



Catholicism and Evolution

A History from Darwin to Pope Francis

By Michael Chaberek, O.P. Angelico Press.

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A 150-Year Discussion

Review by Sister Mary Jean

The title *Catholicism and Evolution* is perhaps a little misleading. It suggests an account of two clear-cut positions as the powers of light and the forces of darkness: take your choice on which might be which. A clearer title might be *Evolution and the Vatican*, since the author's primary focus seems to be on responses of the Roman Catholic Church to what it saw as an upstart, secular intellectual movement.

The first chapter distinguishes several senses of *evolution* as the term is now used. Two important ones are theistic evolution and intelligent design. Although these may sound similar, they are nearly opposites. Theistic evolution is close to deism, the idea that God created the world in the beginning and then left it on its own. Intelligent design tries to show evidence of design in nature purely on scientific grounds: this idea, as recently refined rather subtly by writers such as Phillip E. Johnson, William Dembski, and Michael Behe, has been discussed frequently in journals like *First Things*. Michael Chaberek supports this latter position in general, although his presentation of it is not especially clear.

Chaberek then recounts quite clearly the work of Charles Darwin and some of his precursors and contemporaries, built on the idea that species and even larger classes of plants and animals have changed

over time into other species and groups. The author, not a biologist, deals more extensively with philosophical issues than with detailed biological ones. This account, though rather general, seems to be objective and to correspond with the usual discussions of the topic.

The following chapters discuss the responses across 150 years (*The Origin of Species* was published in 1859) of individual Roman Catholics and of the Magisterium to these new ideas. Some Catholic scientists embraced them, but initially most church authorities insisted on retaining a literal interpretation of Scripture and "classic Christian doctrine." Particular issues have included the special creation of the human body directly from earth, the separate creation of Eve, and the individual creation of each human soul, as well as the immutability of species.

The first official Roman Catholic pronouncements came from a small synod in Cologne in 1860, and from the Pontifical Biblical Commission in a series of decrees from 1905 to 1909. These insisted on retaining a strict, traditional interpretation of Genesis, as against the "symbolic" biblical criticism that was ascendant at the time. This attack on "modernism" was emphatic enough that it virtually silenced Catholic biblical scholars for two generations.

Pope Pius XII opened the door a little in 1950 by writing in *Humani Generis* that strictly scientific questions do not belong to the domain of theology. The whole controversy might have been avoided if this distinction had been clarified earlier. Chaberek devotes a chapter to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, concluding that his teaching is erroneous. Recent popes have cautiously encouraged increased dialogue between theologians and scientists, and Cardinal Christoph Schönborn has written extensively about intelligent design.

By the time he discusses the 1960s, Chaberek's perspective has shifted from balanced objectivity to a position that the Church is right, period. This is disappointing, since other traditionally minded Christian scholars have found room for fruitful dialogue; a notable example is the Anglican Eric L. Mascall's *Christian Theology and Natural Science*. Nevertheless, much of *Catholicism and Evolution* will be useful for students interested in the subject from either side. While the scientific material is sketchy and probably familiar, much of the Roman Catholic account is well-documented and less readily available elsewhere.

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