

History By Numbers

Ron Numbers, historian of science, medicine, and religion, and winner of the 2008 Sarton Medal, discusses his work, gives a glimpse of a fascinating historical character, and tells of the difficulty in predicting the future.

From early on, Ron Numbers harbored a personal interest in Creationism. “First grade through college I went to fundamentalist Seventh-day Adventist schools. All my male relatives were ministers, so through college I was taught nothing but what came to be known as Young Earth Creationism, even while majoring in science.”

[The 2008 Sarton Medal](#) winner discovered the history of science while earning a master’s degree at Florida State University. After a brief flirtation with mathematics, he turned to history and fell in love with history of science after taking the one course offered in the subject.

A dissertation on Laplace’s nebular hypothesis in America at the University of California, Berkeley, brought science and religion to the fore. “The people I was writing about in the first half of the 19th century were going through experiences similar to mine in the second half of the 20th century. That appealed to me.” The result, *Creation by Natural Law* (1977), was published after *Prophetess of Health* (1976), a book on Adventist founder Ellen G. White. Numbers, then teaching at Loma Linda University, a Seventh-day Adventist school, says of the White study; “What I found was not what they wanted me to find, so they fired me. The only job I could get was at Wisconsin - either dumb luck or providence.” Numbers has been at the University of Wisconsin-Madison since 1974; currently, he is the Hilldale Professor of the History of Science and Medicine.

Religion has always played a role in the history of science, says Numbers, although that role has changed over time. “Most of the historical study in the early years focused on the clash between science and Christianity - I might add that until recently most history of science and religion has been of science and Christianity.” A current project, one of many, is the co-editing with John Hedley Brooke of a book titled *Science and Religion Around the World*, which aims to redress the imbalance, and includes “unbelief” in its remit. This first attempt to look historically at the broad spectrum of science and religion will appear in 2009, and Numbers hopes the work will encourage others to explore the broader picture. “One of the lessons from this book is that outside the Abrahamic faiths there hasn’t been as much concern about reconciling science with religion, so the history isn’t as rich.”

In some circles, Numbers is known as the writer on Creationism, in other circles, he says he’s known as the heretical Ron Numbers. “Those two lives are fairly separate - my former Adventist life and my history of science life.” Numbers traces his academic interest in science and religion to his upbringing. “In fact,” he adds, “most of my friends who work in science and religion have some personal reason for doing so. Many are ex-evangelicals, but the same is true of Jewish and Muslim historians of science and religion. There’s a personal angle to it. Some

would like to expose the ignorance and idiocy as they see it. There's been a long tradition, too, of apologetics in the history of science and religion, of people trying to make Christianity into the driving force of all that's good. You can often see traces of both, which originate, I think, within individual responses."

Numbers likes to tell a story that he says, jokingly, shows him to be the only balanced and objective historian of Creationism around. In 1982, as part of a court case in Louisiana on the teaching of Creationism alongside evolution, both sides asked him to be an expert witness. During deposition, Numbers, for the first time, publicly described himself as an agnostic. When writing about Creationism, fairness is important, says Numbers. "Some have appreciated that; Henry Morris, the grand old man of the Creationist movement wrote a very nice blurb for my book (*The Creationists*, 1992, updated 2006). Others opened up their records for me. And yet a number of reviewers from that camp just skewered me. By and large, the scientific community and the historical community have been very kind, even scientists who could readily be described as creation bashers have appreciated my approach. It's not theirs, but they realize that learning about the movement and what motivates people is a useful exercise."

Numbers claims his knowledge about the history of Creationism gives him no inside track on its future. "My book (*The Creationists*) came out just about the time that Intelligent Design was making its first moves, but you don't see that phrase in the book. I had no idea Intelligent Design was going to be a big deal - I had to add a chapter for the new edition." Some things do remain constant in the new edition, though, including a dislike of evolution, geological ages, and the Big Bang, with human evolution the hottest issue of all, says Numbers. "Even pre-human evolution has not in the past generated the excitement and animosity that human evolution has. With the Big Bang, people don't know what the heck is going on, it's hard to get emotional. They know they don't like it and that it's some sort of godless theory about the origin of the universe, but talk about humans coming from monkeys and you get their attention quickly; they know that's wrong."

"No" is a difficult word for Numbers. Harvard University Press has just published his edited volume *Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths about Science and Religion*, and he is currently tidying up five more edited collections, including one on ideology and biology, and a second on religious pluralism in modern America. His big project is called "Science and the Americans." "I want to reach the mythical general reader, but it will be comprehensive enough that I think it will also be used as a textbook. And since there is zero competition, I might be okay." Numbers will be relieved to finish that book - he's already contracted for the next project, one that takes him back to the history of medicine - a biography of John Harvey Kellogg.

The history of religion and medicine is under represented, says Numbers, given that religious groups played a key role in the creation of American hospitals, in the history of nursing, and in medical missions. "There's a wonderful history to be written on the naturalization of diseases down to AIDS. Religion still remains very prominent with debates over abortion and end-of-life issues and stem cell research. All are hot-button issues. If I could live long enough, I could do

that, if I could stop the aging process.”

More than an academic connection exists between Kellogg and Numbers. Kellogg was a protégé of White and her husband, who sent him to medical school, twice. On his return from medical training, Kellogg took over a small water cure institute in Battle Creek and created the Battle Creek Sanitarium, which became world famous. “He was arguably the most widely read writer on sex at the turn of the century, with lots of editions of his *Plain Facts for Old and Young*. He invented flaked cereals and revolutionized the breakfast habits of America. He invented peanut butter, too. I’m sure other people had smashed up peanuts, but he was the one who popularized peanut butter as a food product. And he was right on the cusp between respectable medicine and quackery. His notion of autointoxication brought him a lot of fame and notoriety.” Once the germ theory of disease spread, Kellogg decided that bowel uncleanness caused sickness - autointoxication. “He recommended bran foods and five enemas a day.”

When Numbers began his career, many doubted the legitimacy of American science. Earlier in the 20th century, a significant gap existed between historians of science, such as I. B. Cohen - who argued that only those American scientists who had an impact in Europe deserved study - and American historians who looked at the role of science in American culture. “You never hear those arguments anymore. It’s a much richer field than when it was narrowly focused on the progressive, triumphalist story that George Sarton insisted on, that history of science was the only truly progressive history anywhere. We just don’t talk that way anymore.”

Numbers sees his life in multiple parts - historian of science, historian of medicine, historian of religion - which include presidencies of the American Society of Church History and the History of Science Society (he has also served as *Isis* editor). “I have a joke that my presidency of HSS overlapped with my presidency of ASCH for eight days, during which I officially declared an end to the war between science and religion. For eight days there was peace and harmony.”

The past four years have been spent as president of the International Union of the History and Philosophy of Science, which has brought him into contact with historians of science the world over. Being in the United States, says Numbers, means you take so much for granted in terms of institutional support, which is not the case in many other countries.

Spending a career following his nose has paid off for Numbers. “I haven’t tried to anticipate what was going to be hot. I started working on the history of Creationism when it was a backwater; I wasn’t even sure I could get published when I wrote about Ellen White. I’ve been fortunate that other people have turned out to be interested in the same things, but I had no plan at all.”

- by Michal Meyer; image courtesy Sage Ross

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