

# First Royal Netherlands Academy meeting on evolution and religious belief - September 5, 2006 - a review

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*By TAEDE SMEDES*

In January of 2005, most people in the Netherlands had never heard of it: intelligent design. But in the Spring of that very same year things changed dramatically when Maria van der Hoeven, Minister of Education, Culture, and Science, wrote on her personal weblog that the time was right to reflect on the question whether life had evolved through evolution or perhaps due to an underlying intelligent design. The very few sentences she devoted to ID caused a raging controversy that only slowly subsided throughout 2005. Then, suddenly, the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences took the Minister's call seriously, and announced that, indeed, it was time to reflect anew on the age-old relationship between religion and science.

Last Tuesday (September 5) the first of the series of five debates, initiated by the Royal Netherlands Academy, took place in the Beurs van Berlage in Amsterdam. The interest for the debate turned out to be enormous. Just two weeks after the first announcement all the tickets had sold out. Expectations were high. Would the issue of Intelligent Design in the Netherlands be settled once and for all? The programme for the first evening looked interesting: Cees Dekker, the most outspoken sympathizer of intelligent design in the Netherlands, and an evolutionary biologist, Steph Menken would cross swords. However, against all expectations, it turned out that Dekker and Menken could get along quite nicely.

## **No solution, but clarification**

At the beginning of the evening, moderator Inge Diepman asks Van Oostrom, President of the Royal Netherlands Academy, what the five meetings are aimed at. Van Oostrom warns against too high expectations: "I don't think we'll reach a solution. And I don't hope we do. A scientist likes questions. I do hope to reach some clarification and possibly even some inspiration."

The debate certainly was clarifying. In the first lecture, evolutionary biologist Steph Menken (University of Amsterdam) steps into a helicopter to give a bird's view account of what scientists know about the emergence of life. And that's quite a bit! With help of some powerpoint, he tells the history of life on earth from its first emergence in a primal soup, some 3.5 billion years ago. There is a slight shiver with awe in the audience when Menken shows a photograph of 'stromatolytes', clumps of cyanobacteria still existent at the West coast of Australia and that belong to the most ancient organisms on earth.

Skillfully, Menken maneuvers himself through the huge amount of hypotheses and theories about the emergence of life. When life had come into existence, Menken explains, the mechanisms that were identified by Darwin took hold of it: natural selection and adaptation. But we still know very little about the emergence of life. According to Menken there is at present a "quite insurmountable breach" between scientific just-so stories, the scenarios that describe the emergence of life, and the complexity of even the simplest of bacteria.

However, Menken expects little from 'intelligent design', the idea that life was designed by a supernatural power. "On the basis of evolutionary theory, one can make predictions as to what will happen. Moreover, evolutionary theory admits the possibility of falsification, for instance when irrefutable evidence is found of fossilized mammals in a Precambrian piece of rock. On the basis of intelligent design it's impossible to make predictions. In fact, intelligent design is a lazy theory. One simply renounces all explanation."

Yet, Menken admits that there are many unsolved questions. "Did God create man? I don't think so. But I'm not entirely sure."

## An emotional debate

Cees Dekker (Technical University, Delft), the second main speaker, talks about the relation between evolution and a worldview. In the Dutch discussion on evolution and intelligent design that took place in 2005, rational arguments were hardly heard. It was mainly an emotional debate. Dekker believes this is because there are remain many open questions about the emergence of life. Also, evolutionary theory touches upon the fundamental questions on origins, which are not only of a theoretical nature but are also existential.

Finally, there are biologists, such as Richard Dawkins, who appeal to evolution to make elaborate claims about life being meaningless. Evolution, Dekker concludes, is a science, but for many it has also become a secular religion, a worldview.

In his lecture, Dekker switches to and fro between evolutionary science and his own Christian beliefs. "I am convinced that there's a total design of the world, and I'm also fascinated by the question whether or not we're able to detect that design methodically."

As to the question whether evolution is in conflict with the basic values of the Christian faith, Dekker answers with a resounding no. "Christians believe that God created the heaven and the earth. But there is a huge plurality of visions as to how the world has become what it now is."

But what about the anthropology inherent to evolutionary theory? According to evolutionary theory, humans are merely mammals, according to the Bible, God created man in his own image. But here too Dekker sees a way out. "Humans have mental capacities that distinguish them from animals: self consciousness, rationality, morality, and a sense of the divine and spirituality. There have been made some attempts to reduce those capacities to mere matter, but I find those attempts quite unconvincing."

## Clashing worldviews

If there is a conflict at all, it is at the level of worldviews. "I see a conflict between a theistic and a secular-atheistic worldview," Dekker explains. "But for the rest we should stop speaking about a conflict between religion and science. There have been and still are great scientists who are religious. Faith and science do not cancel each other out. You can't have knowledge without faith and faith also contains an element of knowledge."

The fierce rhetoric that Dekker has used in other debates, tonight remains curiously absent. In the last twenty minutes of the evening, Dekker and Menken sit next to each on the stage, like brothers. There are some questions from the audience, most of them directed at Dekker. When hostess Diepman turns to Menken with a question, he asks her to repeat the question once more. "Sorry, but I momentarily dozed off." That is characteristic of the entire evening. Nowhere does it get tense or remotely exciting.

The opponent that Dekker was supposed to be this evening, remains quiet. Dekker agrees fully with the evolutionary story told by Menken. And Menken leaves some openings for the possibility of intelligent design: "I challenge intelligent design to present a testable hypothesis, something that scientists can use. Unfortunately, I have not seen much of that so far."

And when Menken is asked for his own view on faith and knowledge, he answers: "I know some things in a scientific sense. I have some sort of faith, but it is actually more like hope. I have personal reasons to hope in some way for an afterlife, though I know that the chance of there being one are slim." Dekker looks at him, smiling. "How do you know?" "I don't know," Menken admits, "it's a hunch."

## Retracing of steps

Those who had hoped to attend a spectacle surely will be disappointed. The congeniality between Menken and Dekker turns out to be a lot bigger than the initial announcement made it seem. Also, for those who were even slightly acquainted with the intelligent design debate, the discussion revealed no new angles or surprising new perspectives. At the end of the evening, when there was a quiet drink for those who are not in a hurry to catch their trains, it even seemed as if there are no more questions left, while still four more debates are planned to take place.

Yet at the end of the evening, Frits van Oostrom, the President of the Royal Netherlands Academy is quite pleased with how the evening went. "We could easily have sold a double number of tickets," says Van Oostrom. "With hindsight we should have reserved a bigger room. But we didn't know beforehand that the interest would become this big."

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The next discussion evenings will take place on October 3 (Ronald Plasterk vs. Henk Jochemsen), October 24 (Tijs Goldschmidt vs Wouter van Beek), November 14 (Sander Bais vs. Bram van de Beek, and November 28 (plenary debate with all previous speakers).

Because of the enormous interest in the lectures and the discussions, all the debates are filmed and will be released on DVD after the entire event. More information will follow.

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