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Creation and Evolution

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Due to technical problems last week, the usual e-mail alert announcing "All Things Catholic" was not sent. As a reminder, you can always read the latest column by clicking on the "All Things Catholic" link on the NCRonline.org home page or by typing johnallen.ncrcafe.org into your web browser. If you missed last week's column, you may want to follow this link (

<http://www.nationalcatholicreporter.org/word/word081806.htm>) (All Things Catholic, Aug. 18), since some of this week's material builds on it.

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Europeans are fond of saying that they have no equivalent of the American "creationist" movement, indirectly implying that they're too sophisticated for the anti-intellectual tug of religious extremism. (One might cattily respond that it's sometimes difficult to detect any religious pulse in Europe, extremist or not, but that's beside the point.)

In reality, while there may be no European movement that bears the "creationist" label, there are forces critical of the theory of evolution, however much of a minority they represent.

In the Catholic world, one prominent example is the *Centre d'Etude et de Prospectives sur la Science* ("Center for Studies and Prospectives on Science" or CEP), a group of 700 European Catholic scientists and intellectuals based in France. It's directed by a Catholic metallurgist and philosopher named Dominique Tassot, and it enjoys ties to some European bishops.

Tassot illustrates the forces gathering around Pope Benedict XVI as he takes up the question of "Creation and Evolution" in a Sept. 1-3 meeting with his former doctoral students in Castelgandolfo.

Tassot believes that recent experiments by a French colleague on sedimentation support a quasi-literal interpretation of Genesis regarding the physical age of the earth. This brings him close to a view known as "Young Earth Creationism," although Tassot says he is not a creationist.

Last week, I interviewed Peter Schuster, president of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, who will speak at the upcoming meeting with the pope. Schuster, a microbiologist, regards the evidence for evolution as beyond dispute. Tassot, who will not be at the meeting but who hopes to influence the pope's thinking, believes that scientists are wedded to evolution largely because they're trapped inside a "paradigm" and are unwilling to think outside that box.

I'm obviously not competent to judge the scientific discussion, but one observation I can make is that for Catholic intellectuals such as Tassot, the debate over evolution is a stalking horse for a much larger question.

What's at stake, as they see it, is the post-Enlightenment triumph of secular science over philosophy and theology as the dominant "frame" for construing reality. Tassot wants Catholic intellectuals to retake the initiative, so that alien worldviews do not set the borders within which Catholic thought moves.

The same concern shows up in other areas. It's the same impulse that has led thinkers such as Robert Kraynak, for example, to critique John Paul II's use of the vocabulary of human rights. Doing so, Kraynak worries, unintentionally smuggles a selfish Enlightenment-era assertion of one's rights into Catholic discourse, as opposed to more properly Christian concepts such as charity and sacrificial love.

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At bottom, all this is about reasserting Catholicism's capacity to shape culture, rather than simply trying to carve out a *modus Vivendi* with secularity.

In that sense, Tassot's critique of evolution represents one front in a much larger battle. The full text of my interview with Tassot can be found on the Special Documents section of NCRonline.org. Excerpts appear below.

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Have you communicated your views to Pope Benedict?

Through Bishop Henri Brincard of Le Puy-en-Velay, I was able to get a letter directly on the pope's desk.

What did you say?

First, I reminded him that Pius XII in *Humani Generis* in 1950 suggested a debate inside the Catholic church on evolutionary theory, but it has never happened. I said that it's now time to open the debate, because in each discipline we can find people on both sides, which was not the case in the 1950s.

Second, I said that the impact of this debate is not just scientific. In itself, evolution is a scientific question, but it has consequences on a much larger scale. It opens a possibility for the church to regain the initiative in the field of culture. Right now, Catholic intellectuals spend their time explaining that such-and-such a theory is or is not compatible with the faith, which means that the initiative is always coming from other groups or movements. ? If you accept that only science gives the truth, inevitably intellectuals will move inside a scientific worldview which is actually foreign to Christianity.

What was the pope's response?

He responded very positively, offering a blessing for our members and encouraging us to continue our contacts with the scientific world. He didn't say anything about the idea of launching a debate.

What was your reaction to the piece by Cardinal Christoph Schönborn in the *New York Times* last July?

Schönborn didn't say that Darwin is or is not compatible with the Christian faith, but that Darwinism is wrong. From a theoretical point of view, that's quite different. He affirmed that it's possible for philosophy and theology to attain certainties which are higher than scientific certainties. That's something new from theologians. For three or four centuries, theologians have generally taken their lead from the sciences. This is a question of intellectual authority, and of course it stems from the Galileo case and so on. Little by little, authority has shifted from theologians to the scientists.

How should Benedict pursue the question?

I advised him that he should remain the master of this debate. By that I meant that he shouldn't delegate it to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, even though I couldn't quite say it that way.

What's wrong with the Pontifical Academy of Sciences?

It's not a Catholic academy. Instead, it's the place where the scientific worldview can enter inside the Catholic church. Two-thirds of its members are not Catholic. It's also the pontifical academy with the greatest number of Noble Prize winners, who are well known in their disciplines. I'm not questioning the quality of these people, but the meaning and use of this academy. ? It exists almost by itself, and I'm not sure it's the tool for the pope that it should be.

Are you a 'creationist'?

No, because we arrived at our position before we even knew about creationists. Our position is different, first of all because we're Catholics. From what I can see, creationism is mainly a movement of evangelicals. ? On scientific grounds, good relations with the creationists are possible, but it's a different position. We are not committed to a literal reading of the Bible. Catholics read the Bible in terms of church tradition, the fathers of the church, and so on.

You distinguish between 'micro-evolution' (development within a species) and 'macro-evolution' (development from one species to another), accepting the former but rejecting the latter.

This is what makes the book *Truth and Tolerance* (2003) by then-Cardinal Ratzinger so interesting, because he's one of the few theologians who understands this distinction.

In his *New York Times* piece, Schönborn said something fairly incredible about the 1996 statement of John Paul II, in which the pope termed evolution 'more than a hypothesis.' Schönborn called it 'rather vague and unimportant.' People were surprised to hear him talk about it that way, but it's actually easy to understand. 'Evolution' is never defined in John Paul's statement. In philosophy, we're supposed to define everything, but that was not the case. As such, it's meaningless. What does it mean, for example, to be 'more than a potato?'

Do you think Benedict XVI will make a formal statement on evolution?

I think it's too early. I think he's using the meeting of his Schülerkreis to give a broader extension to the debate. Even if he knows where he wants to go, and I believe he does, it will take time. Most Catholic intellectuals today are convinced that evolution is obviously true because most scientists say so. To show that debate is possible on scientific grounds, and also on philosophical and theological grounds, is more than a question of a few months.

Where do you think the pope wants to go?

In the past, Cardinal Ratzinger was convinced that evolution was true, and being an intelligent man, he devised a way to make it compatible with theological truth. Today I think his view is different. ? He grasps that micro and macro-evolution are not the same, and I think he believes people accepted an atheistic world view in relation to evolution because they accepted the confusion between micro and macro-evolution. He wants people to understand this important truth.

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In a system where so much depends on the man on top, who has the pope's ear is always important. Tassot derives some of his confidence about the pope's position from the fact that Benedict is on friendly terms with a leading anti-evolution European scientist, and a member of CEP, named Guy Berthault.

Berthault claims to have turned the science of dating sedimentary remains upside-down. The reigning assumption is that the deepest levels of remains are the oldest, and that the formations took shape over long periods of time. Berthault argues that sediment is formed by density, speed and geometry, not time. He performed experiments to test his theory at the University of Colorado in Boulder, using equipment capable of simulating powerful water currents.

As a result, Berthault says, the conventional methods of dating fossil remains could be off by millions of years, and the earth could be substantially younger than presently believed.

These claims, it should be noted, have been contested by other scientists.

As Tassot tells the story, Berthault and Ratzinger met by chance. Berthault was a director of a non-profit association that operates a conference center in the Alps, which then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger occasionally used for theological gatherings. They got to know one another, and Berthault told Ratzinger about his research.

"I think that has had some influence," Tassot said. "It was an opportunity for Ratzinger to see that even on the scientific questions surrounding evolution, debate is possible."

On Aug. 6, Berthault wrote to Schuster to bring his research to the attention of the Schülerkreis. (I have a copy of that letter). It will be interesting to see if it has any echo in the seminar.

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