

Father Ronald Ketteler serves as Director of Ecumenism and of Continuing Education of Priests, Episcopal Liaison to the diocesan newspaper, the Messenger. He is also former Chair of the Humanities Division at Thomas More College. These columns appeared originally in the Messenger.



Pope Benedict XVI – ‘The universe..., not the product of darkness and unreason’

In his inaugural homily, Pope Benedict XVI declared "Only when we meet the living God in Christ do we know what life is." Affirming the inherent dignity and transcendence of the human person, he observed: "You 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."

Within this Christological context, the Holy Father then concluded: "There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the encounter with Christ."

That fleeting oblique reference to evolution and the meaning of human life in that inaugural homily echoes a thesis more systematically developed in the Holy Father's earlier theological writings.

One monograph can be singled out for illustration. In 1985, the Pope (then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger) published *'In the Beginning ...' A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, a series of Lenten homilies on the doctrine of creation. In particular, the Holy Father's exegesis of the biblical narratives, especially the opening chapters in the Book of Genesis, exemplifies an engaging biblical theology rooted in a cogent philosophical theology.

Several points in the Holy Father's discussion of the theological issue of creation and evolution are particularly insightful.

First, the relationship between evolution and creation is not an "either / or" matter since the science of evolution and the biblical accounts speak to distinct realities. In other words, the state of the question should not be framed "creation *or* evolution." Since evolutionary biology is not inherently incompatible with the doctrine of creation, that relationship can be phrased "creation *and* evolution."

With regard to the creation narratives in the Bible, Pope Benedict XVI contends that the scripture texts "represent another way of speaking of reality than that with which we are familiar from physics and biology." Thus, the biblical language of the "dust of the earth and the breath of God ... does not in fact explain how human persons come to be but rather what they are." The methodology of evolutionary biology and the theology of creation encompass "two complementary --- rather than mutually exclusive realities." (50)

Secondly, the Holy Father rejects evolutionary materialism, a theory that posits blind chance at the origin of human life. Against evolutionary materialism, the Holy Father affirms

that "the great projects of the living creation point to a creating Reason, and show us a creating Intelligence ..." Thus, he argues that "[h]uman beings are not a mistake but something willed; they are the fruit of love." (57)

Moreover, the scientific disciplines of physics and biology and the other natural sciences provide "a new and unheard-of creation account with vast new images, which let us recognize the face of the Creator and which make us realize once again that at the very beginning and foundation of all being there is a creating Intelligence."

'In the Beginning ...' reflects mainstream contemporary Catholic thought which recognizes the discoveries of modern science on the origin of the universe within the framework of the theology of creation. In principle, there is no conflict between revelation and the science of evolution.

Recently, "Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God," a study issued by the International Theological Commission in 2004, addressed that question in a wider context. The document sets forth a theological synthesis of the relationship of the scientific theories of evolution and the doctrine of creation. It quotes the observation made by Pope John Paul II in a 1996 Message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on Evolution. There Pope John Paul II had stated that "new knowledge leads to the recognition of the theory of evolution as more than a hypothesis."

But, having acknowledged the legitimacy of evolutionary science, the late Holy Father also had cautioned against some theories of evolution --- "materialist, reductionist and spiritualist" --- which are not compatible with Catholic doctrine.

In effect, such a reductionist scientific approach transforms the method of science into a metaphysics (a theory of reality), a philosophical ideology commonly called "scientism." Scientism or scientific materialism becomes a "doctrine" which denies the validity of any other level of explanation beyond the empirical scope of the scientific

method.

The International Theological Commission concludes that Pope John Paul II's Message "cannot be read as a blanket approbation of all theories of evolution, including those of a neo-Darwinian provenance which explicitly deny to divine providence any truly causal role in the development of life in the universe." (C&S n. 64)

Last month, in a July 7th New York Times op-ed article, "Finding design in evolution," Cardinal Christoph Schonborn of Vienna rejected any attempts by evolutionary materialists to co-opt Pope John Paul's Message as a validation of neo-Darwinian ideology. In actuality, the neo-Darwinist understanding which he criticizes views evolution as "an unguided, unplanned process of random variation and natural selection." As already mentioned, that conception of reality is not simply a matter of scientific methodology. Rather, it becomes a metaphysical explanation that excludes a theological or religious interpretation as an authentic avenue to the truth of reality.

In his article, Cardinal Schonborn reaffirms Church teaching summarized in the Catechism of the Catholic Church: "We believe that God created the world according to his wisdom. It is not the product of any necessity whatever, nor of blind fate or chance." (CCC n. 295)

Although a spokesman for Cardinal Schonborn explained that the cardinal's argument is "not an affirmation of any scientific response to Darwin's theory," the pros and cons on his article have already stimulated intense discussion in the current debates on evolution and religion.

As that dialogue progresses, two boundaries must be respected: science must give up claims to being a metaphysics and religion, in turn, must avoid supplanting the proper autonomy of science. Science *and* religion, not science *or* religion, should guide the search for understanding.

August 2005

1st in a Series on Creation and Evolution