Flood geology papers of Whitcomb & Morris . . .

"In particular, they would do well to point out that no rock is unearthed with a clear age label and that dating processes in general are speculative, frequently contradictory and in many instances altogether incompatible with a great age."

Yes, Flood geology means what you think it means. We're talking Noah's Ark here. Noah's Ark - when the children could be learning the spine-tingling fact that Africa and South America were once joined, and have drawn apart at the speed with which fingernails grow.

We have here the head of science, in a school that has received star rating from Ofsted. When I suggested a re-inspection, it had not occurred to me that the people who really come out of the affair badly are the Ofsted inspectors. It is not too late for them to make amends and look properly at what they obviously overlooked before.

With hindsight, it might have been better if those of us in Group Three had kept our big mouths shut and left it to the bishops. They have more to lose than we have, and are less vulnerable to prejudiced and perverse misunderstanding.

Over to you, gentlemen. Power to your elbows. If there is anything I can do to help, you'll find me lying low, with my head down. With the best will in the world, I seem to do more harm than good. It's somebody else's turn.

* Richard Dawkins FRS is Oxford's Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of

Science. His latest book is Unweaving the Rainbow

Home Christine DeBlase-Ballstadt