

*The temptation is great to adopt not just the Protestants' scientific arguments, but also their approach to the Bible and Christianity.*

## Catholics and creationism: Cautions and hopes

*By Thomas Storck*

■ There seems to be interest today on the part of many Catholics in creationism. Within the past few years several Catholic journals have carried articles favorable to creationism and critical of evolution, or at least of Darwinian natural selection. Although the Catholic Center for Creation Research, which existed during the 1970s, is now defunct, other individuals are promoting creationist ideas among Catholics in various ways. This interest largely parallels the increased activity of Protestant fundamentalists in this area, who have numerous organizations to advance the cause of creationism, including the Institute for Creation Research, the Creation Research Society, and Students for Origins Research. As a Catholic creationist myself, I believe that interest in creationism among Catholics is a good thing, though not without certain dangers. But before I

discuss this matter, I think several definitions and distinctions are in order.

By "creationism" is generally meant the thesis that God created each *kind* or basic type of plant and animal directly and separately. More fully this should be called "special creationism." Creationists do not maintain that each *species* or *variety* was created directly by God; instead they reject species as the basic taxonomic unit, substituting the term *kind*, a word originally taken from Genesis 1, which is used to mean the basic biological category. In some cases a kind is the same as its equivalent species, but in other cases it is larger, approximating a genus or possibly even the next highest taxonomic class, family. But in all cases evolutionary change cannot cross the boundaries of kinds (macroevolution), although within a kind genetics and mutations may produce progressive change (microevolu-

tion). An example of this is the evolution of the different finches that Darwin observed on the Galapagos Islands from one variety.

The second proposition, separate from special creationism, is the young earth theory. This holds that the earth was created about 10,000 years ago, not millions of years ago, and that most of the major features on this planet came about as the result of the great cataclysm of Noah, not as the result of millions of years of minor but cumulative geological changes.

**Kind = basic biological category**

The third and last assertion distinguished is biblical fundamentalism. This view, held of course by many Protestant fundamentalists, claims that the teachings of the Bible must be taken literally, that the sacred writers wrote in familiar literary forms, or expressions, "in simple and metaphorical language adapted to the mentality of a little cultured."

Now all or most Protestant creationists, such as for example those associated with the Institute for Creation Research, hold all three of these views. Sometimes people, both friendly and those hostile to creationism, fail to distinguish between these three ideas, and fail to note that holding numbers 1 and/or 2 without holding number 3. Moreover, numbers 1 and 2 are scientific theories, and no amount of scientific evidence can be in support of them, evidence that is considered convincing for no. 1, and intriguing for no. 2. But no amount of logical statement (which I am not myself), and no scientific evidence can ever prove it.

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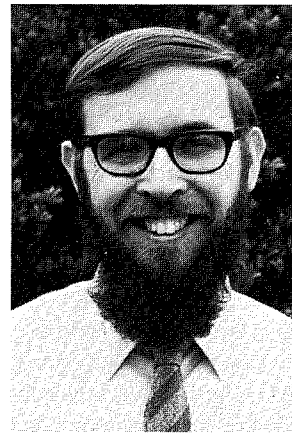
The second proposition, logically separate from special creationism, is the young earth theory. This theory holds that the earth was created no more than 10,000 years ago, not millions of years; and that most of the major geologic features on this planet came about because of the great cataclysm of Noah's flood, not as the result of millions of years of minor but cumulative geologic activity.

### Kind = basic biological category

The third and last assertion to be distinguished is biblical fundamentalism. This view, held of course by Protestant fundamentalists, claims that every part of the Bible must be taken literally, that is, that the sacred writers never used unfamiliar literary forms, or expressed truth "in simple and metaphorical language adapted to the mentality of a people but little cultured."<sup>1</sup>

Now all or most Protestant creationists, such as for example, the men associated with the Institute for Creation Research, hold all three of the above beliefs. Sometimes people, both those friendly and those hostile to creationism, fail to distinguish between the above three ideas, and fail to note that one can hold numbers 1 and/or 2 without accepting number 3. Moreover, numbers 1 and 2 are scientific theories, and various sorts of scientific evidence can be adduced in support of them, evidence which I consider convincing for no. 1, and extremely intriguing for no. 2. But no. 3 is a theological statement (which I do not hold myself), and no scientific evidence could ever prove it.

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Now what has this got to do with Catholics? Much, I think. Many Catholics, for a variety of reasons, have become familiar with the publications of the Protestant creationists, have attended their debates and lectures, and have come to accept statements 1 and 2 above as true. This by itself is good. It is good, first of all, because I consider creationism to be true, and it is good for men to know the truth. But beyond this, widespread Catholic acceptance of creationism would be a major setback for the modernists, unfortunately so common in the Church today. Indeed, it was the pan-evolutionism of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin which helped to undermine the faith well before the turmoil that followed Vatican II.

But in spite of this good there are

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nevertheless some dangers, because many Catholic creationists, while absorbing the scientific contents of the Protestant creationists' books and lectures, absorb also some questionable theological ideas, in particular biblical fundamentalism and a false standard of orthodoxy. Protestant fundamentalists insist that their religion is fully committed to a completely literal interpretation of Holy Scripture, and that anyone not accepting such a literal interpretation is not an orthodox fundamentalist. They, of course, can define their religious beliefs any way they choose, but it is important to note here that there are several problems for Catholics with this. Now a fundamentalist approach to Scripture is not in itself incompatible with our Faith, though I think one can say that the mainstream of Catholic theology has never favored it; but what is incompatible with Catholicism is the assertion that anyone who is not a fundamentalist is a heretic, or, at the very least, a semi-modernist. A few quotations from authoritative documents show how false this idea is.

For example, during the modernist crisis after the turn of the century, supposedly a period of obscurantism in Catholic theology and exegesis, the Pontifical Biblical Commission made it clear that Catholics need not accept a literal interpretation of the six days of creation in Genesis 1. The Commission proposed the following question on June 30, 1909:

Whether the Word *Yom* (day), which is used in the first chapter of Genesis to describe and distinguish the six days, may be taken either in its strict sense as the natural day, or in a less strict sense as signifying a certain space of time; and whether free discussion of this question is permitted to interpreters. Answer: In the affirmative.<sup>2</sup>

In 1948 the Commission again took up the question of the first chapters of Genesis, in its well-known letter to Cardinal

Suhard, Archbishop of Paris. The Commission maintained:

The question of the literary forms of the first eleven Chapters of Genesis is . . . obscure and complex. These literary forms correspond to none of our classical categories and cannot be judged in the light of Greco-Latin or modern literary styles. One can, therefore, neither deny nor affirm their historicity, taken as a whole, without unduly attributing to them the canons of a literary style within which it is impossible to classify them.<sup>3</sup>

Finally there is Pius XII's encyclical, *Humani Generis*, of 1950. In this encyclical the Pope discusses "those questions which, although they pertain to the positive sciences, are nevertheless more or less connected with the truths of the Christian faith."<sup>4</sup> Pope Pius states that if any of these scientific hypotheses, among which is human evolution, "are directly or indirectly opposed to the doctrine revealed by God," then Catholics cannot entertain them. But instead of proscribing discussion of human evolution, he specifically permits it.

. . . the Teaching Authority of the Church does not forbid that, in conformity with the present state of human sciences and sacred theology, research and discussions, on the part of men experienced in both fields, 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—for the Catholic faith obliges us to hold that souls are immediately created by God. 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. . . .<sup>5</sup>

In the same encyclical the Pontiff refers to the "simple and metaphorical language adapted to the mentality of a people but little cultured" of the first eleven chapters of Genesis. There can be no doubt, in the light of these statements, that Catholics are not obligated to accept biblical fundamentalism or creationism.

Indeed, Pius does not even raise the question of the evolution of lower animals, apparently because it could be no conceivable doubt for anyone to believe in the evolution of penguins.

But unfortunately, at least among Catholic adherents of creationism, cues from the Protestant liturgy. If Catholics are obligated to accept creationism, the young and biblical fundamentalists, of course, a great wrong for attempt to impose opinions by the Church, for it involves doctrines the precepts of a kind of falsification of the truth it is likely to turn information away from any interest in science. Creationism, since they see that creationists are so poorly informed, Catholic teaching.

#### Souls immediately created

But I am afraid there is a danger of guided Catholic creationism. Some of the Protestant creationists publish theological books and tapes. It is natural that they are attracted to the publication organizations to buy and use their works, not specifically dealing with creation/evolution controversy. They are formed in their own faith, they are apt to acquire more and more important theological ideas, and they are apt to apostatize from the faith and especially is this a danger since many books being issued from Catholic publishers are unsound. These people, these bad "Catholic" books, turn out to be which seem conservative and ignorant of the Protestant error of their own kind.<sup>6</sup>

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Indeed, Pius does not even mention the question of the evolution of plants and lower animals, apparently thinking there could be no conceivable danger to faith to believe in the evolution of giraffes or penguins.

But unfortunately, at least some Catholic adherents of creationism, taking their cues from the Protestant literature, act as if Catholics are obligated by faith to accept creationism, the young earth theory, and biblical fundamentalism. It is always, of course, a great wrong for anyone to attempt to impose opinions never defined by the Church, for it involves "teaching as doctrines the precepts of men," and is a kind of falsification of the Faith. In addition it is likely to turn informed Catholics away from any interest in scientific creationism, since they see that Catholic creationists are so poorly informed about Catholic teaching.

#### **Souls immediately created by God**

But I am afraid there is danger for misguided Catholic creationists themselves. Some of the Protestant creationist organizations publish theological and devotional books and tapes. It is natural for Catholics attracted to the publications of these organizations to buy and use these other works, not specifically dealing with the creation/evolution controversy. But ill informed in their own faith, these Catholics are apt to acquire more and more Protestant theological ideas, and possibly apostatize from the faith altogether. Especially is this a danger since so many books being issued from Catholic sources are unsound. These people, aware of these bad "Catholic" books, turn to sources which seem conservative and sound, oblivious of the Protestant errors contained in them.<sup>6</sup>



So, in view of all this, I offer three suggestions for Catholic creationists, both to safeguard and deepen their own faith, and to avoid antagonizing or misleading their fellow Catholics. First, that they distance themselves to some extent from the Protestant creationist movement. Certainly they should continue to use the generally excellent scientific work being done by the fundamentalist organizations, but they must know our own faith well enough to recognize and reject the false theology often found in the Protestant texts. In a few cases the fundamentalist creationist organizations publish two versions of a book, one with a Protestant theological and scriptural element, the other, intended for the public schools, with no mention of Christianity. It might be well to acquire and use this latter version where available.

Second, if possible, enlist Catholic scientists and science teachers, and also philosophers and theologians, in support of creationism. Of course, this can be done only if Catholic creationists take care to exclude Protestant theological stances, and concentrate on the scientific case for creationism.

The reasons why these experts are needed are several. Scientists and science teachers are needed for the sake both of credibility with the public and scientific soundness. Briefing oneself on the question of origins, while being in general ignorant of science, is no substitute for a basic science education. One of the attractive features of the Protestant creationist movement, and one which greatly helps its credibility, is that its leaders are all scientists, generally holding doctorates from recognized universities.

The need for philosophers and theologians is just as great if the necessary distinctions are to be made and maintained. The temptation is great to adopt not just the Protestants' scientific arguments, but also their approach to the Bible and to Christianity in general. People knowledgeable of the faith and of sound philosophy must be on hand to prevent any false approaches. Most of the Protestant creationist organizations have boards of reference, consisting of Protestant theologians and pastors, whose job is to insure the orthodoxy (from their viewpoint) of the organization's work. Any Catholic creationist organization should consider having such a board, containing both theologians submissive to the Magisterium and sound philosophers.

Third, try to obtain some of the Catholic creationist writings of the first part of this century. During that time a number of Catholics, clerics and laymen, scientists and philosophers, wrote in opposition to evolution. All or most of these works are out of print, but doubtless some may be found in libraries or secured from Catholic used book dealers. Msgr. George Barry O'Toole's *The Case Against Evolution* (New York: Macmillan, 1925) has been said to be among the best of these Catholic efforts. Msgr. O'Toole was both a philosopher and a scientist, and taught biology for several

years at Seton Hill College in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. No doubt the scientific data in these earlier works will often be out of date, but the reader will find in them the careful distinctions and sound theological and philosophical underpinnings so lacking in the writings of the Protestant fundamentalists.

As a Catholic and a creationist, I hope to see more and more interest in creationism on the part of Catholics. But I grieve to see this interest perverted by Protestant errors or mistaken assumptions. Instead, I hope that a sound and sane Catholic creationist movement will soon arise: sound scientifically, philosophically and theologically. Then, perhaps, many Catholics will embrace the sensible theory of creationism, a theory true, and, as a result, necessarily in full harmony with our Faith. ■

<sup>1</sup> Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, as excerpted in *Rome and the Study of Scripture*, 7th ed. (St. Meinrad, Ind.: Grail, 1962), p. 115.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> One can find many Protestant fundamentalist assumptions and opinions in the work of Paula Haigh, founder of the now defunct Catholic Center for Creation Research. For example, the subtitle of her book, *Thirty Theses Against Theistic Evolution* (Louisville: Catholic Center for Creation Research, 1976) runs in part: "Based on the Conviction that Theistic Evolution is a Heresy. . . ." Her 30th thesis in this work reads in part, "In the general sense, then, the error of evolution must be asserted to be incompatible with divine Catholic Faith" (p. 65).

In a pamphlet of hers entitled, *What's Wrong with Evolution* (Caldwell, Idaho: Bible-Science Association, no date) she writes, ". . . for the Bible does indeed teach us not only science, but it contains all that we need to know about everything" (emphasis author's, p. 14). She also states, "Protestants are way ahead of Catholics in this effort (educating their people against evolution) because they have been far more vigilant and zealous for the integrity of Biblical doctrine" (p. 22). Her writings are pervaded by the view that all theistic evolution is Teilhardian modernism, and that Catholic teaching on the inerrancy of Scripture requires biblical fundamentalism.

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## Translation

*By Peter Milward*

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