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# Catholicism, Evolution and Science- Theology Discussions

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## *An Interview between Joseph E. Gorra and Fr. Michael Chaberek*

The history of theology and Darwinian evolutionary theory continues to attract significant attention by historians, philosophers and theologians. Michael Chaberek's latest book, [\*Catholicism and Evolution: A History from Darwin to Pope Francis\*](#), takes up this history in a fresh and detailed way. In addition, Chaberek's new EPS web contribution, "[Thomas Aquinas and Theistic Evolution](#)," hones in on the arguments for and against use of Aquinas in the evolution debate. This EPS interview with Chaberek unpacks both contributions and their implications.

**For a number of years, Protestant and Catholic scholars have addressed issues at the intersections of theology and science. How do you view the deliverances of these domains of knowledge and their interrelationship?**

First of all, only modernity with the achievements of modern science enables us to fully comprehend the question of origins, especially the origin of all biological diversity. Throughout the centuries, this knowledge was derived from Genesis, but Christian authors (even such prominent figures as Augustine and Aquinas) were unsure of how to interpret the six days of creation.

Today, we know with some degree of certitude what nature can accomplish and what is beyond its inherent powers. For instance, the theory of spontaneous generation was abandoned even though it was commonly accepted by earlier theologians. We know much more about the timeline of natural history and the order of emergence of the different elements of the universe, especially living beings.

**Does this mean our theological understanding of origins should be revised?**

All of this, however, hasn't changed the basic premises stemming from traditional theology. One of them - common to all Christianity - was the belief that the origin of all biodiversity cannot be explained with reference to nature alone. It must employ the supernatural works of God acting immediately on nature. Unfortunately, the majority of Christian scholars – both Protestant and Catholic, whether theologians or scientists – gave into the materialists' claim that the origin of species is explicable within the scientific domain alone. And if science can fully explain it, then it must be a natural event that excludes supernatural causation altogether.

## **You have theistic evolutionists in mind?**

Yes, this is exactly what theistic evolutionists believe in – that evolution is a purely natural process (even if guided or set up by God). After adopting the materialists’ claim, Christian scholars have put a lot of effort into explaining away the message of Genesis and the fundamental teachings of traditional theology.

## **How do we deal with this?**

Today, we need to regain a proper balance between theology and natural science. We need to recognize anew the authority of theology to provide an ultimate answer to the question of origins. Only then can we build a science-faith synthesis based on sound scientific facts on the one hand and a serious approach to the Book of Genesis on the other.

## **What do you find to be the leading historical and historiographical challenges regarding the ‘story of evolution’ among Catholic leadership and theology?**

Immediately after Darwin presented his theory, the vast majority of Catholic scholars opposed Darwinian ideas. Today, those scholars who accept “some form of macroevolution” and think that this is theology’s way to go try to diminish that initial opposition. Moreover the private documents of the Church from that period remained virtually unknown until 1997 when the Archives of the Holy Office were opened to researchers.

## **What was learned?**

We have only recently learned how explicit the initial opposition of the teaching office of the Church was to the scholars who attempted to “baptize Darwin” by claiming that God “guides” or “set up” the evolutionary process. Even those authors who exempted the human body from evolutionary origin (D. Leroy, R. Caverni) were ordered by the Congregation of the Index to withdraw their books and abandon theistic evolution.

Besides the private acts against the first authors promoting theistic evolution, there were also public doctrinal statements rejecting the evolutionary origin of the human body. These include a doctrinal definition from the Synod of Cologne (1860) and statements from the Papal Encyclical *Arcanum Divinae Sapientiae* (1880). The explicit or implicit rejection of biological macroevolution was maintained by the Church teaching office until the 1950’s encyclical *Humani Generis*.

### **Can you elaborate on the value of *Humani Generis*?**

In this last document, Pope Pius XII allowed for discussions about the evolutionary origin of the human body. Even though the Pope didn't make any positive judgement regarding the evolutionary hypothesis (he made it only implicitly possible), *Humani Generis* marks a turning point.

### **Why was *Humani Generis* historically significant?**

After 1950, Catholic scholars nearly universally abandoned the belief in the special creation of the human body. Historically speaking it is a striking fact because this truth was universally taught by the Church Fathers, the Medieval Doctors (both in Aristotelian-Thomistic and Platonian-Augustinian traditions) and all orthodox theologians until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. It is also explicit in the first Catechism from 1566 and all subsequent local catechisms published before 1950.

### **Can you put the significance of what you are saying in a nineteenth-century historical context?**

When Darwin arrived with "The Descent of Man," Catholic scholars did not argue whether the human body evolved or was formed from clay by immediate Divine action. The former was not even allowed as an option. Instead, theologians argued whether "sound doctrine" regarding the special creation of the human body is a solemn dogma or just an ordinary teaching (!). In theological terms a period of a few decades is a short time and such an "evolution" of Catholic teaching must surprise any scholar who sees the problem in a broader perspective. I think that the greatest challenge for the contemporary idea of "a hominid being endowed with a spiritual soul" is historical evidence – 1900 uninterrupted years of Church doctrinal teaching testifying to the special formation of the first human body.

### **How is Catholicism's distinct encounter and confrontation with evolutionary theory related to how it understands divine authority?**

As you may know, Catholics believe that Christian revelation is expressed in three ways – through Holy Scripture, Holy Tradition and the Church Magisterium (the teaching office of the Church). Precisely this belief was challenged in Luther's formula *Sola Scriptura*. In the Catholic sense, there is some order of the three sources of faith (Lat. *loci theologici*) – Tradition would never contradict the Scriptures, and Church teaching follows the Scriptures and Tradition. In a sense, Holy Scripture (New Testament) is the record of Holy Tradition, i.e., the oral teachings of the Apostles. Thus we can also say that Holy Scripture is a part of Tradition. Each of these sources adds some

aspect to Catholic doctrine; Scriptures add objectivity and immutability, Tradition guarantees the proper understanding of the Bible and makes explicit some teachings from Scripture, and the Magisterium actualizes the doctrine in different times and cultures. Obviously, this “triune” source of faith is actually the one source of Christian belief and there cannot be a contradiction between any of the sources.

### **How did this shape nineteenth and twentieth century debates about origins?**

To understand how this understanding of God’s revelation influences the evolution debate we need to go back to the modernist crisis of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Modernism was mainly a challenge to traditional Biblical exegesis. It consisted of critical exegesis or higher criticism. Higher criticism challenged not just the Catholic but also the Protestant understanding of the Bible (in fact, it started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestant biblical scholarship in Germany).

### **How did this influence the ‘authority’ question, whether the authority of the church to address these issues or the authority of the Bible as an indispensable source of knowledge of reality?**

Altogether, Biblical criticism deprived the Bible of its normative value. The Bible was not a norm anymore (*norma normans non normata* – Augustine), but just one of the texts which is subject to the same methods and experiments as any other ancient writing. The academic value of critical exegesis - with its multiple unfounded assumptions and its often contradictory methods and results - has been disputed. Nevertheless, critical exegesis justified the abandonment of many traditional beliefs. It also made room for the wide acceptance of evolutionary theory among Catholics and Protestants alike.

### **How so?**

The Genesis account of creation was rendered a myth, one of the beautiful poems of Antiquity, or a reminiscence of the Babylonian or other mythologies in Hebrew culture, etc. All of these interpretations - as much as they might reveal some aspects of Genesis – deprived it of its one main and substantial value, namely, of being a text that recounts the true and historical beginning of the universe. Once the Biblical message was dethroned, some other theory of origins had to replace it. The Darwinian story proved a good candidate and it has become the new foundation myth for the post-Christian civilization of our times.

### **But is the problem of ‘biblical criticism’ the core of the problem?**

No, here is the core of the problem: Catholics, like Protestants, have made peace between the Book of Genesis and Darwin’s theory by removing the Genesis message and transferring it to the realm of poetry and metaphor, i.e. literary fiction. Critical exegetical methods made the job.

Holy Tradition as well as Church pronouncements are not vulnerable (at least not to the same degree) to the same methods. Theological tradition in the form of the Church Fathers and Holy Doctors (like Augustine, Ambrose, Thomas Aquinas) is irreconcilable with the Darwinian view of origins.

### **But some Catholic scholars working ‘in’ the tradition have found peace with Darwinian evolution and their theological convictions.**

In my opinion, Catholic scholars who speak about the non-contradiction between evolution and Genesis chapters 1-3 flounder in aporias and contradictions. In order to make the two compatible they need to deny the historical value of Genesis. But this is not enough, because the new interpretation of Genesis needs to be compatible also with enduring Church Tradition. So, either they need to reinterpret and invalidate the whole Tradition and a number of Church pronouncements – a step much harder than tinkering with Genesis alone – or they need to say that Genesis was wrongly understood throughout nearly the entirety of Church history, by the saints, the popes and the Holy Doctors. Each way is difficult and places theistic evolutionists on shaky ground. On the other hand, Protestant scholars could rediscover the importance of Tradition and the Church Magisterium by realizing how useful these sources are in defending the authentic Christian understanding of creation.

### **Given debates among ‘creationists,’ ‘theistic evolutionists’ and ‘intelligent design’ advocates, what can each potentially learn from your book?**

In my book *Catholicism and Evolution* I offer a different typology: Young Earth Creationists, Progressive Creationists, Theistic Evolutionists and Atheistic Evolutionists. These four groups include all positions in the current debate regarding the origin of species. As you see, there aren’t intelligent design advocates, because one can find them among all “theistic groups” (although theoretically even atheists can adopt the basic claims of intelligent design theory).

## **What is the relationship between intelligent design theory and a theological framework?**

My division is made with reference to a theological standpoint whereas intelligent design is a scientific theory and, as such, is essentially independent from any particular theological views. The book *Catholicism and Evolution* is mostly historical, covering only the post-Darwinian debates about evolution.

## **How does your book develop?**

The introductory part deals with the controversy within natural science. Its climax is marked by the emergence of the intelligent design theory. The core of the book presents theological debates regarding evolution in the Catholic Church. Two great stages are clearly distinguishable – first is an explicit rejection of the evolutionary story whether in its atheistic or theistic form. The second stage is a moderate acceptance of the theistic form of evolution in the Church. However, even this acceptance is not quite explicit; it leaves many questions opened and is not accompanied by a rejection of either of the competing ideas (i.e. Young Earth Creationism and Progressive Creationism).

## **How does your perspective differ from other books on the history of this debate?**

Unlike the majority of the books on the topic, my goal was not to diminish the initial rejection of the Darwinian theory by the Church and then highlight its acceptance in contemporary theology, but to present the “true” history including both the initial resistance to theistic evolution and the current confusion in the Church on this issue.

## **How do present debates about science and theology, especially the topic of origins, reflect past developments?**

When we look to the past we see a battlefield packed with dead ideas and arguments, and smoke after fiery debates. When we look into the present we do not see a definite answer to the question of the origin of species and the human body in particular. These facts make believers ask a few questions: Can Catholic doctrine evolve to the degree of a complete abandonment of a given truth of faith? Is Revelation so vague and vulnerable to scientific scrutiny that at the end of the day we cannot say anything positive about origins based on Revelation alone? Does the Bible provide us only with moral teachings on how to get to heaven, or does it also shape our worldview, that is, our understanding of the beginnings and the destination of physical reality? As a detailed historical description of ongoing theological

debates, my book provides a factographical knowledge which is an indispensable though insufficient tool to resolve these greater questions.

**How, specifically, does your [EPS web paper](#) extend your book's discussion?**

*Catholicism and Evolution* recounts the evolutionary debate of the past 150 years. To provide the full Catholic answer to Darwin's theory we need to refer to the broader Catholic tradition, specifically the writings of Thomas Aquinas. Darwin tried to justify his grand metaphysical claims about universal common ancestry, transformation of species and the animal origin of the human body by employing some biological facts (like bacteria becoming resistant to antibiotics) and laws (like natural selection).

**How might Thomists respond?**

Today many Thomists accept those facts and laws, and they think that they indeed justify Darwinian metaphysics, i.e., those grand claims about the universal common ancestry or the transformation of species. Besides, many Thomists accept the theologically unfounded premise that the natural history of the universe cannot contain the so-called "physical leaps". In other words, they assume that God did not act supernaturally in the natural history of the universe. In order to defend those Darwinian grand claims and the natural explanation of the whole history of the universe, they try to employ Aquinas' ideas.

**Why might some Thomists think that defense is needed or compelling?**

Some Thomists are honestly bothered by the fact that if Aquinas' teachings were incompatible with biological macroevolution then either Thomas or evolution must be wrong. Because they believe in evolution and also do not want to challenge the theory reigning in science, they choose to reinterpret Aquinas' doctrine and show how it is "compatible" or "leaves room" for Darwinian metaphysics.

**And this get us to your paper, right?**

Yes, in my paper I address this problem. I show that Aquinas' metaphysics is incompatible with and in fact, contradicts Darwinian metaphysics. And this is true regardless of whether or not one agrees with Aquinas and even regardless of whether or not Aquinas was right.



## **So, is there a need for a ‘renewal’ of the Catholic theology of creation to address contemporary scientific advances and challenges? If so, what might the contours of that look like?**

There is a twofold reason why such a “renewal” is necessary. First, modern science really enriched our understanding of the origins of the visible universe. For instance, throughout the centuries there were two interpretative traditions of the Genesis account. One was attributed to St. Ambrose. According to him different species of living beings were created independently over a time, which Genesis calls “six days”. Another tradition was attributed to St. Augustine. According to him, species were also created distinct from each other but their creation happened in one moment at the beginning of time. Some of them were created in a developed and other in a hidden form or seminal reasons (Lat. *rationes seminales*).

### **How does Aquinas factor into this historical theology?**

When Thomas Aquinas summarizes the Christian interpretative traditions, he says that he would defend both, and that they agree in their essential points (i.e., supernatural creation of species as distinct since their inception). Modern knowledge in paleontology, however, shows that plants and animals appeared on Earth successively over a long time. This strongly favors the Ambrosian tradition over the Augustinian one. Apparently, contemporary knowledge enables us to settle the question of which of the two traditional interpretations of Genesis is closer to the truth.

### **What is the other reason for a renewal?**

The second reason why the renewal is necessary stems from the fact that the traditional doctrine of creation has been nearly completely abandoned in contemporary Christianity. Even in the seminaries and theological departments, the classic theological treatise On Creation (*De Deo Creante* or *De Creatione*) has been replaced with the teaching about different science-faith models and vague speculations about “God working entirely through secondary causes”. In Biblical scholarship the historical and literal meaning of Genesis (1-3) was abandoned, giving place to all kinds of reductive interpretations. But new science shows how little the Darwinian mechanism can actually accomplish.

### **How so?**

Paleontology reveals striking discontinuity in the fossil record. Thus at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, biological facts stripped of theoretical interpretation encourage us to return to the classic Christian doctrine on

creation. There is no contradiction between natural facts and the belief in creation – the contradiction is between the doctrine of creation and evolutionary theory, that is, an abstract construct built upon (or even regardless of) the facts. The renewed teaching on creation needs to take into account both the best scientific discoveries and traditional theological interpretations.

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