

*The fact that special creation is commonly ridiculed, even in most Catholic circles, should not trouble us unduly.*

## Reflections of a Catholic creationist

*By Thomas Storck*

■ I am a creationist. That is, I do not hold the general theory of evolution, sometimes called macroevolution, the theory that states that all living things began with “a few forms or...one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.” I have been convinced that macroevolution was erroneous since the late 1970s. Around 1972, while I was an undergraduate, a friend gave me a pamphlet setting forth the chief objections to evolution, and I, who had hitherto accepted evolution as a matter of course, and saw no theological objections to it, wondered what the evolutionists would have to say in reply to the points brought out in the pamphlet. I soon found out, for a few years later I was able to attend one of the debates conducted by the Protestant organization, the Institute for Creation Research, between a creationist scientist and an

evolutionist scientist. I found, to my surprise, that the evolutionists had very little to say. Shortly afterwards I took a course on evolution, less a biology course than a course in the philosophy of science, in graduate school, and again I found that evolutionists actually had not much of an argument to make. For example, the peppered moths, moths in England who exist in both black and white colors, the respective numbers of which vary as the background trees on which they rest are dirtied by industrial soot or not, so that one or the other of them is more of a target for birds to see and eat, were still being trotted out as evidence for macroevolution. Afterwards I published in this journal my first acknowledgement that I was a creationist in 1986.

So even though I am not a scientist, I think that the evidence against evolution is so overwhelming that a non-scientist can evaluate it with intellectual integrity. But there are a number of scientific, biblical, theological and his-

torical issues which are involved in the creation/evolution debate, and which are often presented in a confused manner. It is with these that I propose to deal in this article, making some distinctions and showing that the creation/evolution debate actually consists of two or three distinct questions which ought to be separately addressed and separately evaluated. In a sense, this article is an updating of my original 1986 HPR article.

I have already briefly described macroevolution, but for those readers who may be unfamiliar with the arguments and terminology on this issue, I should say a word about the distinction between macroevolution and what is often called microevolution. Microevolution is simply the changes that occur in living things, plants or animals, but changes that are strictly limited. In the book of Genesis (1:24) we read, "And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds.'" The Latin Vulgate uses in this verse for "kinds" the Latin words *genus* and then *species*. But these must be understood differently from the current biological categories of *genus* and *species*, for Scripture seems to be speaking of what the Protestant creationists call a "created kind." That is, when God created an original plant or animal there was a certain genetic variability within it, as we can see in the many different types of dogs, for example. But a dog cannot become an elephant nor a fish a bird. When Darwin saw fourteen different types of finches in the Galapagos Islands in 1835 he rightly concluded that they were modifications of finches whose ancestors had come from the South American continent. But finches are finches. We cannot reasonably conclude from the fact that since finches can change a bit, thus, as one author put it, from Darwin's insight about the finches "man received a first intimation that he might once have been an ape." Moreover, we should note that the ge-

netic boundaries of these "created kinds" in some cases correspond to one of present biological species, in other cases to a biological genus, and perhaps in some, to a biological family.

We thus distinguish between evolution or change within the limits of the "kind" that God originally created, microevolution, and evolution across the boundaries of the kind, macroevolution. It is not my intention to relate the evidence which convinced me that the latter type of evolution had never occurred and never could occur; others have done this better than I could. Rather I will go on to one of the topics whose relationship to evolution is often confused, the question of the age of the earth.

In order for macroevolution to be true, in order for the many tiny variations that occur in living things to add up to macro variations, e.g., for a reptile to become a bird, an immense amount of time is needed. Thus evolutionists are necessarily committed to a very old age for the earth, say, 4.5 billion years. The so-called Cambrian explosion, the appearance of an abundance of fossils in rocks, is commonly dated almost 600 million years ago and the first appearance of man, or something like man, two million years ago. But creationists do not need to posit such great ages for the earth. Although Holy Scripture does not say when God created the cosmos, working from the genealogies and ages stated in Scripture, some have attempted to work out what seemed to them to be the correct age of the earth according to the Bible. The most famous of these chronologies, usually attributed to the Anglican Archbishop of Dublin, James Ussher (1581-1656), puts creation in the year 4004 B.C. In fact, Ussher and his contemporary John Lightfoot of Cambridge University, seem to have fixed creation to a definite day and even hour! Wisely, contemporary Protestant creationists do not set such precise dates, and simply argue for an earth no more than 10,000 years old.



Although a Douay-Rheims Bible that I own has a footnote at Genesis 1:1 noting that the date for the creation event was 4004 B.C., in general Catholic thought has not approached the matter in the same way as have Protestants. The Fathers of the Church were not unanimous in their opinions about the manner of creation, and the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1909 issued a series of decisions about the first three chapters of Genesis which, while holding that these narratives are not mere edifying fictions derived from pagan myths and that they do contain historical facts, taught nevertheless that some expressions in these chapters may be “used figuratively, that is metaphorically or anthropomorphically” and that we are not “strictly and always bound, when interpreting these chapters to seek for scientific exactitude of expression” nor need Catholics understand the six days of creation as six literal days. Later, in 1948, the Commission responded to questions submitted by the Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Suhard, on the first eleven chapters

of Genesis, and noted that the “literary forms of the first eleven Chapters of Genesis . . . correspond to none of our classical categories and cannot be judged in the light of Greco-Latin or modern literary styles.” While one may not say that these chapters do not contain history, they do so “in simple and figurative language, adapted to the understanding of a less developed people.” In an address of November 22, 1951, to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences Pope Pius XII refers in passing to the “billions of years” of the existence of the universe and “that the average age of the oldest minerals is at the most five billion years.” Obviously the Pontiff was not stating these opinions as the teaching of the Church, but nevertheless if Pius thought these dates probable or even possible, then he himself did not hold to a young-earth theory. It is clear, then, that Catholics are not committed by the teaching of the Church to a recent creation, or to a method which involves using biblical genealogies to try to date the creation of man.

Protestant creationists also offer a variety of scientific arguments for a recent creation of the universe and the earth, but I have never felt that I was competent to evaluate these arguments. Moreover, it may well be the case that the natural sciences simply have no way to determine these ages. The data may be too diffuse and difficult to evaluate. My reason for introducing this subject is simply to note that special creationism, i.e., the rejection of macroevolution, is a separate subject from the age of the earth. One may be convinced on the first and remain agnostic on the second. Often many people lump the two questions together as if one necessitated the other, but this is not so. Though I am certainly attracted by the notion of a recent creation, I have no opinion on it. It is certainly a possibility; I simply do not know.

A question related this is as follows: How long did it take for God to create the cosmos? The Protestant creationist movement is firm-


ly committed to holding that God's creative acts were limited to six 24-hour days. As we saw, the Pontifical Biblical Commission some time ago ruled that such an interpretation of Genesis does not bind Catholics. St. Thomas notes that St. Augustine considered the seven days to be one day schematically presented. Moreover it is obviously impossible from a scientific standpoint to know how long it took God to create the cosmos, even if we could know when he did it. Perhaps he did it instantaneously, perhaps over a longer period. Neither theology, philosophy nor natural science seems to pronounce definitively on this.

Another matter, which, while strictly speaking it does not concern creation or evolution or the age of the earth, is nonetheless intimately related to this subject, is the question of Noah's flood. The scientists connected with the Institute for Creation Research think that the geologic features which evolutionists see as evidence for the great antiquity of the earth, such as the various rock strata, instead are evidence for an enormous catastrophe, a worldwide flood, as related in Scripture (Genesis 7:1-8:19). For them, because of their commitment to a fundamentalist interpretation of Scripture, it is necessary to vindicate not only the existence of such a flood, but that it literally covered the entire earth. Again, Catholic thought has not insisted on this. For example, Fr. Patrick O'Connell, an author who takes a very traditional approach to evolution and the book of Genesis, opines that although the whole human race perished in the flood of Noah, it did not actually cover the entire physical earth. Although I certainly accept the reality of the flood and the fact that all of mankind except for those in the ark were destroyed by it, I would not venture an opinion on whether it covered the entire earth or not. There does seem to be some evidence for a worldwide flood, as in the enormous "fossil graveyards" found all over the world, places where thou-

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sands, sometimes millions or more, of fossilized animals can be found together, a fact which certainly suggests some kind of universal catastrophe. But for Catholics, the question of the exact geographic extent of the flood does not have the urgency that it has for fundamentalist Protestants.

Lastly, we must look at two utterances of the Supreme Pontiffs which deal with evolution. My contention here is that both these documents basically regard the question of



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***It is clear from his remarks that John Paul regards evolution as at least probable: he speaks of "the theory of evolution" as "more than a hypothesis," and says that it is supported by "a series of discoveries in various fields of knowledge," and that this "convergence . . . is in itself a significant argument in favor of this theory."***

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evolution as a scientific question, and that from a theological standpoint, Catholics are neither prohibited nor compelled to accept evolution.

The first document is the encyclical *Humani Generis* of Pope Pius XII, August 12, 1950. Toward the beginning of this encyclical Pope Pius states, "Some imprudently and indiscreetly hold that evolution, which has not been fully proved even in the domain of natural sciences, explains the origin of all this [ad omnium rerum originem], and audaciously support the monistic and pantheistic opinion that the world is in continual evolution." He goes on to censure those "fictitious tenets of evolution which repudiate all that is absolute, firm and immutable . . ." (sect. 5 and 6). I take it that the Pope is here condemning such pan-evolutionism as the theories of Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and not directly the theory of evolution in the natural world. For later in the same encyclical he states that the

Teaching Authority of the Church does not forbid that . . . research and discussion . . . take place with regard to the doctrine of evolution, in as far as it inquires into the origin of the human body as coming from pre-existent and living matter. . . . However, this must be done in such a way that the reasons for both opinions, that is, those favorable and those unfavorable to evolution, be weighed and

judged with the necessary seriousness, moderation and measure. . . . Some however rashly transgress this liberty of discussion, when they act as if the origins of the human body from pre-existing and living matter were already completely certain and proved . . . and as if there were nothing in the sources of divine revelation which demands the greatest moderation and caution in this question. (sect. 36).

In the next section Pope Pius condemns the idea of polygenism, the notion that Adam and Eve were not two individual human beings but stand for an undetermined number of original humans, for "it is in no way apparent how such an opinion can be reconciled with original sin."

What is noteworthy about these passages is that Pius XII seems to focus chiefly on the question of human evolution. Although he notes that "evolution . . . has not been fully proved even in the domain of natural sciences," it is only human evolution which he addresses in the context of raising theological difficulties. Even here he does not seem to think that theology necessarily raises any insuperable obstacles to accepting the evolution even of the human body, could this ever be sufficiently proven.

Although Pius XII apparently did not rule out the possibility of evolution being true in the physical order, he wisely saw the dangers of the theory, especially the tendency toward a "monistic and pantheistic opinion that the world is in continual evolution," and that nothing "is absolute, firm and immutable." Unfortunately philosophy and theology seem to be in the grip of such notions today. Even many ostensibly orthodox Catholics seem to accept a version of the idea of development of doctrine which allows for what was once true to become false and vice versa. Yet such an idea of development is utterly foreign to Cardinal Newman's theory of doctrinal development, and moreover seems to partake of at least some of the characteristics of that Modernism condemned by St. Pius X in his encyclical

*Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (September 8, 1907) and in the decree *Lamentabili Sane* (July 3, 1907). Therefore those Catholics who do hold that macroevolution is true in the physical order should be very careful not to extend that opinion to areas where it could not possibly apply, such as the doctrines and dogmas of the Church.

Pope John Paul II also addressed the question of evolution in a message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on October 22, 1996. It is clear from his remarks that John Paul regards evolution as at least probable: he speaks of "the theory of evolution" as "more than a hypothesis," and says that it is supported by "a series of discoveries in various fields of knowledge," and that this "convergence . . . is in itself a significant argument in favor of this theory." Does this somehow mean that, despite what I have said above, Catholics are obliged to accept macroevolution? It should

be evident that an encyclical carries more doctrinal weight than a papal address to a group of scientists. This message does not oblige Catholics to consider evolution as true or as proven or even as probable. It represents the personal views of the Holy Father, and certainly shows that he sees no contradiction between macroevolution and Catholic faith. But it is not a statement binding on the Church.

In light of the paucity (to say the least) of scientific evidence for macroevolution, and since the theory of special creation, unlike evolution, presents no theological or philosophical difficulties, there clearly is no reason why a Catholic cannot reject macroevolution and adhere to special creation. The fact that special creation is commonly ridiculed, even in most Catholic circles, should not trouble us unduly. For the supposed wisdom of the modern world, if truth be told, usually rests on very slender foundations. ■



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