

# Catholic Confusion on Creation

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*Has Pope Francis secretly ditched biblical creation? Is there a new official doctrine of the Church, which looks at Genesis through Darwin's glasses? The short answer to these questions is 'no.' This article explains why.*



Every now and then confusion emerges about the doctrine of creation in the Catholic Church. Often this confusion is media-induced. The moment this pope says something along progressive lines, his words are blown out of proportion to create momentum and political pressure. When Bishop Francis said (in 2014) that the 'Big Bang' and evolution harmonize with biblical creation, this produced sensational headers about the pope ending up in the camp of the evolutionists. In reality Francis did not say anything different than what his two predecessors already vocalized publicly. More to the point, he actually made out a case for Intelligent Design without mentioning the name, because the goal-oriented evolution he spoke about does not exist in a scientific sense. But on this the mass media kept silent. They like to use this pope for their own agenda.

## **Personal opinion**

While Pius XII seemed more flexible on the doctrine of creation, the public shift of the Vatican only started under Pope John Paul II. In a lecture for the Papal Academy of Science (22-10-1996) he spoke positive words about evolution as "more than an hypothesis." Also at the time newspaper headers followed like 'Pope believes in evolution.' What was blatantly ignored, however, was that John Paul addressed cosmic evolution and the physical development of the universe, something which had also been praised and acknowledged by his predecessor Pius XII. Both Pius and John Paul were very critical about and issued cautions against the idea of biological macro-evolution.

There is a background to the praise for evolution by the last three main inhabitants of the Chair of Peter. This shift happened under enormous pressure, especially from the Jesuit order, which is not only the largest religious order, but also the one most involved in and responsible for Catholic education. Georges Lemaître, the brilliant Belgian physicist who proposed the idea that was popularized as the 'Big Bang' was a Jesuit; as was the priest and heretic Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, one of the most influential Catholic theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup>

century. As a result of his commitment to evolution, Teilhard abandoned the dogma of original sin.

Any pope is influenced by his environment. For those who are not Roman Catholics it is important to realize that the Catholic Church distinguishes between personal opinions of a pope and official pronouncements that he makes as the official representative of Christ, when he defines a doctrine as part of the Deposit of Faith “once delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3) which then form part of the Magisterial, or official, teaching of the Catholic Church. Historically and doctrinally the Catholic Church is committed to biblical creationism. Other views are permissible, although these must meet minimal doctrinal criteria. The most comprehensive recent document of the Magisterium on creation is a document on the first chapters of Genesis and evolution that was promulgated by Pius X and his Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) in 1909. Together with relevant parts of *Humani Generis* this is the latest official teaching of the Church on the doctrine of creation and Darwinism. Any Catholic who openly doubts these teachings is, by ex-cathedra declaration, guilty of ‘culpa gravi,’ or mortal sin (*Praestantia Scripturae*, 18-11-1907). Whatever the prevailing views at Catholic schools and seminaries might be presently, this remains the official doctrine of the Church; albeit a state not dissimilar to that of the doctrine of Scripture in today’s Church.



### **Official doctrine**

Following the Apostles, Church Fathers and Councils, the Catholic Church teaches that the first three chapters of Genesis have a literal and historical meaning. Mythologizing of the sacred history of Genesis is expressly rejected. More specifically, any Catholic is obliged to believe as history: the immediate creation of man, the formation of Eve from Adam and a literal interpretation of mankind’s fall into sin, the role of the serpent included. Bible interpreters, however, are free as to their interpretation of the word ‘day’ in Genesis. Both the proper sense of the text (*sensu proprio*) and a non-literal interpretation (*sensu improprio*) are allowed, provided that the historical requirements mentioned earlier are met.

The PBC established that the Church Fathers are more or less unanimous in their literal interpretation of Genesis 1-3 as historical events. If they deviate from this at all, as St. Augustine did in regard to the meaning of “day” in Genesis 1, it is not in Darwin’s direction. On the contrary, Augustine proposed an immediate creation of everything in principle, shorter than six day-night cycles. All Fathers were ‘creationists’ and believed in a young earth of less than six thousand years at the time; including Augustine. These views were

confirmed by the Fourth Lateran Council. The greatest scholar of the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas, specifically taught the proper sense of the word day in Genesis 1.

Creationism prevailed in the Catholic Church well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even in this year's Gallup poll (May 2017) it was surprising, if not encouraging, to see that despite all concerted efforts to the contrary in 'Catholic' education and in the mainstream media, two in every five Catholics in the United States adheres to the official doctrine of creation and also believes in a factual worldwide flood as described in the Bible.

All this stands in stark contrast to the activities of prominent scholars and Church leaders. In the twentieth century prominent theologians, like Teilhard de Chardin, started to promote mythology in Biblical Studies and Darwinism in science. Still the Church did not waver and the standards of the Papal Bible Commission remained the official doctrine. This became clear in 1948 when French Cardinal Suhard tried to make the Pontifical Biblical Commission withdraw its promulgated teachings on Genesis and evolution. The Vatican denied his request and confirmed that these teachings were clear and valid so that nothing beyond these was required. For this reason, *Humani Generis*—which appeared shortly afterwards and which allows Catholic scholars not to believe or to teach evolution but to examine it as an hypothesis—should be read in the light of the PBC decrees of 1909.

### **Careful**

The last three popes favouring theistic evolution suggests a tension between their personal views and the Magisterium of the church. This can be confusing, particularly for non-Catholics. A good pope distinguishes between things he personally lacks faith for and what he acknowledges to be the continuous and authoritative faith of the apostolic Church. Even if he feels differently in his heart, his official pronouncements will show loyalty to the doctrine of the Church of all ages and places which he should represent. Benedict XVI usually was quite diplomatic in his choice of words and emphasized regularly that evolution was a hypothesis and a pragmatic theory for testable phenomena. Pope Francis also has a similarly reticent approach in his official letters. For example, in *Laudate Si* (24-5-2015, 81) he says: "Human beings, even if we postulate a process of evolution, also possess a uniqueness which cannot be fully explained by the evolution of other open systems." In other words, the pope in his official teaching is careful not to deny the official doctrine of the Church. Which pope would like to be seen committing something he knows to be qualified as mortal sin by the prior Magisterium of the Church? Neither Benedict nor Francis has thought it wise to give passing metaphysical scientific theories the status of fact or dogma – a sensible approach.

### **Consequences**

There is also good theological reason for the Magisterium not to endorse theistic evolution. Neo-Darwinism does not sit well with several core doctrines of the Church. It does not meet the requirements of the PBC by any stretch of the imagination and is far too problematic in most respects to be classified as a form of *sensu improprio*, especially as it was the perceived heresy of Darwinism that gave rise to the pronouncements of the PBC in the first place. This, however, pales into insignificance if the larger doctrinal implications of theistic evolution are considered. The resulting doctrine of God is no longer Catholic, nor is it possible to maintain a biblical view of man, or of 'humanity' (for my dear readers in San Francisco), or of the traditional doctrine of sin. This is illustrated by Teilhard de Chardin. His theistic evolutionary views forced him to ditch the doctrine of original sin. For Teilhard,

Darwinist chance mutations in a world already profoundly touched by mortality was God's method of creation. No good creation anymore, not even the conditional mortality that some Fathers taught, but a completely different view of humanity and (alleged) sin is required. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Pope John Paul II advanced the view that any conceived life would ultimately be saved. If theistic evolution were true, it should not be otherwise or God would be profoundly unjust.

The doctrine of God fares even worse. The god of theistic evolution creates by means of an endless hell of suffering, death and destruction, from which after billions of years eventually man arises. At best God infuses souls into wretched humanoids who have to make a start in a world that has been subjected to a cosmic curse from the very beginning with a fallible body and mind to match. Man had no chance whatsoever to begin with. Theologically this cruel experiment is a far cry from Genesis and a loving Father who creates the world through the author of the Sermon on the Mount. This god of theistic evolution much more resembles what Scripture calls the devil. If one embraces theistic evolution with intellectual integrity, this will necessitate adaptation of one's view of God. This may range from a reduced impotent god to a different range of forces. The Gnostics and Marcion already realized that one's view of creation has implications. Christ as agent of creation (John, Colossians) cannot present different values than the Incarnate Word and the Master of the Gospels. For them this resulted in a separation between the material and spiritual world. In today's confused world and Church modern Gnostics arise, ceding the material world to Darwinism and claiming the soul for the Lord. But it does not work that way. This view of god is essentially pagan. Darwinism is not unlike the old Demiurge, representative of a different god with non-Christian values.

Our Lord, His Apostles, the Fathers and Councils, from Lateran IV to Vatican I propagated a good creation and the historicity of the events described in Genesis 1-3, including a historical fall of the first two parents of humanity with cosmic implications. Unless manmade religion fully takes over, it is unlikely that the doctrine of creation and the requirements of the PBC will be officially revisited by present or future popes. The doctrine of creation is based on the best philological interpretation of Scripture and confirmed by Our Lord in the Gospel. Added to this is the unanimous view of the Fathers as a rule for the interpretation of Scripture laid down by two Ecumenical Councils, Trent and Vatican I. All of this pretty much prevents any innovation in regard to the doctrine of creation without sabotaging the Catholic faith. Then there are additional clear statements of the Magisterium in the decrees of several ecumenical councils and authoritative papal declarations (particularly the anathema of Vatican I in 1869/70 against the proposition that "the progress of science" could justify changing the doctrine of creation defined by the Church). In other words, the official abandonment of the traditional doctrine of creation and its replacement with some form of theistic evolution is an absolute impossibility, unless the Church leadership officially renounces the immutability of dogma as an essential characteristic of the Magisterium—and ceases to be Catholic.

Indeed, even at times when the Magisterium is more Catholic than the pope, the official doctrine of the Church remains.

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