

## Evolution's Role in Roman Catholic Theology

by Dave Hunt

### A Surprising Development?

Most non-Catholics were surprised when Pope John Paul II, in a formal statement sent to the Vatican's Pontifical Academy of Science on October 23, 1996, announced that evolution was a scientific theory acceptable to the Church. Evangelical leaders, in joining forces with Rome, assured their critics that Catholicism accepts biblical inerrancy. Yet the Canons and Decrees of the Second Vatican Council (Roman Catholicism's highest authority) declare: "Hence the Bible is free from error *in what pertains to religious truth revealed for our salvation*. It is not necessarily free from error in other matters (e.g. natural science): [emphasis in original].<sup>14</sup> Evolution is "scientific," and the Bible is not infallible when it comes to science.

Allegedly infallible popes have made dogmatic but embarrassingly unscientific pronouncements based upon false biblical interpretations. Choosing to blame the Bible rather than admit the folly of its leaders, Roman Catholicism denies that the Bible is "free from error" in matters of science. Here is a brief excerpt from the Pope's statement to the Academy:

**I am pleased with the first theme you have chosen, that of the origins of life and evolution, an essential subject which deeply interests the Church....We know, in fact, that truth cannot contradict truth....I would remind you that the Magisterium of the Church has already made pronouncements on these matters....**

**In his Encyclical *Humani generis* (1950), my predecessor Pius XII had already stated that there was no opposition between evolution and the doctrine of the faith about man....Pius XII stressed this essential point: if the human body takes its origin from pre-existent living matter, the spiritual soul is immediately created by God....For my part...[I have said that] the exegete and the theologian must keep informed about the results achieved by the natural sciences....**

**Today...the theory of evolution...has been progressively accepted by researchers, following a series of discoveries in various fields of knowledge. The convergence...of the results of work that was conducted independently is in itself a significant argument in favour of this theory.<sup>15</sup>**

John Paul II was simply reiterating the official position of his Church. In May 1982, on the hundredth anniversary of Charles Darwin's death, the Pontifical Academy of Sciences held a conference of scientists in honor of Darwin and issued this statement: "We are convinced that masses of evidence render the application of the concept of evolution to man and other primates beyond serious dispute."<sup>16</sup> As a further example of endorsements by the Roman Catholic Church, in 1967 the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* had declared confidently:

**Evidence...supports...the fact of organic evolution. The best judges of the matter are the specialists who, over a period of 100 years, have assembled the necessary evidence. For them the fact of evolution has been established as thoroughly as science can establish facts of the past not witnessed by human eyes.<sup>17</sup>**

### Deliver Us from Further Embarrassment

The shameful case of Galileo explains why Pope John Paul II warned that "the exegete and the theologian must keep informed about the results achieved by the natural

sciences....” In enforcement of Church dogma, Pope Urban VIII threatened an elderly and very ill Galileo with torture if he would not renounce his claim that the earth revolved around the sun. On his knees before Rome’s Holy Office of the Inquisition, in fear for his life, Galileo recanted of this “heresy”—with his lips but not in his heart. That the sun and all heavenly bodies revolved around the earth remained official Roman Catholic dogma for centuries, with one “infallible” Pope after another affirming it. Only in 1992 did the Vatican at last admit officially that Galileo had indeed been right.

John Paul II’s quotation of Pope Leo XIII that “truth cannot contradict truth” is a capitulation to science. Rome’s theologians must take care that their interpretation of biblical truth agrees with the latest scientific theories. Yet Peter, who Catholics say was the first Pope, declared that all Scripture was inspired of the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21). Surely the Holy Spirit’s knowledge of science is not dependent upon the theories of scientists, who often contradict one another and must revise their theories periodically! If the Bible is not infallible when it comes to science, then why believe it is infallible regarding salvation or anything else?

Nevertheless, Edward Daschbach, a Catholic priest, without any apparent sense of betraying Peter and the Bible, explains the official Roman Catholic position:

**The Church, then, does not accept...the literal interpretation of the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis that would lead us to think that God, for example, actually made two grown adults suddenly from clay and rib....Catholics should be against creation-science for at least three serious reasons:**

***First: It effectively teaches a distrust of science and ultimately hurts religion as well. By defending a literal understanding of the opening chapters of Genesis...creation-science sets itself squarely against the world of true scientific discovery....The myths used by the Genesis authors are simply tools with which they communicate their religious beliefs.***

***Second: Creation-science is contrary to the method of interpreting Scripture favored universally by scholars and strongly approved by our Church. This favored approach...[allows us to] accept the divine revelation contained in Scripture, while accepting at the same time human author’s errors in matters of science or history....***

***Third: Creation-science leads to deep prejudice and bigotry against the Catholic Church. The case in point is the Book of Revelation. When creation-science advocates ply their fundamentalist tools to this final scriptural book, the Church often becomes a target for vehement attack....***<sup>18</sup>

### **Theistic Evolution: A Convenient Compromise**

The Pope stands firmly with a theory which contradicts not only the Genesis account of creation but other key portions of the Bible as well. And today’s leading evangelical magazine, *Christianity Today*, supports the Pope in his endorsement of evolution. An editorial declared: “John Paul II was...reminding scientists that if they were to be faithful Christians there were limits beyond which their science could not take them...no theory of evolution was acceptable...that did not recognize the direct divine origin of the human soul.”<sup>19</sup>

This issue was discussed at a gathering of mostly professing evangelicals at Biola University in Southern California in mid-November 1996. There were scientists from various fields, along with journalists, theologians, and educators “representing 58 state colleges and universities, 28 Christian academic institutions, and 18 other organizations.” While all agreed that God was involved in the process (which Darwinism denies), there was wide disagreement on the extent of that involvement, all the way from a strict biblical cre-

ationist view to the belief that God used evolution to create various species over a period of millions of years and finally infused a pair of them with human souls.<sup>20</sup> The latter theory is called theistic evolution.

In contrast to the intimidation by science and the lack of confidence in the Bible's inerrancy to which both Catholics and many Protestants have succumbed, consider these stirring words from the famous preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon:

**We shall with the sword of the Spirit maintain the whole truth as ours, and shall not accept a part of it as a grant from the enemies of God. The truth of God we will maintain as the truth of God, and we shall not retain it because the philosophic mind consents to our doing so.**

**If scientists agree to our believing a part of the Bible, we thank them for nothing: we believe it whether or no. Their assent is of no more consequence to our faith than...the consent of the mole to the eagle's sight. God being with us we shall not cease from this glorying, but will hold the whole of revealed truth even to the end.<sup>21</sup>**

#### **Footnotes:**

14. Vatican II, *Vatican Council II, Divine Revelation* (Knights of Columbus paraphrase edition, III.11e).
15. Pope John Paul II, "Message to Pontifical Academy of Sciences," in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 30 October 1996, pp. 3, 7.
16. Father Edward Daschbach, S.V.D., "Catholics and Creationism," in *Visitor*, October 21, 1985, p. 3.
17. *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (McGraw-Hill, 1967), vol. 5, p. 689.
18. Daschbach, S.V.D., *Visitor*, p. 3.
19. Editorial, "The Pope, The Press, and Evolution," in *Christianity Today*, January 6, 1997, p. 18.
20. Belz, "Witness for the Prosecution," in *World*, November 30/December 7, 1996, p. 19.
21. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Greatest Fight in the World*.