

## THE LEGACY OF DUYVENE DE WIT FOR CREATIONIST BIOLOGY: PART I — THE MAN AND HIS LIFE

MAGNUS VERBRUGGE\*

Received 15 August 1983, Revised 28 February 1984

### Abstract

*This is part one of a three-part series of articles on the life and work of J. J. Duyvene De Wit, a Dutch biologist, who ascribed to the Creation viewpoint and actively worked against the falsity of evolutionary concepts.*

### A Man to Remember

Dr. J. J. Duyvene De Wit, professor of biology at the University of Orange Free State in South Africa, was an untiring creationist whose major ambition in life was to rally the forces of Christianity to do battle against evolutionism on all fronts.

In his inaugural address when a professor of physiology in Amsterdam he emphasized that if a scientist who is a Christian will avoid *unscientific speculations* derived from non-Christian philosophies, he can avoid many of the conflicts that are said to exist between science and faith. In contrast, the humanist forever gets embarrassing controversies, because he must and does indulge in such speculations. As a biologist he came to this conclusion after an intensive study of the philosophy of nature, developed by Dr. Herman Dooyeweerd.

During the last two years of his life De Wit struck up an intensive correspondence with Dr. George Howe. His purpose was to bring together representatives of the Creation Research Society and those members of the new Christian philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd who had not embraced evolutionism. Alas, his sudden death in 1965 put an end to this project. His article "The Impact of Herman Dooyeweerd's Christian Philosophy upon Present Day Biological Thought" was published posthumously in 1965 as one chapter in the book *Philosophy and Christianity*. This book contained 29 essays dedicated to Dooyeweerd, upon his retirement from teaching philosophy of law and other courses at the Free University of Amsterdam.

Today evolutionists are still winning major propaganda victories in the battle between creationists and transformists. We sometimes tend to despair and wonder whether we are fighting the good fight in a way worthy of God's blessing. For that reason it may be an inspiration for us to have a closer look at the work of this courageous fighter for creationism and to try and find answers to questions such as these: What motivated him? How successful were his methods? Can his example inspire us to adopt his aim and methods? Where do we go from here? And what is his legacy? Who was this man De Wit?

Dr. Howe sent me his correspondence with these questions in mind. In what follows I will try to find some of the answers, since they could prove to be instructive to us today.

### Professional Career

J. J. Duyvene De Wit was born in Holland on March 5, 1909. He studied biology in Utrecht and received

\*Magnus Verbrugge, M.D., F.R.C.S. (Canada), a urologist (retired), receives his mail at Herman Dooyeweerd Foundation, 1915 Bahia Way, La Jolla, CA 92037.

his M.Sc. in 1933. From 1933 to 1946 De Wit was head of the scientific department of a pharmaceutical company. In his spare time he continued his research with the species of Bitterling, a small fresh water fish.

In 1939 he earned his Ph.D. "cum laude" with as topic for his thesis: *The Sexual-endocrine Organization of Rhodeus Amarus Bloch and the Significance of the Ovipositor Test for Endocrinology in General*.

From 1946 to 1950 he served as head of the Institute for Animal Production under the auspices of the Central Organization for Applied Scientific Research of The Netherlands. He continued his research on the Bitterling at the University of Utrecht.

In 1950 and 1951 De Wit served as Professor of Physiology at the Free University in Amsterdam and remained scientific advisor to the Institute for Animal Production. From 1951 to 1964 he was Professor of Zoology, University of the Orange Free State, South Africa.

During these years he devoted himself not only to scientific work but also to the battle against evolutionism. This latter activity eventually cost him his standing within his profession. He had begun a research project pertaining to various representatives of the fish of the Acheilognathinae group, commonly called Bitterlings, but funding for this effort was suspended. Next he was put on half pay, his teaching activities were curtailed and he was offered a small position as researcher.

When he first contacted Dr. Howe in 1963, he had heard of the latter's interest in the battle against transformism and inquired about a possible teaching position in the United States. He badly wanted a more congenial environment in which to labor.

On July 25, 1965, just a few months after the untimely passing of his 19 year old son, Dr. De Wit died while on vacation in Italy.

### Professional Correspondence

In a letter of October 24, 1963<sup>1</sup> De Wit referred to Howe's paper: "Miracles and the Study of Creation," by stating that he had requested that "lines of descent between primates and man" be removed from displays at the Transvaal Museum.

He complained that the overwhelming majority of Christian biologists are transformists who see evolution as the way God created man. As a consequence they hold that "an animal heritage in man is present, accounting for his moral deficiency, and replacing sin in its true Scriptural meaning." "The fight against this is a heavy one."

In December 1963<sup>2</sup> De Wit announced the publication of an article on Teilhard de Chardin<sup>3</sup> in *Creative Minds in Modern Theology* and also in *Philosophia Reformata*,<sup>4</sup> a journal of Christian philosophy, of which Dr. Herman Dooyeweerd was editor.

In a letter of February 1964<sup>5</sup> he mentioned that he had sent two treatises telling how difficult it is to find scientific substantiation for evolutionism to some 25 "top biologists," including Dobzhansky, Grobstein, Julian Huxley, E. Mayr, H. J. Muller, B. Rensch, Overhage, Portman, A. Remane, Stich, Stebbings, G. G. Simpson, Waddington, and others for comments.

In March 1964<sup>6</sup> he discussed some of the replies from the biologists to whom he had sent his treatises.

H. J. Muller of Indiana University refused to go over his objections to transformation point by point. The reason: he thoroughly disagreed with them!

Sir Julian Huxley was astonished that De Wit's bias could bring him to ignore the evidence for evolution as presented by man's embryonic gills and tail. And how could he question the validity of the general theory of gradual evolution by natural selection after he, Huxley, as well as Dobzhansky, Rensch and Mayr had written whole books showing its validity!

Dobzhansky wrote that he was a Christian and was sorrowful and ashamed by De Wit's attitude. He felt that such writings would be welcomed by all militant atheists because they displayed obscurantism, blindness and were reactionary in character.

G. G. Simpson expressed his shock that a professor in the Department of Zoology in what is "supposed to be a university" would write such a treatise. He had even thought that this university was located in a civilized country! He considered De Wit to do a great disservice to Christianity and religion. He refused to address himself to the arguments since he disagreed with De Wit.

Rensch referred De Wit to his books for his opinion on the questions raised. He objected to the "mixing of science and religion." Religion developed slowly and not always in correspondence with the facts, whose investigation is the task of science. But now fortunately many Catholic and Protestant theologians have begun to coordinate scientific facts and religious interpretations. These men now believe that all organisms arose through a slow process of development through natural forces, all the way to man. He hoped that these theologians would convince all Christians now of the scientific merits of evolution.

It is interesting for us to see how some famous scientists descended to the level of the ancient sophists by attacking their opponent "ad hominem" instead of with rational arguments. These sophists pointed at some regrettable feature in their opponents' character, be it a lack of intelligence (he is a fool) or a lack of morals (he is a crook).

#### On Christian Philosophy

In April 1964<sup>7</sup> De Wit agreed with Howe's statement that "as soon as the light of God's Word penetrates apostate deliberations (religious, philosophical and scientific . . .) then, by inner necessity, it reveals itself as prophetic."

Concerning opposition that such activity might bring from committed evolutionists, De Wit wrote: "If our work does not *evoke* anti-Christian reactions of all sorts, we may question ourselves whether we are moving on the right track!" He posed an open question for evolutionists as follows:

What have you, so-called non-conservative and scientifically 'enlightened' people *contributed* to the spiritual unfolding and deployment of our world during the last century? What securities,

standards, norms, etc. have you developed which transcend, or even equal those which developed already in our Western culture as the result of Christianity taken in its true sense? Nothing but three wars, two of which were world wars.

In a June 16, 1964<sup>8</sup> letter De Wit spoke of Christians who refuse to take a stand. He expressed the hope that some prominent biologists would soon come to the fore who would join him in the task of attacking Darwinism on the scientific *as well as the philosophical* level.

My greatest concern at present is the increasing sympathy of certain kinds of Christians with secularized science and philosophies for ecumenical reasons. As a result the true children of God become more embarrassed by them than by their non-Christian neighbors.

On July 24, 1964<sup>9</sup> De Wit mentioned the fact that Christians live side by side but apart from each other because of denominational barriers. And yet, so many are agreed on this central issue: they believe God's record of creation and reject man's transformist speculations. He expressed his desire to work for bringing all scientists who are creationists together in spite of their different backgrounds.

In a letter of August 12, 1964<sup>10</sup> De Wit further elaborated on the means by which he felt that this ideal could be realized. He recognized that *the major obstacle is the prevailing lack of insight into the philosophical aspects of biology as a science*. Because of this lack, Christian biologists miss a great weapon in their fight against the transformists. He argued as follows:

The question at issue, which in my opinion is of essential importance to the further policy of the CRS, can only be treated from the standpoint of Christian philosophy . . . This philosophy is however not known among creationists and I think it absolutely necessary that they become intrinsically acquainted with it.<sup>11</sup>

He urged George Howe and John Moore to attend a conference, to be held on the philosophy of science at Unionville in Canada that summer.<sup>12</sup> Dr. Moore went and wrote a report on his experience, which was reprinted in the October 27, 1964 issue of *Calvinist Contact*, a Christian weekly in Canada.<sup>13</sup> The reason Moore went, he wrote, was his reading of some "tremendously important" articles by Duyvene De Wit. He found it to be "most fulfilling to my mind and spirit." Studying the Christian philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd through reading *In the Twilight of Western Thought*<sup>14</sup> and seeing it applied at the Unionville conference was for him "a wonderful experience." He urged other Christian scholars to investigate this law-philosophy of Dooyeweerd, because he saw the answer there to the traditional theistic evolutionary thoughts of so many Christian scholars. De Wit<sup>15</sup> asked that Dr. Howe have Dr. Moore write in the *Creation Research Society Quarterly* about the conference in these words: "Both circles of Christians (i.e. *scientists and philosophers* M.V.) **MUST** come to intrinsic cooperation and understanding."

He also mentioned that his articles on Teilhard de Chardin and on transformism would be published in *Philosophia Reformata*,<sup>16</sup> edited by Dr. Herman Dooyeweerd, with a foreword by Dr. Mekkes, Professor of philosophy in Holland. Thus De Wit's anti-evolu-

tionist ideas had found a good reception among reformed philosophers in the school of Dooyeweerd.

De Wit<sup>17</sup> wrote that he had sent a request to the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) for a grant for research on the problem of how a species originates and what it really is. For elucidation of these questions he proposed to do research on the commensalism between his favorite fish, the Bitterling, and the Mussel. He stated that a side issue to be investigated was the problem of genetic pauperization. In the accompanying bibliography he listed 79 publications by him on related subjects, some of them in co-authorship with others. De Wit felt that his work would help to put his anti-transformist position on a more scientific basis.

A request to withdraw this grant application was mentioned in correspondence of December 14, 1964.<sup>18</sup> De Wit received a letter from NSF asking him to withdraw his application for a research grant. The reasons were rather technical, but he was told that if he had been an American, he would have stood a good chance:

... likely you would have been on the other side of the wire. Your credentials are excellent and the work you are doing is important. It should be quite a feather in the cap of the University of the Orange Free State to have a scholar of your status on campus.

On February 1, 1965<sup>19</sup> he informed Dr. Howe of the rejection of his application. He had also had further grants for continuing his research in South Africa denied. Indeed, his transformist colleagues were trying to remove him because of his anti-evolutionary position. De Wit also mentioned that Dr. Riemer of NSF wrote that he would gladly support De Wit's application for a grant from the South African authorities because of the scientific merits of the work as recognized by the 13 American scientists who reviewed his application.

On May 17, 1965<sup>20</sup> De Wit reported that the booklet on his critique of transformism had been favorably received by several scholars in philosophy and theology at the Universities of Potchefstroom, Stellenbosch and Bloemfontein. He ended his letter with:

Although you will be extremely busy, of course, during the period ahead, I hope that you will find time to write me off and on about our common work and task against evolutionism.

Soon after this final letter, Dr. J. J. Duyvene De Wit, dedicated fighter against evolutionism, suddenly died. All we have today is the writings he left behind. In the next paper we shall examine the fruits of his labor.

Readers who are interested to learn more about the amazing Cosmonomic view that inspired Dr. De Wit and others to abandon evolution as a "scientific" approach to the question of origins, may well wish to investigate the following papers and books:

Howe, G. F. 1979. Book review of *A Key to Dooyeweerd* by S. T. Wolfe. *Creation Research Society Quarterly*, 16:78-79.

Wolfe, S. T. 1978. *A Key to Dooyeweerd*. Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., Nutley, N.J.

Kalsbeek, L. 1975. *Contours of a Christian Philosophy*. Wedge Publications, Toronto. (Dooyeweerd has always felt this to be the best available introduction to his philosophy.)

Wolfe, S. T. 1971. Dooyeweerd and Creationism. *Creation Research Society Quarterly*, 7:227-228.

### References

1. Duyvene De Wit, J. J. October 24, 1963. First of a series of letters to Dr. George Howe referenced as De Wit, followed by the date.
2. De Wit. December 9, 1963.
3. Duyvene De Wit, J. J. 1963. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the founder of a new pseudo-christian mysticism in P. E. Hughes, Editor, *Creative minds in modern theology*. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids.
4. *Ibid.* (Reprinted in *Philosophia Reformata*, 1964, 29:114-ff.)
5. De Wit. February 5, 1964.
6. De Wit. March 23, 1964.
7. De Wit. April 8, 1964.
8. De Wit. June 16, 1964.
9. De Wit. July 24, 1964.
10. De Wit. August 12, 1964.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. Moore, J. N. October 24, 1964. *Calvinist Contact*.
14. Dooyeweerd, Herman, In the twilight of western thought. 1965. The Craig Press, Nutley, New Jersey.
15. De Wit. September 13, 1964.
16. Duyvene De Wit, J. J. 1964. Ref. 4 and Reflections on the architecture of the organic world and the origin of man. *Philosophia Reformata* 29:114-170.
17. De Wit. February 1, 1965.
18. Riemer, M. J. 1964. Personal correspondence to De Wit. December 11.
19. De Wit. February 1, 1965.
20. De Wit. May 17, 1965.

### QUOTE

Charles Steinmetz, the visionary electrical engineer, said in 1930, of all things:

I think the greatest discovery will be made along spiritual lines. Here is a force which history clearly teaches has been the greatest power in the development of men and history. Yet we have merely been playing with it and have never seriously studied it as we have the physical forces. Some day people will learn that material things do not bring happiness, and are of little use in making men and women creative and powerful. Then the scientists of the world will turn their laboratories over to the study of God and prayer, and the spiritual forces that have hardly been scratched.

Brooks, Warren T. 1984. High technology and Judeo-Christian values: mind, not money, drives the economy. *Imprimis* 13(4):6. Reprinted by permission from *Imprimis*, the monthly journal of Hillsdale College, featuring presentations at Hillsdale's Center for Constructive Alternates and at its Shavano Institute for National Leadership.