

Catholicism and Evolution: not so compatible after all?

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Recall your frustration when the media reported Pope Francis's remarks in favor of evolution as though they represented a total reversal of the Church's teaching on the subject. Sheer annoyance with the media is enough to explain why educated Catholics responded by emphasizing that this is nothing new; that belief in evolution was explicitly deemed permissible way back when by Pius XII.

I myself was taught growing up that Catholics are permitted to believe in evolution with three important caveats: we must affirm that God initiated the process, that all human beings are descended from an original pair (monogenism), and that each human soul is specially created by God.

This is true as far as it goes. Catholics are permitted—that is to say, not forbidden—to believe in a form of evolution. But the author of a new history of Catholicism and evolution wants you to know that just because Catholics are not forbidden to believe in evolution—specifically, in biological macroevolution, including the evolution of the human body—does not mean that evolution and Catholicism are ultimately compatible.

While the majority of Catholic theologians today accept what is called “theistic evolution”, which is basically neo-Darwinian evolution with the bare-minimum concessions to Catholic doctrine specified by Pius XII—it would seem that the Catholic tradition contains more difficulties for evolution than most realize or are willing to acknowledge.

The author is Fr. Michael Chaberek, a Polish Dominican, and the book is *Catholicism and Evolution: A History from Darwin to Pope Francis*, recently published by Angelico Press. Chaberek traces the development of Catholic attitudes towards Darwinism over the past century-and-a-half, from the early Catholic evolutionists, some of whom ran afoul of the Index of Forbidden Books, through to the encyclical *Humani Generis* of Pope Pius XII, to the cautious (or not-so-cautious) acceptance of the current era.

The sources Chaberek examines include both magisterial and non-magisterial statements on evolution by Church officials, the opinions of theologians, and even some magisterial documents which were not about evolution but addressed issues of creation directly relevant to the debate. There is also an appendix which goes further back to the views of the Church Fathers (particularly St. Augustine) and later saints and theologians (such as St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Robert Bellarmine) on the origin of the human body.

Chaberek is seemingly very thorough in covering as many relevant sources as possible, not just magisterial statements and the opinions of Popes. (I say “seemingly” simply because I am not conversant enough with the Catholic literature on evolution to know for sure.) Less obvious sources examined by Chaberek include documents of the Index that were previously absent from the debate because they were not made public until the 1990s.

As Chaberek points out, certain Catholic evolutionists had their works prohibited or at least were given warnings by the Index; but because the Index's internal documents were not available, nobody knew what views in particular were objected to and therefore the prohibitions could tell us little from a doctrinal standpoint. While not infallible or even magisterial, the various reports presented by consultants to the Index are valuable sources which show us how prominent Churchmen and theologians at the time interpreted the Church's teachings on creation.

A Danger of Bias

As early as the first chapter, readers will note that Chaberek is an enthusiastic proponent of intelligent design. The book is liberally sprinkled with arguments for intelligent design and against mainstream evolutionism. Now even though ID is ostensibly a scientific, not theological, theory, it is not necessarily irrelevant to a book on Catholicism and evolution, since many of the Church's statements on the matter, particularly regarding the interpretation of Genesis, have been predicated on whether or not evolution has been "proven" or has at least passed beyond mere speculation.

After all, it would be rash to overturn the traditional interpretation of, for example, man's creation from the dust of the earth merely to accommodate a yet unproven theory which may be abandoned within a few decades. Most churchmen now accept that there is sufficient evidence for biological macroevolution, but if Chaberek is convinced otherwise, it is natural for him to include scientific arguments with the intent of showing that Scripture has been prematurely reinterpreted.

I myself am undecided in the ID vs. macroevolution debate. That said, I was concerned to note that all five blurbs on the back of *Catholicism and Evolution* are from prominent ID advocates. The question on my mind as I prepare to write this review, then, has been to what degree Chaberek is a biased source. More specifically, there are two questions: First, has Chaberek's bias (justified or not) against macroevolution led him to leave out important facts or fudge history? Second, how biased is his interpretation of the facts?

To the first question my answer is a relatively confident no. Though I am not qualified to say for sure, it seems to me that Chaberek has been quite thorough in his presentation of the history itself; and because he quotes plentifully from the primary sources, the reader is given a fair chance to decide for himself how they ought to be interpreted.

But from the second question Chaberek does not escape quite so unscathed. On the one hand, he is somewhat convincing in arguing that contemporary theologians have in their eager support for evolution glossed over a number of difficulties presented by the Catholic philosophical and theological traditions. However, fairly consistently, he makes his sources say more than they actually say against evolution, or gives them greater teaching authority than they actually have.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission

Take for example what would seem to be one of Chaberek's strongest anti-evolution sources: a series of *responsa*, or replies, made regarding questions of scriptural interpretation by the Pontifical Biblical Commission between 1905 and 1909. Some of the *responsa* dealt with

issues of historical and textual criticism more generally, and one dealt specifically with the first three chapters of Genesis.

The *responsum* on Genesis stated that it was not admissible to claim that these chapters are not historical narratives, but less literal forms such as:

allegories and symbols, lacking a foundation in objective reality, given under the appearance of history in order to inculcate proposed religious and philosophical truths; or...legends, partly historical and partly fictitious, freely composed for the instruction and edification of souls.

It further listed specific things the “literal, historical sense” of which cannot be called into question. These included “the special creation of man” (meaning man was created by God directly and not by secondary causes) and “the formation of the first woman out of the first man.”

These statements by the PBC seem clearly to rule out the possibility of the evolution of the human body—though Chaberek strangely contradicts himself here. After detailing the contents of the *responsa*, he states that they “pose a great difficulty for the theistic theory of evolution, although, as it turns out, not an insurmountable obstacle.” Five pages later, though, he states:

The principle of historical and literal exegesis, applied to the origin of species and mankind, has caused insurmountable obstacles for the theistic theory of evolution.

At any rate, the question is not whether the *responsa* can be interpreted to admit of theistic evolution—I believe Chaberek is right that they cannot—but what sort of authority the PBC’s decrees carry.

As Chaberek details, the PBC was established by Pope Leo XIII in 1902 in the Apostolic Letter *Vigilantiae Studii*. In 1907, Pope Pius X issued the *motu proprio Praeestantia Scripturae Sacrae* making the PBC (in Cardinal Ratzinger’s words) “an organ of the teaching office” of the Magisterium, a status which it retained until 1971, when Pope Paul VI reorganized it and demoted it to a mere body of scholars enjoying the confidence of the Magisterium. Chaberek quotes Pius X:

We do now declare and expressly prescribe, that all are bound in conscience to submit to the decisions of the Biblical Commission, which have been given in the past and which shall be given in the future, in the same way as to the Decrees which appertain to doctrine, issued by the Sacred Congregations and approved by the Sovereign Pontiff.

Chaberek claims that because of this, the PBC’s pronouncements between 1907 and 1971, including those mentioned above, “had doctrinal value and were binding.”

They were certainly binding in some sense, yet the exact nature of the PBC’s authority is still debated today. When reading the quote according to Chaberek’s interpretation, what strikes me as strange is the idea of a Pope giving full doctrinal authority to an indefinite number of statements *which have not even been written yet*. Such a grant of authority would as far as I know have been completely unprecedented in the Church’s history; indeed, it is questionable

whether the Pope can grant binding doctrinal authority to statements he has not read, and the content of which he is wholly ignorant, for the simple reason that they do not yet exist.

The question arises, then, whether the submission required by *Praestantia Scripturae Sacrae* is not of a disciplinary sort. Were the decrees of the PBC meant to be binding on faith or simply on obedience? If one is “bound in conscience to submit,” does that require one’s assent or simply non-contradiction? Pius X wrote that one must submit “in the same way as to the Decrees...issued by the Sacred Congregations and approved by the Sovereign Pontiff.” Yet the decrees of the Church’s various congregations are not infallible, even when approved by the Pope.

Furthermore, Chaberek omits to quote the latter half of the sentence. Pius X continued:

...nor can all those escape the note of disobedience or temerity, and consequently of grave sin, who in speech or writing contradict such decisions, and this besides the scandal they give and the other reasons for which they may be responsible before God for other temerities and errors which generally go with such contradictions.

This certainly adds to the impression that the submission required was one of obedience, not of faith. Pius X sternly warns against “disobedience or temerity,” not heresy. Further, he warns against the “errors which generally go with such contradictions,” which seems to indicate that if disobeying by contradicting the PBC’s decrees was gravely sinful, “such contradictions” were not in themselves necessarily doctrinally erroneous!

It is likely, then, that the authority given to the PBC was not such as to settle doctrinal questions definitively, but to restrict the scope of a debate and of certain historical-critical methods that, running wild at the time, were a serious danger to the faith of many.

An instructive parallel is the debates that raged for centuries over the Immaculate Conception, which became so furious that in 1483, Pope Sixtus IV published a constitution excommunicating anyone *on either side of the debate* who charged the other side with heresy! St. Pius V later forbade all public discussion of the subject whatsoever. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* further tells us:

Paul V (1617) decreed that no one should dare to teach publicly that Mary was conceived in original sin, and Gregory XV (1622) imposed absolute silence (*in scriptis et sermonibus etiam privatis*) upon the adversaries of the doctrine until the Holy See should define the question. To put an end to all further cavilling, Alexander VII promulgated on 8 December 1661, the famous constitution "*Sollicitudo omnium Ecclesiarum*", defining the true sense of the word conceptio, and forbidding all further discussion against the common and pious sentiment of the Church.

Yet the Immaculate Conception was not declared a dogma until 1856. Such decrees forbidding public debate or the expression of certain opinions on a subject are seldom revoked; they simply cease to be relevant as the circumstances which warranted them change.

Finally, there is a *L'Osservatore Romano* article written in 1990 by Cardinal Ratzinger, then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Commenting on the CDF’s Instruction *Donum Veritatis, On the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, Ratzinger

confirms that the PBC's authority was of a disciplinary nature and that even in that respect the *responsa* are no longer binding:

The text also offers different forms of binding which arise from different levels of magisterial teaching. It states—perhaps for the first time with such clarity—that there are magisterial decisions intended to be the last word on the matter as such, but are a substantial anchorage in the problem and are first and foremost an expression of pastoral prudence, a sort of provisional disposition. Their core remains valid, but the individual details influenced by the circumstances at the time may need further rectification. In this regard one can refer to the statements of the Popes during the last century on religious freedom as well as the anti-modernistic decisions at the beginning of this century, especially the decisions of the Biblical Commission of that time. As a warning cry against hasty and superficial adaptations they remain fully justified; a person of the stature of Johann Baptist Metz has said, for example, that the antimodernist decisions of the Church rendered a great service in keeping her from sinking into the liberal-bourgeois world. But the details of the determinations of their contents were later superceded once they had carried out their pastoral duty at a particular moment.

It is strange for Chaberek to be seemingly unaware of this statement by Ratzinger, since he quotes him elsewhere on the topic. (I owe the quote to a useful [blog post](#) on the PBC by Mark Giszczak.)

A Consensus Unscathed

The author has likely succeeded in amassing as many potential and real obstacles to evolution as can be found in the Catholic tradition, and then some. But as I believe the example of the PBC demonstrates, his views on just how insuperable these obstacles are need to be taken with a large measure of salt.

Chaberek wants badly to be able to say that biological macroevolution is heretical, but in the end he cannot. He holds out hope that the Church will declare something like this in the future, perhaps once the neo-Darwinist consensus is overturned, and he doesn't doubt that this would be within the scope of her authority.

In the appendix, Chaberek cites a work by Spanish Jesuits published in 1952 as “the last Catholic theology textbook to present the special creation of the human body as Church teaching.” But the authors of the textbook, in the course of arguing against evolution, themselves say: “If it was solidly confirmed by means of scientific evidence that the human body is the result of evolution, then theologians would undisputedly have to acknowledge that fact.”

That they can even say this, which no faithful Catholic could say (for example) about a theory which purported to disprove the resurrection of Jesus, shows that even they do not view the direct creation of man from the dust of the earth as immutable Catholic doctrine. That the authors think evolution “highly inconceivable” is irrelevant. Once they have admitted even a theoretical possibility that the evolution of man could be confirmed, they have given up any possible claim that it contradicts an infallible teaching of the Church.

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