

Catholicism and Evolution: A Response to Stephen Barr

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In a recent article for *First Things*, physicist Stephen Barr reviewed two books promoting so-called “Catholic evolutionism.” The books are *The Origins of Catholic Evolutionism*, by Kenneth W. Kemp, and *Darwin and Doctrine: The Compatibility of Evolution and Catholicism*, by Daniel Kuebler. Unfortunately, Barr gives into the many misrepresentations and over-simplifications that pervade the books. In fact, these publications are far from telling, in Barr’s words, “the full story of how the Church did react to the theory of evolution.”

Some Overlooked Documents

Barr begins with bold claims such as that “The Catholic Church never condemned the theory of evolution nor came close to doing so” and that “no condemnation by the Catholic Church ever came.” In order to know how far from reality these statements are, it is enough simply to look up the relevant documents. Dr. Barr should know them since he read “the full story of how the Church did react to the theory of evolution” in Kenneth Kemp’s “massively researched” book.

In 1878 the Congregation of the Index issued a decree against an Italian priest, Raffaello Caverni, who advocated a moderate form of evolutionism as compatible with the faith. We read in the document:

Until now the Holy See has rendered no decision on the system mentioned. Therefore, if Caverni’s work is condemned, as it should be, Darwinism would be indirectly condemned. ... Darwin destroys the bases of revelation and openly teaches pantheism and abject materialism. Thus, an indirect condemnation of Darwin is not only useful, but even necessary, together with that of Caverni, his defender and propagator among Italian youth.

It’s true that the decree could be easily dismissed as a low-ranking, private (i.e., directed to one person) document. But claiming that the Church held an opposite position to what this document states is not supported by any facts.

If we want to evaluate the Catholic view on evolution in the 19th century, we need to look at the issue from a broader perspective. The Church from the beginning believed that our first parents were not born from other creatures but created directly by God — man from the dust of the earth and woman from his rib. The Church Fathers and Holy Doctors throughout the ages were entirely unanimous on this matter. As a consequence, this belief assumes divine supernatural activity and thus cannot be overridden by any scientific evidence.

Catholic evolutionists readily dismiss the argument from the Fathers and Doctors by saying that they also unanimously taught things like geocentrism, a young earth, and spontaneous generation. But this counterargument is mistaken, because the authority of the Fathers is binding for Catholics only (1) if they taught something universally and unanimously and (2) if they taught it as a matter of faith rather than natural knowledge. The creation of Adam and Eve, unlike those other issues, meets the two criteria. And this is why in the 19th and early 20th centuries their special creation was assumed as ordinary Catholic teaching.

Barr, following Kemp, rightly says that there was no defined dogma regarding the origin of Adam's body. But this is a tautology, because if there had been such a dogma no debate would ever take place. The more relevant question is, does the “non-dogma” allow us to dismiss the classic Catholic position on human origins? Let's see how the Church sees it.

The *Syllabus Errorum*

Barr celebrates the fact that none of the 80 theses in Pius IX's *Syllabus Errorum* concerned evolution. But the 22nd condemned thesis reads:

The obligation by which Catholic teachers and authors are strictly bound is confined to those things only which are proposed to universal belief as dogmas of faith by the infallible judgment of the Church.

This means that — contrary to what Barr believes — Catholics are bound to accept the special creation of man even if it was not defined as a separate dogma but proposed just as an ordinary Magisterium, which it was. Moreover, jumping to the conclusion that there was simply a “variety of views” in the Church, just because there was no such a dogma, is a *non sequitur*. And this is a major fallacy from Barr, who seems to take the opinions of some individuals to be as relevant as the position of the Roman School of theology (Mazzella, Zigliara, Palmieri, Pesch, Mannens, Perrone, Sala, Tanquerey, et al.), which clearly taught and defended the special creation of man in his body and soul. Certainly, there were minor differences among these authors, such as regarding the status of the doctrine (revealed, dogmatized, ordinary, common opinion, etc.). However, to suggest that any view on human origins, let alone a contrary position, was almost equally probable in the Church is a major misrepresentation.

Dismissed in Two Ways

Now, we need to realize that any theory or idea may be dismissed in two ways. One is by contradicting it directly, the other by proposing a positive alternative. So, for example, the sentence “John is going to the theater tonight” is contradicted directly by saying “John is not going to the theater tonight.” The other way of contradicting that sentence is to say: “John is staying home tonight” which excludes his going to the theater but also his going to church, to a store, or to his family. What Barr actually says is that the Church never condemned evolution in the first way, but he totally ignores the fact that the Church condemned it in the second way many times over the centuries.

Throughout the ages the Church consistently taught that the first man was created out of the dust of the earth, which means that he did not evolve from lower animals, but also that he was

not brought to the earth by aliens, nor produced by the Devil, nor that he popped up spontaneously from nothingness, etc.

And for this reason, Barr's claim that "The Church said nothing about evolution until 1950" is not quite accurate, to say the least. In fact, as early as 1817 Erasmus Darwin's (a grandfather of Charles Darwin) book *Zoonomia*, proposing that all animals developed from a single "living filament" by means of generation, was placed on the papal Index of Prohibited Books in the strictest category of condemned books.

In 1860 the Synod of Cologne pronounced the following:

Our first parents were created immediately by God. Therefore we declare that the opinion of those who do not fear to assert that this human being, man as regards his body, emerged finally from the spontaneous continuous change of imperfect nature to the more perfect, is clearly opposed to Sacred Scripture and to the Faith.

Indeed, given that the word "evolution" does not appear in this formula, does that mean that it does not condemn the evolutionary origin of man? The first sentence establishes the positive doctrine of direct creation. This excludes any secondary causes including any evolutionary processes. Then there is a description of the evolutionary account of human origins that already circulated among scholars of the time. The synodal formula easily gained the special recognition and approval of Pope Pius IX as it did not say anything else than, for example, what Pope Pelagius I said twelve centuries earlier. Pope Pelagius proclaimed in his solemn profession of faith that

Adam and his wife were not born of other parents, but were created: one from the earth and the other from the side of the man.

That Adam was not born but created means that there is no biological continuity between him and any other creature, including the imagined hominids, or any other "previous living matter."

The Perennial Catholic Teaching

Barr notices that evolution was not "mentioned, directly or indirectly, in the decrees of the First Vatican Council." But this claim again does not give the reader an objective view of the issue. In fact, the Council was interrupted and this is why it failed to pass the third dogmatic constitution which repeated the perennial Catholic teaching on the creation of Adam from the dust of the earth.

All too often Barr conflates opinions of different individuals expressed in private letters or (more or less academic) articles with the position of the Church. Indeed, from reading his article, one might get an impression that private letters have become a new *locus theologicus*. A glaring example of such an approach is his quote from a letter by Leo XIII in which the Pope speaks about pressures on Roman Congregations to make a decision on evolution. The Pope says he would not stop them, because scholars need time to do their work "or even make a mistake." The quote ends with the Pope saying: "The Church will always be in time to put them on the right road."

I do not see how one can deduce any support for evolution from these words. After all, a lack of immediate condemnation is quite different from giving any support to an idea, which would be needed in light of the fact that evolution was a novelty contradicting established teaching. But the major problem is that while Barr quotes the ambiguous private opinion, he fails to mention a public, doctrinal — and quite explicit — teaching of the same Pope expressed in his encyclical *Arcanum*:

We record what is to all known, and cannot be doubted by any, that God, on the sixth day of creation, having made man from the slime of the earth, and having breathed into his face the breath of life, gave him a companion, whom He miraculously took from the side of Adam when he was locked in sleep. God thus, in His most far-reaching foresight, decreed that this husband and wife should be the natural beginning of the human race, from whom it might be propagated and preserved by an unfailing fruitfulness throughout all futurity of time.

First, the Pope says that the classic doctrine of the creation of Adam and Eve is “to all known” and “cannot be doubted by any.” This clearly contradicts Barr’s belief that there was a vast variety of opinions on the matter that were freely discussed, as if for the previous 18 centuries the Church had no clue how man came to exist. Then it is said that Eve was produced *miraculously* which means she wasn’t produced by natural laws of evolution. Also, the Pope confirms that this first pair was the *natural beginning* of the human race, which means that all humans come from this one pair by natural human generation. All of these points contradict the views of Catholic evolutionists.

There are several other documents that could be quoted here but let me conclude this part of my response by mentioning just the 1909 Decree by the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) which established that the first three chapters of Genesis must be understood *literally and historically*. (By the way, the PBC also explained that the “day” of creation may be understood as a natural day or any other period of time.) Specifically, the special creation of man and the formation of the first woman out of the first man cannot be doubted as literally and historically true. Unlike today’s Biblical Commission, the PBC under Pius X was a teaching body of the Church clarifying biblical issues on behalf of the Pope. And obviously, if *special creation* is literally true then *natural evolution* cannot be.

Humani Generis

Especially distorted is Barr’s take on Pius XII’s 1950 encyclical *Humani Generis*. Barr believes that in the encyclical, “Clearly implied is the position that Mivart put forward in 1871: that a natural, evolutionary origin of man at the bodily level is not contrary to the Catholic faith.” But, in fact, nothing is “clearly implied” by Pius XII. In *Humani Generis*, the Pope says that

[T]he Teaching Authority of the Church does not forbid that ... research and discussions ... take place with regard to the doctrine of evolution, in as far as it enquires into the origin of the human body as coming from pre-existent and living matter — for the Catholic faith obliges us to hold that souls are immediately created by God.

The Pope simply allows (precisely, “does not forbid,” which is only an implicit permission) scholars to have a debate regarding the origin of the human body. We need to emphasize that Pius XII does not authorize in any way the evolutionary view of the human origin of any

kind. Moreover, he adds no fewer than four conditions under which the discussion on the origin of man is “not forbidden”:

1. The arguments of both sides must be seriously considered.
2. One cannot present the evolutionary hypothesis as a proven fact.
3. One should always take into account the decisions of the Church.
4. Catholic scholars cannot act as if the sources of divine revelation did not contain anything that would demand the greatest moderation and caution regarding this matter.

Clearly, today’s Catholic pro-evolutionary scholars do not meet any of these four reservations. (1) Arguments of both sides are never seriously considered. Many Catholic evolutionists don’t even know that there are “two sides” or what they would claim. “The other side” to the evolutionary one is the one advocating the classic Catholic position stating that man was created directly from the dust of the earth. Very rarely do Catholic events or publications invite proponents of any other view than the evolutionary one. Several Catholic scientists in good standings were declined membership in the Society of Catholic Scientists just because they were associated with “the other side.” (2) Even though the Pope says that it is not allowed to present the evolutionary hypothesis as a proven fact, most Catholic evolutionists readily do so. (3) And obviously Catholic evolutionists downplay or ignore the previous decisions of the Church while (4) they treat the sources of divine revelation as if they did not contain anything that is hard to harmonize with the evolutionary hypothesis. Paradoxically, the books by Kemp and Kuebler testify to that attitude which transgresses the limits of the debate allowed by Pius XII.

Later in the document, Pius XII explicitly forbids discussions on polygenism, but again, Catholic evolutionists completely ignore that ban to the extent that currently the issue of polygenism is the most debated one among all issues associated with evolution. The reason for their disobedience — as they claim — is that Pius XII forbids polygenism because it is not clear how to reconcile it with the doctrine on original sin. So, if a solution were found, the ban would be lifted — they think. However, this reasoning is a *non sequitur*, because removing the reason for the ban is not the same as removing the ban. Catholic evolutionists have not achieved the first, but they already have done the latter, even though lifting the ban belongs to the proper authority only, namely the Pope. We see therefore that *Humani Generis*, while being the most quoted Church document by Catholic evolutionists, in fact is treated by them very selectively, some parts being distorted or flatly contradicted.

The Argument from “Authority”

The argument from authority carries great weight in the Church as all her doctrine is based on the divine authority of the Bible and Holy Tradition. This does not mean, however, that any Church scholar, even of the greatest stature, is infallible himself. Augustine advocated the preexistence of the human souls — a view later universally abandoned by the Church.

Thomas Aquinas presented a mistaken explanation of Mary’s sinlessness (heretical, according to the view pronounced as a dogma in 1854). We know as a fact that even the greatest minds do err. This is why quotations from John Henry Newman and other similarly recognized scholars, especially when they are ambiguous and come from private letters, may be interesting for a historian, but they do not constitute any argument in our evaluation of the Church’s position on evolution. Similarly, the often-quoted words of John Paul II, that “new knowledge has led to the recognition of the theory of evolution as more than a hypothesis,”

provide no support for the evolutionists' argument. The Pope does not define evolution. He does not say it is true, nor that it is compatible with the faith.

Theistic Evolution Is Not a Modern Concept

As I have written before, we need to look at the issue of evolution from a broader perspective. That is because while the word "evolution," describing the process of the self-formation of the universe, may not appear before Darwin, the idea itself predates Christianity. Pagan cosmogonies did not include the idea of direct creation. God, or gods, were too great or too much focused on themselves to act directly on matter. Even in Plato, Aristotle, and the neo-Platonists, God never creates different forms of life directly. That idea is specific to Biblical Christianity. It is clearly taught in Genesis as read according to the Catholic Tradition. When St. Paul goes to Athens and speaks at the Areopagus, the first thing he proclaims to the pagans is the correct idea of creation. He says he believes in "The God who made the world and all that is in it" (Acts 17:24). So, Paul does not share the view of theistic evolutionists who say that God created the world and left it to the laws of nature that formed it. Rather, God created the world *and all that is in it*, that is, all beings understood as specific natures, such as the cat nature, the horse nature, and the human nature.

St. Irenaeus finds the idea of God using the universe to form the universe in the writings of the Gnostics and he condemns this idea as contrary to Christian doctrine. Over the centuries, Christian "creationism" gained more and more support and understanding and came to pervade the entire culture. But in modernity, due to the writings of authors such as Descartes and then the deists of the Enlightenment, such as De Maillet, Erasmus Darwin, later Lamarck, and several other authors, the old pagan idea of theistic evolution is restored in opposition to Christianity.

Neo-Pagan Pushback

In such a broad context, theistic evolution may be seen as neo-pagan pushback, contradicting some of the substantial tenets of Christianity. This idea entered the Church through the backdoor under the guise of "modern science." I agree with Barr that today we have a plurality of opinions, but I don't think that such a plurality was acceptable in the 19th or early 20th century. Certainly, things have changed a lot since *Humani Generis*, but that was a change in human attitudes and thinking. The Church in her doctrinal teachings has never adopted, even implicitly, any form of theistic evolution or the evolutionary origin of man.

There are many other issues raised by Barr in his article and still more in the books he reviews. I have provided answers to these claims in my own books: *Catholicism and Evolution*, *Aquinas and Evolution*, and *Knowledge and Evolution*. I directly answered Kemp's ideas such as the division into biological and theological humans [here](#) and [here](#). Recently I have also come out with a book that is based on a series of conversations with theologian Steve Greene. The title of the book is [*Creation or Evolution? A Catholic Dilemma*](#). This is a popular level work that offers a good introduction to the creation-evolution debate in the Church.