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A Catholic Perspective on Creation and Evolution in the Bible Part 2

The image of God in the Bible proclaimed in the *Shema*—"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord" (Dt 6:4)—lies at the heart of biblical covenantal love. This ancient credo declares the uniqueness and oneness of the God of Israel. It is the verse quoted by Jesus in identifying the first and greatest commandment. (Mk. 12: 28-30; Mt, 22:36-37)

In his inaugural encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* ("God is Love," 2005), Pope Benedict XVI conceives the image of God rooted in the *Shema* as a reflection of the doctrine of creation. That foundational confession of faith discloses the God of revelation as "the one true God himself who is the source of all that exists" and through whom "the whole world comes into existence by the power of his creative Word." (DCE n. 9)

The Pope then draws two basic insights from that revealed mystery: 1) creation is "dear to him [God], for it was willed by him and 'made' by him," and 2) the God of biblical revelation "loves man."

From his earlier writings as a theologian, one work of Pope Benedict XVI is especially instructive for understanding the doctrine of creation in relation to modern science. '*In the Beginning ...*' *A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall* (1985), a series of Lenten homilies, included three homilies on creation theology. Those chapters construct an engaging biblical theology drawn from the exegesis of the creation narratives from the opening chapters in the Book of Genesis.

As part of that overview, '*In the Beginning ...*' analyzed the theological question of creation and evolution by setting forth several working assumptions for interpreting the biblical meaning of the Genesis texts.

First, since the science of evolution and the biblical accounts speak to distinct realities, the relationship between evolution and creation does not become an

"either / or" matter. From this perspective, the science of evolutionary biology cannot be judged to be inherently incompatible with the doctrine of creation. Consequently, the relationship between science and faith on this question can be more accurately phrased as "creation *and* evolution," not "creation *vs.* evolution."

The creation narratives in the Bible "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 scientific methodology of evolutionary biology and the theology of creation encompass "two complementary -- rather than mutually exclusive realities."

Secondly, Pope Benedict XVI has consistently rejected evolutionary materialism, a theory that posits blind chance as an all-encompassing explanation of the origin of human life. Against such evolutionary materialism, he affirmed that "the great projects of the living creation point to a creating Reason, and show us a creating Intelligence..." Thus, he argued that "[h]uman beings are not a mistake but something willed; they are the fruit of love."

The Christian doctrine of creation declares that "[t]he universe is not the product of darkness and unreason. It comes from intelligence, freedom, and from the beauty that is identical with love. Seeing this gives us the courage to keep on living, and it empowers us, comforted thereby, to take upon ourselves the adventure of life."

Nonetheless, the disciplines of physics and biology and the other natural sciences can 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."

The Catholic Conference of Kentucky (CCK) is an agency of the Catholic Bishops of Kentucky, established in 1968. It speaks for the Church in matters of public policy, serves as liaison to government and the legislature, and coordinates communications and activities between the church and secular agencies. There are 406,000 Catholics in the Commonwealth. The Bishops of the four dioceses of KY constitute CCK's Board of Directors.

As the Holy Father would point out later in "The Truth of Christianity?" (1999), Christian belief and practice affirm the unity of love and reason which subsist together as 'the two pillars of reality: true reason is love, and love is true reason.' The unity of reason and love undergirds the authentic foundation and meaning of all reality.

In his treatise on the theology of creation, Pope Benedict XVI noted that "the Bible is not a natural science textbook, nor does it intend to be such." Therefore, there is a need for distinguishing "between the form of portrayal and the content that is portrayed" in Sacred Scripture. The images or ways of describing reality [the content portrayed] are not the reality itself. The Holy Father concluded: "... only the reality that shines through these images would be what was intended and what was truly enduring."

'*In the Beginning...*' reflected and continues to reflect 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.

In the 1980s, *The Church's Confession of Faith* had articulated the limits of theology in these matters. An adult catechism published in 1985 by the German Bishops' Conference, the CCF explained that "the Bible uses modes of expression and representation dependent on the world picture of its time; these are not binding on us. The Bible does not wish to instruct us on the empirically knowable genesis of the world or of the different species of organisms. It wishes to stress that God is the Creator of the world and its salvation...."

In this regard, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1997) lays down several key principles for an appropriate exegesis of Sacred Scripture.

First, in affirming the Bible as the divinely inspired Word of God, the Catechism upholds the truth of Sacred Scripture and its inerrancy in terms of "saving truth." It adopts a critical passage from the *Dei Verbum*, the Second Vatican

Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: "... we must acknowledge that the books of scripture firmly, faithfully, and without error teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the Sacred Scriptures (DV n.11)." (CCC n. 107) "Saving truth" is normative and binding; the time-conditioned cultural expressions of the biblical meaning are not.

Secondly, insofar as the Bible is the Word of God in human words, readers "must be attentive to what the human authors truly wanted to affirm and to what God wanted to reveal to us by their words." (CCC n. 109)

Thirdly, identification of the intention of the sacred authors must "take into account the conditions of their time and culture, the literary genres in use at that time, and the modes of feeling, speaking and narrating then current." (CCC n.110)

The Catechism confirms this position by again quoting directly from *Dei Verbum*: "For the fact is that truth is differently presented and expressed in the various types of historical writing, in prophetic and poetical texts, and in other forms of literary expression." (DV n.12)

Accordingly, the U.S. Catholic Catechism for Adults (2006) sums up two polar positions which are not in accord with the Catholic understanding of creation and evolution: "on the one hand, by 'creationist' or fundamentalist biblical positions that do not take into account the literary forms of the Bible and the primary theological purpose of its teaching, and, on the other hand, by the use of theories of evolution to support a materialist and anti-religious interpretation of the world and humanity." [USCCA, 61

The USCCA concludes: "The Bible is not a scientific textbook and should never be read as such; rather it reveals what God wants us to know for the sake of our salvation."

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