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Benedict's thinking on creation and evolution

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All Things Catholic

Citing my interview last week with Dominique Tassot, head of a group of European Catholic scientists and intellectuals critical of the theory of evolution, the London *Guardian* carried a piece this Monday asserting that Pope Benedict XVI is preparing "a fundamental shift in the Vatican's view of evolution."

Even setting aside the question of whether Tassot knows the mind of the pope, the claim still seemed over-hyped, since when I asked Tassot if he expects a statement from Benedict his answer was, "I think it's too early."

In fact, there's no sign that Benedict intends to make a formal statement on evolution anytime soon, at least anything that would go beyond his numerous reminders to the effect that, "We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary." (That comment came from his April 2005 installation Mass). In the classic argot of the Vatican, conventional wisdom is that such a statement is not yet "opportune." The fact that this year's meeting of his Schülerkreis, the circle of his former doctoral students, is devoted to the theme of "Creation and Evolution" suggests that Benedict wants to hear from theology, philosophy, and the natural sciences before reaching conclusions - if, indeed, he feels the need to reach conclusions at all.

Yet it's equally clear that the Schülerkreis session this weekend is not just a busman's holiday. Benedict sees the philosophical currents unleashed by Darwin as a matter of no little import, and one can expect the issue of creation and evolution to be an important theme in this pontificate.

In that light, it's a useful exercise to summarize here what we know about Benedict's thinking.

Since we live in a sound-bite culture, let's get straight to the bottom line: Benedict XVI is not a "creationist." He does not believe in a strictly literal reading of the Book of Genesis, nor has he ever made any reference to teaching "creation science" in schools. A member of the prestigious secular French Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques (inducted in 1993 along with then-Czech President Vaclav Havel as one of only twelve foreign nationals), Pope Benedict has no desire to launch a crusade against modern science.

Nor is Benedict XVI really an advocate of "intelligent design" in the American sense, since intelligent design theorists typically assert that data from biology and other empirical sciences, by itself, requires the hypothesis of a designer. Benedict may have some sympathy for this view; he has questioned the evidence for "macro-evolution," meaning the transition from one species to another on the basis of random mutation and natural selection. Ultimately, however, he sees this as a debate for scientists to resolve. His concern cuts deeper, to the modern tendency to convert evolution into "a universal theory concerning all reality" that excludes God, and therefore rationality, as the basis of existence. In contrast, Benedict insists upon the fundamental conviction of Christian faith: *"In principio erat Verbum - at the beginning of all things stands the creative power of reason."*

Benedict is clear this is a question which "can no longer be decided by arguments from natural science."

With respect to Pope John Paul II's famous 1996 formula that evolution is "more than a hypothesis," therefore, it's meaningless to ask whether Benedict XVI agrees or disagrees. Ever the professor, he would insist upon clarifying what precisely is meant by "evolution," whether it's being evaluated on a scientific or philosophical basis, and so on.

What does seem clear, however, is that Benedict worries that with its seeming *nihil obstat* for the theory of evolution, the church may inadvertently have accelerated the diffusion of a worldview which holds that it's pointless to ask questions which can't be settled by laboratory experiments, and that chance and meaninglessness are the ultimate laws of the universe. In that sense, one suspects Benedict would affirm that evolution is indeed "more than a hypothesis" -- for better, and for worse.

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Prior to his election as pope, Joseph Ratzinger treated the question of evolution in surprisingly extended fashion. One can outline his thinking in four concepts.

(1) Whatever the findings of the natural sciences, they will not contradict Christian faith, since ultimately the truth is one.

This confidence is expressed in Ratzinger's 1990 book, *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*. The book takes the form of an extended reflection on the creation stories in Genesis, and Ratzinger writes:

"What response shall we make to this view [evolution]? It is the affair of the natural sciences to explain how the tree of life in particular continues to grow, and how new branches shoot out from it. This is not a matter for faith. ? More reflective spirits have long been aware that there is no either-or here. We cannot say: 'creation or evolution', inasmuch as these two things respond to two different realities. The story of the dust of the

earth and the breath of God, which we just heard, does not in fact explain how human persons come to be but rather what they are. It explains their inmost origin and casts light on the project that they are. And, vice versa, the theory of evolution seeks to understand and describe biological developments. But in so doing it cannot explain where the 'project' of human persons comes from, nor their inner origin, nor their particular nature. To that extent we are faced here with two complementary - rather than mutually exclusive - realities."

Another resource is the 2004 document "Communion and Stewardship: Human Beings Created in the Image of God" issued by the International Theological Commission, the chief advisory body for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. While not a personal work of Joseph Ratzinger, the document would not have been issued if he had serious reservations.

One key to the document's argument, in paragraph 69, is that even if science demonstrates that "chance" in the empirical sense really is the key to the evolution of organic life, this in no way means that God is not the "prime mover," nor does it imply that life is random and meaningless.

"Many neo-Darwinian scientists, as well as some of their critics, have concluded that, if evolution is a radically contingent materialistic process driven by natural selection and random genetic variation, then there can be no place in it for divine providential causality. A growing body of scientific critics of neo-Darwinism point to evidence of design ? that, in their view, cannot be explained in terms of a purely contingent process and that neo-Darwinians have ignored or misinterpreted. The nub of this currently lively disagreement involves scientific observation and generalization concerning whether the available data support inferences of design or chance, and cannot be settled by theology. But it is important to note that, according to the Catholic understanding of divine causality, true contingency in the created order is not incompatible with a purposeful divine providence. Divine causality and created causality radically differ in kind and not only in degree. Thus, even the outcome of a truly contingent natural process can nonetheless fall within God's providential plan for creation."

Two points are important here.

First, theology cannot settle the argument between chance and design as the best scientific explanation of organic life. Second, Christians know both from revelation and from philosophical reflection that God is the ultimate author of life, whatever its physical processes. As a result, the truth of Christianity does not rise or fall with the scientific case for "intelligent design."

(2) As a scientific matter, the evidence for "micro-evolution" seems beyond doubt; the case for "macro-evolution" is less persuasive.

While Benedict does not believe it is the church's role to settle scientific debates, that doesn't mean he lacks his own views. Most notably, Benedict has doubts about what he calls "macro-evolution." ("Micro-evolution" refers to developmental changes within a species, "macro-evolution" is the transition from one species to another on the basis of mutation and selection.)

Ratzinger outlines his thinking in a November 27, 1999, lecture delivered at the Sorbonne entitled "The Truth of Christianity," which is published in his 2003 book *Truth and Tolerance*.

"No one will be able to cast serious doubt upon the scientific evidence for micro-evolutionary processes. R. Junker and S. Scherer, in their 'critical reader' on evolution, have this to say: 'Many examples of such developmental steps [micro-evolutionary processes] are known to us from natural processes of variation and development. The

research done on them by evolutionary biologists produced significant knowledge of the adaptive capacity of living systems, which seems marvelous.' They tell us, accordingly, that one would therefore be quite justified in describing the research of early development as the reigning monarch among biological disciplines. ? Within the teaching about evolution itself, the problem emerges at the point of transition from micro- to macro-evolution, on which point Szathmáry and Maynard Smith, both convinced supporters of an all-embracing theory of evolution, nonetheless declare that: 'There is no theoretical basis for believing that evolutionary lines become more complex with time; and there is also no empirical evidence that this happens.'"

This distinction between "micro" and "macro-evolution" is apparently one Ratzinger began to make in the 1980s, after hearing a series of lectures at the Gustav Siewarth Academy, a small Catholic academy in Germany's Black Forest. Tassot told NCR that a German Catholic intellectual named Alma von Stockhausen, the founder of the Gustav Siewarth Academy, has said that Ratzinger concluded macro-evolution is "impossible" after this experience.

It is worth repeating, however, that whatever his personal views, Benedict XVI is unlikely to render an official judgment on what he sees as a scientific question. In a 1992 Vatican press conference presenting the Catechism of the Catholic Church, he said that it is not the function of the church to pass judgment on the scientific merits of evolutionary theory.

(3) Evolution has become a kind of "first philosophy" for enlightened thinkers, ruling out the possibility that life has any ultimate meaning. Here Christianity must draw the line.

Benedict's deepest concern with the impact of Darwin's theory is that it has promoted scientific positivism, holding that only empirical science can produce certainty, and hence that religion, if it survives at all, can only do so as a subjective, emotional consolation against the cold indifference of the universe. In response, Benedict argues that Christianity relies on truths deeper than empirical observation, among them that life has purpose. In this sense, he believes in "intelligent design" - not necessarily as the product of scientific observation, but as a metaphysical principle.

In his book *In the Beginning*, Ratzinger writes:

"We must have the audacity to say that the great projects of the living creation are not the products of chance and error. Nor are they the products of a selective process to which divine predicates can be attributed in illogical, unscientific, and even mythic fashion. The great projects of the living creation point to a creating Reason and show us a creating Intelligence, and they do so more luminously and radiantly today than ever before. Thus we can say today with a new certitude and joyousness that the human being is indeed a divine project, which only the creating Intelligence was strong and great and audacious enough to conceive of. Human beings are not a mistake but something willed; they are the fruit of love. They can disclose in themselves, in the bold project that they are, the language of the creating Intelligence that speaks to them and that moves them to say: Yes, Father, you have willed me."

Ratzinger argues that the appeal of Christianity in late antiquity was precisely its capacity to unite the desire of philosophers for a rational worldview based on perception and knowledge, as opposed to the irrational poetry of the gods, with the deepest longings of the human heart for truths about human existence. To allow a positivist philosophy of evolution to dislodge Christianity, he insists, would not be a victory for enlightenment, but ultimately the triumph of irrationality.

He makes this case in *Truth and Tolerance*:

"The question is whether reality originated on the basis of chance and necessity and, thus, from what is irrational; that is, whether reason, being a chance by-product of irrationality and floating in an ocean of irrationality, is ultimately just as meaningless; or whether the principle that represents the fundamental conviction of Christian faith and of its philosophy remains true - In principio erat Verbum - at the beginning of all things stands the creative power of reason. Now as then, Christian faith represents the choice in favor of the priority of reason and of rationality."

(4) On the moral level, the widespread acceptance of evolution as a "first philosophy" is dangerous.

If evolution as a philosophy (what some intellectuals call *evolutionism*) leads to meaningless, than it cannot help but have consequences in how people lead their lives. Benedict draws this out in *Truth and Tolerance*:

Now the theory of evolution, in the cases where people have tried to extend it to a philosophia universalis, has in fact been used for an attempt at a new ethos based on evolution. Yet this evolutionary ethic that inevitably takes as its key concept the model of selectivity, that is, the struggle for survival, the victory of the fittest, successful adaptation, has little comfort to offer. Even when people try to make it more attractive in various ways, it ultimately remains a bloodthirsty ethic. Here, the attempt to distill rationality out of what is itself irrational quite visibly fails. All this is of very little use for an ethic of universal peace, of practical love of one's neighbor, and of the necessary overcoming of oneself, which is what we need.

Later, he adds:

"The theory of evolution teaches us [that] progress has its price. And the present-day experiments with man, who is being turned into an 'organ bank,' show us the entirely practical applications of such ideas, in which man himself takes further evolution in hand."

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Benedict XVI's views on evolution, as by now should be obvious, can't be condensed into a simple slogan, such as whether he's "for" or "against" it. He has a deep respect for science, but at the same time he insists that empirical science by itself must not set the "frame" within which we think about the meaning and purpose of existence. He worries that an uncritical embrace of the theory of evolution has been dangerous, but he also has steered clear of identifying himself with its fundamentalist and Luddite critics. To put this in a formula, he doesn't want to repeat the Galileo case, but neither does he want to surrender to Auguste Comte - who predicted a "physics of man" that would render religion obsolete.

Perhaps the best optic on what Benedict is after comes in this comment from *Truth and Tolerance*: "This dispute has to be approached objectively and with a willingness to listen, by both sides - something that has hitherto been undertaken only to a limited extent."

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