

Exporting creationism: Dutch creationist leaflet now to be distributed in Belgium

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In previous issues of *Reports of the NCSE* (Branch 2009; Brummer 2009), it was reported that last February, in reaction to the Darwin year festivities, Dutch young-Earth creationists distributed a eight paged leaflet to six million households in the Netherlands. Although the creationists met with some opposition from both outside *and* within protestant orthodox circles, the activist creationists considered this campaign a huge success. Measured by the media attention they drew, this was not an unreasonable evaluation. The leaders of the campaign were repeatedly interviewed in newspapers and invited to TV and radio shows, hereby given an ideal forum to express their anti-evolutionary sentiments. Creationism had most certainly made its way back into the Dutch public arena. Inspired by this response, the Dutch creationists are now taking their campaign across the border to Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of Belgium (the small country of Belgium consists of two main regions: Flanders, in the north, near Holland, where people speak Dutch, and Wallonia, in the south, near France, where French is the common language).

News of the expansion of the campaign into Flanders came when, on July 28, this year, articles appeared in Flemish newspapers, informing the public that “[t]he creationists are coming” <http://www.standaard.be/Artikel/Detail.aspx?artikelId=9B2D3SHQ&word=creationisten>. Although, from the very beginning in November 2008, Belgian creationist groups had been involved with the campaign, the news still came as a surprise and this for two reasons. First, there is the financial aspect. For the leaflet campaign in Holland alone the creationists had to raise 400,000 Euros (well over half a million US Dollars). In December 2008, Kees van Helden, who acted as spokesperson for the leaflet campaign, declared in an interview that the campaign would only be expanded into Belgium if sufficient money was in (see also: Branch 2009). Today, they are still more than 70,000 Euros (app. 100,000 US Dollars) short from leveling the bill for the Dutch campaign (see www.creatie.info, accessed on August 28, 2009). It makes one wonder how they will collect funding for this new project as the other one has not yet been paid for.

Second, creationism has never been a big issue in Flanders (or Belgium, for that matter). The Netherlands have a long tradition of orthodox Protestantism, that turned out to be a fertile soil for the young-Earth creationism imported by the ICR and other American creationist organizations during the 70s of the previous century (Knevel 2007). Even today, this American influence still leaves a distinct mark on Dutch creationism. One of the organizations behind the leaflet campaign, *Mediagroep in Genesis* (see <http://www.scheppingofevolucie.nl>), is a Dutch spin-off of *Answers in Genesis*. Also, the content of the leaflet is most certainly inspired by North-American creationist literature (Brummer 2009). For instance, the reference to the supposed “abuse” of Ernst Haeckel’s drawings of embryos in textbooks can be traced back to *Icons of evolution* by Jonathan Wells, a leading member of the *Center for Science and Culture* (Wells 2000: 81-109). The

leaflet also takes the two-model approach, a theme that is highly popular in North-American creationist propaganda (Pennock 1999).

In contrast with Holland, the most influential denomination in Flanders is Roman-Catholicism. Catholicism traditionally allows for a more relaxed reading of the Bible and has usually taken a rather lenient attitude towards evolution and evolutionary theory. Therefore, it offers less opportunity for creationist ideas to spread. In 1996, pope John-Paul II declared that evolutionary theory is “more than a hypothesis” and in March this year, the Vatican itself organized a conference to discuss evolutionary theory. In editorials of Flemish Catholic magazines that comment on the Darwin year, evolutionary theory is generally endorsed and appeals are made for a “rational dialogue” between science and religion. In the same breath, the authors explicitly distance themselves from the protestant fundamentalists in the USA and Holland, and from the “ideological” interpretations of evolutionary theory that turn “Darwinism” into “a kind of religion” (De Volder 2009; Henau 2009). On top of this Roman-Catholic tradition, Flemish culture and society are highly secularized, leaving little to no room for Christian fundamentalists.

Of course, this does not mean that Flanders wholeheartedly embraces evolutionary theory. The fact that there exist Flemish young-Earth creationist organizations almost trivially contradicts this conclusion. These groups, however, consist of only very small numbers and do not pose a serious threat to Flemish science education. Sometimes, Intelligent Design is not recognized as a fundamentalist movement, but mistaken for a bridge between science and religion; and occasionally, prominent members of the Belgian catholic church or of the Flemish Christian democratic party say things that sound Intelligent Design-*ish*. However, nowhere – and this, again, in contrast with the Netherlands – can we find a well-formulated defense of Intelligent Design theory by a prominent Christian.

Of more relevance perhaps is the presence of Islamic creationism. As a result of immigration waves between 1950 and 1970, when Belgian factories and mines were looking abroad for cheap labor, Belgium today has distinct Turkish and Moroccan communities, especially in the cities. Exact figures are hard to come by, but approximately 5 percent of the Belgian population is Muslim. How many Muslims are in fact creationists is even harder to tell, but some events and surveys indicate that at least within the Muslim communities, creationism is a respectable phenomenon. In February 2008, an imam proclaimed on national television that “we [Muslims] do not accept evolutionary theory, because it is an ideological system that one uses to combat religion. The theory only functions as a scientific cover-up.” (see <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4MMpxlN-TdQ>>) He said the deficit of the theory was convincingly demonstrated by scientists like Harun Yahya, the leader of the influential Turkish creationist movement that actively seeks converts in Europe (on Harun Yahya and Islamic scientific creationism, see Sayit & Kence 1999; Edis 1999). Small surveys conducted in Antwerp and Brussels show that Muslim high school students feel far more reluctant than their Christian and atheist colleagues to accept evolutionary theory, making them an easy target for Islamic creationists (Bogaert 2005; Perbal 2005).

Except for Islamic creationism, there exist some resentment against evolutionary theory among orthodox Jews

<<http://www.standaard.be/Artikel/Detail.aspx?artikelId=R11G5BVQ&word=creationisme+jods>> and in anthroposophy circles (anthroposophy is a Christian cult, instigated by the Austrian philosopher Rudolph Steiner) (Blancke 2004). However, creationism in Flanders or Belgium is not very visible, organized nor active. Nevertheless, Bert Dorenbos, president of the anti-abortion organization *Schreeuw om Leven* ('Cry for life') who also acts as a spokesperson for the leaflet campaign, feels confident that the leaflet will find a hearing in Flanders. In a Flemish newspaper, Dorenbos said: "I know of many groups in Belgium that reject evolutionary theory, but they haven't come to the surface yet. When these people see our leaflet, they just might come out of the closet. There is big potential for creationism here and that is exactly what we are digging for. We want to initiate the debate."

<<http://www.standaard.be/Artikel/Detail.aspx?artikelId=9B2D3SHQ&word=creationisten>> Perhaps, Dorenbos is right. After all, the study by Miller, Scott and Okamoto in *Science* in 2006, does show that one out of five Belgians does not accept the evolution of humans out of "earlier species of animals" (Miller, Scott and Okamoto 2006). Nevertheless, whether this percentage can be translated directly into support for young-Earth creationism remains very doubtful.

And what about the money problem? According to Dorenbos, there isn't any: "Some sympathizers give ten Euros, others a hundred, or even much, much more. That's how today we have almost paid for the 6,6 million leaflets in the Netherlands. In Belgium, we can count on the same kind of support, I suppose." Indeed, the creationists seem to be quite sure they will collect the necessary funding as they cherish even bigger plans. Dorenbos explains: "For now, the leaflet is only in Dutch. But there is some interest to translate it into French. But we'll see. First we have to look into how we are going to get the campaign in Flanders organized. After that, we might expand the campaign into the rest of Europe." However, there seems to exist some confusion among the activists. One day later, on July 29, a small article appeared on the website of the *Reformatorsch Dagblad*, an orthodox Christian newspaper, in which L. Van Bochove of *Johannes Media*, another cooperating organization of the campaign, said that the news that the leaflets are going to be distributed on a massive scale in Flanders rests on a misunderstanding. According to Van Bochove, for the moment sympathizing churches in Flanders are only handing out the leaflets that were left from the Dutch campaign. This news, however, has not been picked up anywhere in the press, so it remains unclear how many leaflets will be imported into Flanders.

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