Reilly Center Reports

Catholic Faith and Evolution: Has Anything Changed?

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A new round of controversy over the Catholic Church’s position on the science of evolution was unleashed by an op-ed column published in the New York Times in July, 2005, authored by Cristoph Cardinal Schönborn, Archbishop of Vienna. The editors titled an article published two days later, “Leading Cardinal Redefines Church’s View on Evolution.” As misleading as this title is, it did capture the impression that many of the responses to the letter, both pro and con, took from it. Unfortunately, Cardinal Schönborn’s statement has further muddied already silty waters, particularly in the context of ongoing debates over Intelligent Design Theory. Ought Catholic scientists to be concerned that certain scientific conclusions are going to be “trumped” by the Church’s teachings? Should teachers of science in Catholic schools feel obligated to give greater credence to the attacks on evolution than the scientific facts of the case warrant, because evolution has been found to contradict Catholic faith? The answer to both of these questions is still the same as it has been: no.

(1) Did Cardinal Schönborn “redefine” the Church’s view on evolution?

An easy negative answer to this question comes from the simple observation that Cardinal Schönborn does not have the authority to redefine the Church’s view. Cardinal Schönborn is the Archbishop of Vienna, and he has legitimate authority as a teacher of the faith in that diocese, although even there he must teach in harmony with the entire college of bishops in union with the Bishop of Rome. Outside of that, his theological position has precisely the authority that the strength of his arguments confers, no more and no less. Some have pointed out that he is the general editor of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, or that he is an influential Cardinal who is close to Pope Benedict XVI. These are valid points, and suggest that he does represent a theological opinion held by significant numbers of Catholic bishops and officials of the Vatican Curia. This does not, however, suffice to turn this view into a binding teaching of the Catholic Church. In fairness, Schönborn does not himself claim to do this in his piece; he claims, rather, to clarify a position that has already been taken by the Church and that is being overlooked or distorted.

Then, what is the officially binding teaching of the Church on evolution? A precise answer to this question has to start with the fact that those authorized to speak in the name of the Church in a binding way have done so only very sparingly when it comes to evolution. For example, toward the end of the nineteenth century a number of books were referred to the so-called “Congregation of the Index” because they advocated various degrees and forms of harmony between Catholic doctrine and evolution. (“The Index,” abolished soon after the Second Vatican Council, was a list of books deemed to contain heretical opinions.) The Congregation of the Index repeatedly declined to issue a public condemnation of evolution or to place a book on the Index explicitly because of its advocacy of evolution. Recent research into the Vatican archives has shown that there was a strong desire to avoid a repeat of the Galileo affair: specifically, of the 1616 condemnation of Copernicanism and the placement on the Index of several books advocating the harmony of Copernicanism and Scripture. To avoid this, they dealt with books about which they had concerns “unofficially.” Often this meant securing the withdrawal from publication of these books by working through religious superiors of the authors (who were almost all priests). Later in the twentieth century a similar tactic was used with priest and scientist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, of the Society of Jesus, who was simply forbidden to publish by his Jesuit superiors.

The result is that there is no official statement, either condemning or approving evolution, from an authoritative congregation of the Vatican, even though there were ample opportunities to issue one. There was no authoritative statement from a Pope prior to Pius IX’s 1950 encyclical, Humani Generis. Without entangling ourselves too deeply in questions of “what counts” as an officially binding doctrine of the Catholic Church, it should be noted that even an encyclical, although a serious statement of Catholic belief,
falls short of the authority of an “infallible” statement, explicitly issued as such by a Pope, or the authority of statements by ecumenical councils (such as Vatican II). That said, Pius IX stated in *Humani Generis* that Catholics were free to accept the scientific theory of evolution as a matter for debate. They could not, however, question the doctrine of “monogenism”—the belief that all human beings descended from a single originating couple. They also had to maintain that even if evolution could explain the origin of the human body from “pre-existing living matter,” each soul was created and “infused” into each individual directly by God.[1] When John Paul II issued his own statement in 1996, as an address to the Pontifical Academy of Science, he went even further. He observed that the theory of evolution is “more than a theory,” and that the convergence of independent lines of inquiry in support of the theory is “a significant argument in favor of this theory.”[2] He was, thus, far more positive about the status of the theory as scientifically demonstrated, and it is for this that many advocates of evolution, such as Stephen Jay Gould, praised the statement. Referring back to Pius XII, John Paul II stipulated only that Catholics must believe in the direct, divine origin of the human soul (he quietly left the issue of monogenism to the side).

So, in conclusion, Cardinal Schönborn did not, on the one hand, have the authority to “redefine” the Catholic position on evolution. In fact, the official Catholic position on evolution has few explicit planks. There is no officially binding statement that, on the basis of Catholic doctrine, rules out acceptance of evolution, of whatever scientific form, as long as the uniqueness of the human person is maintained by means of asserting the direct divine creation of the human soul (more on this in a moment). Since this is so, scientists and theologians (still) have a great deal of freedom in dealing with the science of evolution.

(2) Then what is all the fuss about?

If there is a paucity of binding statements on evolution from the Church’s magisterium, this is not to say that concerns have not been voiced. The only point of the foregoing section is that these concerns have not resulted in the statement of a binding truth of the faith. For the first hundred years or so after the publication of *The Origin of Species*, the major concern had to do with the application of evolution to the origin of the human race, specifically to the extent that it conflicted with the stories about human beginnings in Genesis 1 and 2 (what would one do, for instance, with the creation of Eve from Adam’s rib in Gen. 2:21-22?). This problem has been resolved for Catholics, at least on the level of authoritative teaching, with the acceptance, beginning in the 1950’s, of the methods and results of modern scripture scholarship. It is now uncontroversial (for Catholics, if not for fundamentalists) to recognize that accepting the truth of these parts of Scripture need not mean accepting them as scientifically accurate accounts of human origins.

The issue of “monogenism,” which we already saw briefly, is a somewhat different case. The reason for holding on to descent from an original pair comes not just from a literal reading of Genesis 1 & 2, but lies in the role this story played in subsequent Christian scripture and tradition. In a fateful move, St. Paul drew a parallel between our unity in Adam, in terms of which we are all sinful, and our unity in the redeeming grace of Christ (see, for example, Rom 5:12-21 and 1 Cor 15:20-23). In large measure due to St. Augustine, this parallel evolved (if you’ll pardon the expression!) into the doctrine of original sin. Monogenism and the related doctrine of “the Fall” became the third rail of theological reflection on the implications of evolution. It was when Teilhard de Chardin suggested in the early 1920’s that one need not, indeed should not, take the doctrine of original sin to depend on a specific historical action by a particular couple, however many millennia ago, that he lost his university position in France and was exiled to China!

But this is no longer the burning issue that it once was. We have already seen that in his address on evolution, John Paul II reiterated Pius XII’s insistence on the direct divine creation of each human soul, but left aside Pius’ other condition for acceptance of evolution: adherence to monogenism. When the International Theological Commission, a select group of theologians which aids the Vatican curia and the bishops in interpreting Christian doctrine, took up the issue of evolution in 2004, it did mention “the common ancestry and natural unity of the human race,” but without explicitly tying this to monogenism.[3] For over forty years Catholic theologians have been exploring different ways of talking about this “natural unity” without relying on monogenism. Thus, it is safe to say that the science of evolution does not make the doctrine of the fall and original sin any more difficult than it already was anyway!
John Paul II’s primary concern when it came to evolution was maintaining the theological doctrine that each person is created in the image and likeness of God (the *imago dei*). This was important to him because it provided an indispensable basis for the assertion of the inalienable dignity of each person, a fundamental pillar of Catholic Social teachings, among other things. Maintaining the doctrine of *imago dei* is the primary reason he gives for holding on to the doctrine of God’s immediate creation of each individual soul. However, this is a doctrine based in revelation (e.g., Gen 1:26-27), and depends ultimately on the person’s faithful acceptance of revelation rather than demonstration by science. Moreover, John Paul argued that the soul and its creation are phenomena outside of the realm of science, so that science can neither prove nor disprove it.

If, then, science should not be called upon either to prove or to disprove this doctrine, then why mention it in a statement on evolution? Here John Paul II made an important distinction between what the science of evolution is in itself and what it becomes when united with a broader philosophical perspective.

And, to tell the truth, rather than the theory of evolution, we should speak of several theories of evolution. On the one hand, this plurality has to do with the different explanations advanced for the mechanism of evolution, and on the other, with the various philosophies on which it is based. Hence the existence of materialist, reductionist, and spiritualist interpretations. What is to be decided here is the true role of philosophy, and beyond it, of theology. [4]

Biologists would probably balk at the claim that scientific disagreements over the causal explanations constitute a fragmentation of the Neo-Darwinian synthesis into a plurality of theories. In any event, for John Paul II, as for the ITC eight years later, these disputes “cannot be settled by theology.”[5] For him it is in the second source of pluralism of “theories of evolution” that the Church does have a stake, but that is because at this point these theories have become broader “world-views,” which go beyond the specific scientific results precisely by “combining” with a certain philosophical perspective. Some of these theories are indeed, the Pope argued, inconsistent with the doctrine of the sacred dignity of the person; but John Paul makes it clear that this is because of the philosophical viewpoint by which the science has been interpreted: “theories of evolution which, *in accordance with the philosophies inspiring them*, consider the mind as emerging from the forces of living matter, or as a mere epiphenomenon of this matter, are incompatible with the truth about man. Nor are they able to ground the dignity of the person.”[6] Only if it can be shown that the science of evolution, narrowly speaking, can *only* be interpreted through these “materialist” philosophies is the science problematic; but this has to be demonstrated, not assumed.

In cases where tensions like these arise, John Paul calls for clarity about the disciplines that are involved: are we evaluating the natural science, narrowly construed; the philosophy by which the science is interpreted and expanded into a broader worldview; or the theology which interprets the truth that emerges from either of the other two in the light of its own sources in scripture and tradition? The necessity to keep these boundaries clear, if also open, is one of the major lessons that the late Pope drew from the Galileo affair.[7] In speaking of Galileo John Paul firmly insists on the traditional Catholic doctrine that since God is the source of all truth, then truths found in different disciplines cannot in principle conflict. This includes truths of natural science and truths drawn from revelation. Moving from this “in principle” coherence to an adjudication of conflicts requires, in his view, a careful epistemological inquiry into how these truths have been worked out, in the disciplines appropriate to each (science, philosophy, theology).

With the mention of “materialist philosophies” we have now finally come to Cardinal Schönborn’s concern. Schönborn’s objection, however, turns on different issue than the dignity of the person. He is concerned about the question of the role of chance in evolution, and the degree to which a scientific theory that gives a preeminent role to randomness and contingency, as does the Neo-Darwinian theory of evolution, can be harmonized with a belief in God’s providential governance of the universe. Schönborn states categorically that “evolution in the neo-Darwinian sense -- an unguided, unplanned process of random variation and natural selection -- is not [true]. Any system of thought that denies or seeks to explain away the overwhelming evidence for design in biology is ideology, not science.” This concern is not a new
one. Indeed, a classic statement of it can be found in Princeton theologian, Charles Hodge’s 1874 book, *What is Darwinism?* How might we evaluate it along the lines that John Paul II suggested?

Unfortunately, Schönborn is not as careful as John Paul II, or the International Theological Commission, which he also quotes (very selectively). He speaks indiscriminately of “neo-Darwinian dogma,” or simply “neo-Darwinism,” without clarifying what he means by this. As I read him, he makes two claims. First, he asserts that “neo-Darwinism” entails a rejection of design in nature that makes it impossible to assert God’s providential governance of all creation, which is a truth of revelation. Second, he asserts that “neo-Darwinism” rejects evidence for design in nature which is in opposition to a truth of revelation that can also be reached by human reason. Here he appeals to the statement of the First Vatican Council that there are certain truths of faith which can be ascertained by unaided human reason. If we follow John Paul II’s warning to keep some clear if permeable disciplinary boundaries between science, philosophy and theology, what should we make of these claims? Since both turn on the issue of divine providence I will focus there.

First, “neo-Darwinism” can mean either a particular form of the science of evolution, or it can mean a broader philosophical perspective. It seems that Schönborn has the latter in mind, particularly as represented by some particularly ferocious atheists such as Jacques Monod, Richard Dawkins, and Daniel Dennett. It is true that these men argue that Neo-Darwinism as science discredits theism altogether, but others (such as theologians John Haught, Alister McGrath, or Langdon Gilkey, or philosopher Michael Ruse) have retorted persuasively that these claims step outside the boundaries of science to make general epistemological or metaphysical points. Thus, the argument is not with the science but with the philosophical interpretation of the science, a distinction of which Schönborn appears unaware.

Does the science of evolution undermine the fundamental conviction of faith that God providentially governs the universe? Here it depends on how one conceives of that governance. Since the eighteenth century one particular image or model for thinking of God’s governance of the universe has been so predominant that it has almost been forgotten that it is just that: one possible image. This is the model of the engineer, building a machine according to a preexisting plan. William Paley made this approach famous with his analogy of the divine watchmaker. As the watchmaker is to the watch, so is God to the cosmos. It is this image that Richard Dawkins had in his sights when he wrote *The Blind Watchmaker*.

Schönborn and Dawkins evidently agree on the assumption that to undermine that particular model for thinking about divine governance is to undermine any possible model of divine providence. But this is precisely what needs to be shown, and it has certainly not been a statement of authoritative Catholic teaching. The International Theological Commission itself draws on thomistic philosophy to argue that even if certain crucial processes in natural history are shown to be contingent at very profound levels, this does not preclude talking about divine governance:

*But it is important to note that, according to the Catholic understanding of divine causality, true contingency in the created order is not incompatible with a purposeful divine providence. Divine causality and created causality radically differ in kind and not only in degree. Thus, even the outcome of a truly contingent natural process can nonetheless fall within God’s providential plan for creation.* [8]

The point here is not to elaborate particular solutions to how one might think of God’s providence in a natural world “ruled” by contingency, but to point out that this is still an open question. After all, it is not just modern science that is pushing theologians to rethink their philosophical arguments and imaginative models for presenting divine providence. The Book of Job ought to have taught us to be suspicious of easy solutions to this question, and the history of suffering of the past century should only drive that lesson home even more forcefully.

In conclusion then, Schönborn’s statement does not represent a shift in the Catholic Church’s position on evolution, nor even an accurate reflection of what that position is. To the extent that his statement mirrors a strong concern in Catholic (and Protestant) theology on how to combine the science of evolution with the
doctrine of divine providence, the approach proposed by John Paul II in 1996, and adopted by the International Theological Commission in its 2004 discussion, is still the most prudent route for a Catholic theologian or scientist to take. It requires making careful distinctions between when one is working in the realm of science, when one has moved in philosophy beyond the conclusions of science to say something broader about the world and how we know it, and when in theology one is attempting to discern points of harmony and dissonance between science and philosophy, and the truths of faith. When it comes to evolution and Christianity, there is still much work to be done in each of those fields, and the danger of Schönborn’s open letter is that it will short circuit that hard work, just as the condemnation of Copernicanism did in 1616.

Notes

[1] Pius XII, “Humani Generis,” nos. 5, 6, 37, 37.


The statements of the ITC are not to be taken as expressions of the “magisterium” (the official teaching authority of the Church), but it does have a significant voice, in part because its publications are released under the authority of the prefect of the Congregation of the Defense of the Faith. The prefect at the time of this statement was the future Pope Benedict XVI, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger.

[4] John Paul II: “Magisterium is concerned with question of evolution, for it involves the conception of man.” Message to Pontifical Academy of Sciences, no. 4. This is available online at http://www.its.caltech.edu/~nmcenter/sci-cp/evolution.html

[5] See ITC, “Communion and Stewardship,” no. 69. The whole point of the Pontifical Academy of Science, to which John Paul II made his address on evolution, is “to inform the Holy See in complete freedom about developments in scientific research” (“Magisterium is concerned,” no. 1, emphasis added).


[8] ITC, “Communion and Stewardship,” no. 69. Schönborn neglects to cite this part of the document.