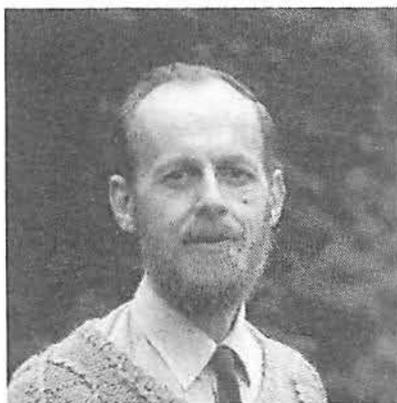

PROFILE

Mart de Groot

Dialogue with an Adventist Astronomer



Between the bay of Donegal on the scenic west coast of Northern Ireland and the tortured city of Belfast in the east lies the ecclesiastical capital of Ireland—the ancient city of Armagh. The director of its 200-year-old hilltop observatory founded in 1790 by Richard Robinson, the Anglican bishop of Armagh, is a Seventh-day Adventist Netherlander.

Dr. Mart de Groot, a world authority on P Cygni, a bright star in the constellation of Cygnus the Swan, has been the director of the obser-

vatory since 1976. When he is not studying the stars or spending time with his wife, Willemien, and their six children and one grandchild, Dr. de Groot gives as much time as he can to evangelism—not an easy business in the troubled religious climate of Northern Ireland.

Dr. de Groot also enjoys gardening, dinghy sailing, and *korfball*—a distant relative to basketball invented in Holland and introduced by de Groot to the Irish.

Please, tell us a little about your childhood and early life.

I was born in Leiden, one of the oldest cities in the Netherlands. My father died when I was five, leaving my mother to take care of my younger brother and myself. But when I was 10 years old my mother remarried. I got a new grandmother who had just become an Adventist. She started to take my brother and me to church. But when I went to a secondary school with classes on Saturdays my church attendance dropped off.

Did you always want to be an astronomer?

When I finished my basic education I had no clear idea about what to do. In my last year at school I opted to study mathematics at the University of Utrecht so that I could imitate my fantastic mathematics teacher. I had to choose one minor subject to go with mathematics and physics. The choice was between chemistry and astronomy. I had already had one disaster with chemistry. One New Year's Eve I had nearly blown my eyes out making homemade fireworks, so I opted for astronomy. What began as an experiment with a largely unknown discipline turned into a major enthusiasm one night a week in the astronomy lab.

What effect did your studies have on your religious thinking?

The evolutionary theory, with its long time-scales and apparent negation of God's personal involvement in Creation, made me think back to my early years in Sabbath school where the story of origins had been a different one.

Did you maintain your church connections while at the university?

No. In fact, I had not been to church for eight years when a young evangelist, Hans LaRondelle, came to the local Seventh-day Adventist church. To please Granny, I accompanied her to the lectures. The prophecies did not interest me a lot, but after the lectures I had the chance to fire a few questions about my "creation or evolution" dilemma. LaRondelle discussed these matters with me and gave me some books to read. Now I was introduced to Jesus Christ, and what I had learned in my childhood acquired new meaning. In 1959 I made my choice: I would serve the Lord. After my baptism I continued postgraduate studies until I completed my doctorate in 1969.

Did your conversion cause you to reconsider your professional aspirations?

At the time of my conversion, and later when I was approaching the end of my thesis, I had to ask myself whether astronomy was really the right thing for a Christian to do so near the end of time. On both occasions I considered preaching the gospel full-time.

Why did you decide to stay with astronomy?

My doubts about the correctness of my choice of career were resolved when I considered the life of the prophet Daniel. Here was a man, 10 times better "in all matters of wisdom and understanding" than his educated contemporaries. He prayed that God would fulfill his promise of allowing the Jews to return to Israel. Yet when they returned he stayed at the court and served the kings of two different world empires. He realized that he was probably the only one who could exert an influence for eternal life on the heads of state he served.

So I decided to witness in the sphere where God had placed me. Indeed in my position I have been in contact with heads of state and high government officials in various countries. I think of myself as a voluntary ambassador of the Lord. I study the universe and run an observatory in Northern Ireland to pay expenses.

So how does a Netherlander come to be living and working in Northern Ireland?

By a long and circuitous route. By the time I finished my doctorate, I was married and we had three children. It was customary at the observatory in Utrecht for young doctors to go abroad for a few years to widen their horizons. I was happy to find a job at the European Southern Observatory in the Chilean Andes. Soon I became the resident astronomer on the mountain. We lived in Chile for six very full and happy years. We moved to Armagh in 1976.

What does Armagh Observatory contribute to the study of astronomy?

Astronomy is one of the most international of disciplines. If an astronomer wishes to observe a star for an uninterrupted period of say, 48 hours, he needs help from colleagues abroad. When the star sets at one place, its observation can be continued by another observatory farther west. Thus, with a number of collaborators at observatories spread around the Earth, a star can be monitored for some length of time. The staff of 16 at Armagh have cooperated with astronomers on all the other continents. Cool stars, which show large explosions in their atmospheres, are the main objects of study at Armagh. We share the excitement of research with the students at The Queen's University of Belfast, and further afield.

What are your duties as director of the observatory?

Beside my scientific work I also have the responsibility for running the observatory. This including all the management tasks. This year the observatory is celebrating its 200th anniversary and we have organized a very ambitious year-long program. It includes a major exhibition, astronomical conferences, lectures, a schools competition, the issue of special postage stamps, various radio and TV programs, etc. This has raised the observatory's profile at home and abroad and given me a number of

opportunities for witnessing. A highlight of the bicentenary was an interview on a prime-time British religious television program—the BBC's *Songs of Praise*.

What is the attitude toward religion among the scientists with whom you work?

Dialogue with colleagues of different religious perspectives is not always easy. Mostly, I find that my colleagues are divided into two large camps. First, there are those who believe that science, given enough time, will ultimately be capable of answering all the questions we can ever ask.

In the other camp are those who have seen enough evidence that science will never be able to answer all our questions, and that there must be a God who knows. I find, though, that people in this latter group normally adhere to ideas about God proclaimed by the large popular churches. They seem to believe that God is relevant to the history and sometimes future of the world, but that he had nothing to do with the origin of the universe.

How can the church reach out to members of the scientific community?

Paul said, "I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some." Likewise, some of us will have to become scientists to be able to understand the working of a scientific mind and know just how to influence its thinking and choosing. God calls his children to enter many different professions and provides them with an income so that they can make full use of their opportunities to witness.

What are the greatest tensions between your scientific knowledge and your Christian faith?

I have continued to wrestle with the question of the origins of the universe. During the first 20 years of my career I tried to ignore the questions of cosmogony and cosmology—the origin and structure of the universe. I wanted to hold onto my simple belief that God had created everything. But it is

necessary to come to grips with even the most difficult questions and wrestle with them until God indicates a way forward. So during the past eight years or so, I have taken a deeper interest in cosmological questions and found that the claims of science in this area are often flawed. Now I have gained enough confidence in this particular matter to cross swords with supporters of the purely materialistic scientific view, and on occasion I have been able to score points in public. But on all occasions my own faith has been strengthened.

What advice would you give to students struggling to marry their scientific knowledge with their Adventist faith?

If you are confronted by scientific claims contrary to Christian belief, you should first take a faith step. Review your own understanding of God, his work, his plan for humanity, and for you personally. Then, from this safe foundation you will have to check the validity and accuracy of the claims of science. This process will require much honesty and will sometimes be painful. But in the end there will be the rich reward of personal peace.

What support does your scientific knowledge provide for your Christian faith?

Astronomy allows one to see a part of creation almost entirely unspoiled by sin. It can give insight into the character of the Creator and provide strong support for personal faith. The universe shows me that God is a God of order, but also of surprises, a God who works according to a plan as well as a God who likes variety, a God who is concerned with the very small and the very large, a God who is all-powerful and eternal.

Helen Pearson

Helen Pearson has completed a master's degree in religious journalism at the City University in London. Helen and her husband, Michael, teach at Newbold College, in England.