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Volume 8, numéro 2, 1952

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1020786ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1020786ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Laval théologique et philosophique, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)

1703-8804 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Schlitzer, A. L. (1952). The Position of Modern Theology on the Evolution of Man. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 8(2), 208–229.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1020786ar>

The Position of Modern Theology on the Evolution of Man

The suggestion that man originated by way of a process of evolution has had the most diversified impact in the area of religion on the experts in both science and theology.

Among the scientists Charles Darwin was led by his convictions on the evolution of man to a disbelief in God, or at least to agnosticism. "I think," he wrote, "that generally (and more and more as I grow older) but not always, that an Agnostic would be the more correct description of my state of mind."¹ In another letter he reveals the source of his doubts. "But I may say that the impossibility of conceiving that this grand and wondrous universe with our conscious selves, arose through chance, seems to me the chief argument for the existence of God; but whether this is an argument of real value, I have never been able to decide."² He thought that his own theories dispensed with the need of a Creator, and weakened the arguments brought forth in proof for the existence of God.

Lecomte Du Noüy, on the other hand, drew evidence for the existence of God from his views on evolution. As Pierre De Saint-Seine puts it: "In the order of human causes, it is his vision of evolution that led him to the vision of God."³

Among theologians the claim that man originated on this earth through a process of evolution from lower animals evoked a welcome response from Cardinal Liénart, of Lille, while it provoked the indignation and heated attack of Cardinal Ruffini.

"Among the discoveries of which science is justly proud," wrote Cardinal Liénart in 1947, "those made in Geology and in Paleontology especially within the last half century rank among the most outstanding." After a brief summary of the reconstruction of "pre-history" according to these experts, he concludes that for Paleontology

the occurrence of evolution, that is to say the passage from one species of life to another, and, consequently, the animal origin of the human body, is now considered a fact settled once for all. At the time of the "Conference on Paleontology" which in the month of April of this year brought together in Paris the leading authorities in Paleontology and in Biology from France, England, America and Switzerland, all without distinction of philosophical leanings were unanimous on this point.⁴

1. *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, New York, D. Appleton, 1896, T.I, p.274.

2. *Ibid.*, p.276.

3. *Études*, 255 (1947), p.381.

4. *Le chrétien devant les progrès de la science*, in *Études*, 255 (1947), p.289.

Cardinal Liénart then proceeds to show how the teaching of evolution can be fitted into Catholic thought safely and fruitfully.

In sharp contrast with this enthusiastic welcome of Cardinal Liénart, Cardinal Ruffini has nothing but scathing denunciation. In a feature article written for the Vatican newspaper, the *Osservatore Romano*, June 3, 1950, he expresses deep concern and alarm at the favor with which some Catholics view the claims of evolution, and proposes vigorous arguments against evolution. For him not only have the upholders of evolution failed to bring forward one convincing proof, but their proposal is directly opposed to Catholic doctrine.

The arguments brought forth so far, he claims, have failed completely to disturb the Christian conviction based on Scripture, the teaching of the Fathers and the ever constant traditional teaching of the Church as set down in the Catechism. He contends further that the doctrine of evolution jeopardizes the fundamental truths of Christian faith on the perfections and position of Adam as the head of the human race, on Original Justice and on Original Sin. Finally he fears that the acceptance of evolution will open the door to a general breakdown of faith.¹

The fact that Cardinal Ruffini published his article in the *Osservatore Romano* was taken by a few as indicative that he acted as the spokesman of the official stand of Rome. It is interesting to note, however, that a little more than a month after Cardinal Ruffini uttered his fervent plea to Catholics to shun the theory of evolution in order to safeguard the true faith, Pope Pius XII issued his encyclical *Humani Generis*, which appears to speak in a much calmer and conciliatory fashion, certainly with none of the alarm or condemnation of Cardinal Ruffini. I shall speak of this document in detail later. I think we shall see that the Sovereign Pontiff pursues a middle course between the enthusiastic welcome of Cardinal Liénart and the outraged rejection of Cardinal Ruffini.

I should like to engage in a brief, critical examination of the problem of the evolution of man in the light of the various sources of theological thought. For this purpose I propose to scrutinize developments in the Magisterium of the Church, Scriptural and Patristic studies, and the teaching of theologians. Before beginning this task, one point needs to be set forth in all clarity. This is not intended as a contribution to the arguments in favor of the evolution of man from the lower animal. This alone is intended; to disengage the problem, if possible, from some elements in the field of theology that throw shadows of darkness rather than rays of light on the way to the solution.

1. Consult also CARDINAL RUFFINI'S : *La teoria dell' evoluzione secondo la scienza e la fede*, Roma, Orbis Catholicus, 1948.

I. THE MAGISTERIUM OF THE CHURCH

It is a well known fact that toward the close of the last century the Holy See willed that Catholics should not teach or write in favor of the evolution of man's body. The action of Rome with regard to a book published in 1891 by the French Dominican, Père Leroy gives ample evidence of this. In 1896 a distinguished and learned priest of the Congregation of Holy Cross at Notre Dame, John A. Zahm, published a book entitled, *Evolution and Dogma*. Two years later, in 1898 the Sacred Congregation of the Index decreed that this book should be placed on the Index of Forbidden Books, but withheld promulgation of the decree on the condition that the author would withdraw his book from public sale. ¹

This action on the part of the Holy See does not mean necessarily that the Church officially and categorically condemned the theory of evolution. The prohibition could have meant simply that Rome judged these books unsafe and dangerous to the faith either because of the spirit of the times, or because of the manner in which the ideas were presented.

Well known, too, are the decrees of the Biblical Commission issued in 1909 on the interpretation of the Book of *Genesis*. One of these decrees merits particular attention here, namely the answer of the Commission to the question whether the literal historical meaning of the text of *Genesis* on the *special creation* of man, the formation of the first woman from the first man, and the unity of the human race can be called into doubt. The Commission answers in the negative.

Theologians have given various interpretations to this decree which insists that *Genesis* teaches the "special creation" of man. For some the Commission forbids the insertion of any evolutionary process at all in the inspired account of man's origin. They stress the fact that the Commission speaks of the special creation of *man* ("peculiaris creatio hominis"), the whole man, that is, and not merely the soul of man. For others the will of the Commission would be obeyed provided it be admitted that God intervened immediately in the final adaptation of the body to the human soul within a process of evolution.

A letter of J. M. Voste, O.P., secretary of the Pontifical Commission for Biblical Studies to Cardinal Suhard on January 16, 1948 seems to favor the second alternative. The writer points out that the pronouncements of Rome such as that of the Biblical Commission of 1909 "by no means block the way to a further, truly scientific investigation of these problems, in accord with the findings of the past forty years." ²

1. As authoritatively stated by M. CIGOGNANI, O.P., secretary of the S.C. of the Index, in letters dated Sept. 10, 1898, and April 25, 1899, preserved in the archives of the Generalate, Congregation of Holy Cross.

2. *A.A.S.*, XL (1948), pp.46ff.

Pope Pius XII in an address to the Pontifical Academy of Science, November 1941, reaffirmed the common teaching of the Church on : 1) the essential superiority of man over the brute animal by reason of his spiritual soul ; 2) the derivation of the body of the first woman from the first man ; 3) the impossibility of the true father of a man being any other than a man.

He thereupon declared that science has yet to produce convincing proof that the body of man had its origin from a brute animal : "The many researches conducted in the field of paleontology or of biology and morphology have not yet furnished any positively clear and certain evidence bearing on other problems respecting man's origin." Then in well guarded words the Holy Father expresses the hope that science may some day help to solve the problem one way or other : "Therefore we can only leave to the future the answer to the question whether science, illuminated and guided by revelation, may some day be able to present secure and definite results with regard to so important a subject." ¹ Notice, he does not say, in fact he explicitly denies, that the problem and its solution is exclusively a matter of the investigation of science. But the Sovereign Pontiff does issue a warm invitation to science to bend every effort to solve the problem. He calls it an "important" problem. His words also appear to express his feeling of trust and confidence in the ultimate good judgment of scientists themselves.

In August 1950 the Holy Father issued his encyclical *Humani Generis*,² in which he again maintains that science has not yet proved the origin of man's body by way of a process of evolution. Nevertheless he permits, and indeed seems to welcome, freedom of research and discussion on the problem

by experts as far as the present state of human sciences and sacred theology allows. However, this must be done so that the reasons for both sides, that is, those favorable and those unfavorable to evolution, be weighed and judged with the necessary gravity, moderation and discretion ; and let all be prepared to submit to the judgment of the Church to whom Christ has given the mission of interpreting authentically the Sacred Scriptures and of safeguarding the dogmas of faith.

Since the Pope holds that the origin of man has not yet been definitely settled, and that possibly science enlightened and guided by revelation may one day come up with the answer, and that the answer conceivably might be that man's body did evolve from the lower animal, he must mean to say that theologians on their part have not definitely disproved the possibility that man's body did originate by way of evolution. Theologians may take this as a warning not to be too sure of themselves in their opinion on the matter.

1. *A.A.S.*, XXXIII (1941), p.506.

2. *A.A.S.*, XLII (1950), pp.561ff.

The Pope is addressing theologians as well as scientists when he warns that in discussions on the matter "the reasons for both sides, that is, those favorable and those unfavorable to evolution, be weighed and judged with the necessary gravity."

In this same encyclical the Pope states emphatically that one element in this problem is beyond dispute, namely that the entire human race on this earth originated from one first human couple. Polygenism, therefore, is out of the question.

Throughout his pontificate Pius XII in the name of the Catholic Church has held out the hand of friendship to science. In his latest address to the Pontifical Academy of Science, November 1951,¹ he spoke of the pleasure with which he honored the scientists gathered before him :

For, by your research, your unveiling of the secrets of nature, and your teaching of men to direct the forces of nature toward their own welfare, you preach at the same time, in language of figures, formulae, and discoveries, the unspeakable harmony of the work of an all-wise God.

In fact, according to the measure of its progress, and contrary to affirmations advanced in the past, true science discovers God in an ever-increasing degree — as though God were waiting behind every door opened by science . . .

There are no doubt today many scientists whose very method of seeking truth has closed the door to God for them, as in the case of Charles Darwin. But an atheistic or agnostic attitude is not the badge of the true scientist. Many scientists such as Lecomte du Noüy justify the Pope's words of praise.

In the judgment of the Holy Father, modern scientific discoveries and theories add new strength to the proofs for the existence of God : "But if the primitive experience of the ancients could provide human reason with sufficient arguments to demonstrate the existence of God, then with the expanding and deepening of the field of human experiments, the vestiges of the Eternal One are discernible in the visible world in ever more striking and clearer light." Further on the Pope amplifies this statement :

From these 'modes of being' of the world around us which, in greater or less degree of comprehension, are noted with equal evidence by both the philosopher and the human mind in general, there are two which modern science has, in a marvelous degree, fathomed, verified, and deepened beyond all expectations : 1) the mutability of things, including their origin and their end ; and 2) the teleological order which stands out in every corner of the cosmos . . . To the first way [of St. Thomas in proof of the existence of God] physics, especially, has provided an inexhaustible mine of experiments, revealing the fact of mutability in the deepest recesses of nature, where previously no human mind could ever even suspect its existence and vastness. Thus physics has provided a multiplicity of

1. *A.A.S.*, XLIV (1952), pp.31ff.

empirical facts, which are of tremendous assistance to philosophical reasoning. We say 'assistance,' because the very direction of these same transformations, precisely in view of the certainty afforded by physics, seems to Us to surpass the value of a mere confirmation and acquires almost the structure and dignity of a physical argument which is in great part new, and more acceptable, persuasive, and welcome to many minds.

With similar richness other sciences, especially the astronomical and the biological sciences, have in our own day contributed to the argument from order such a vast array of knowledge and, so to speak, so stupefying a vision of the conceptual unity animating the cosmos, and of the teleology directing its movements, as to anticipate for modern man the joy which the Poet imagined in the empyrean heaven . . .

The Pope here draws a picture of the cosmos which from its beginning has been in dynamic movement, a movement evolving its potentialities, a movement not haphazard but teleologically directed. We must resist here any tendency to read between the lines, or to make the Pope say anything beyond his intentions. However, while the Pontiff gives no indication that he has in mind an organic as well as an inorganic evolution, yet his words could be taken as giving great comfort to those philosophers for whom an organic evolution reaching its supreme success and purpose in man, if proved to be a fact, would greatly enrich the integral concept of the philosophy of nature.

The Pope goes on to say that modern science has made important contributions toward establishing the age of the earth. He sketches briefly the methods by which modern science basing its calculations on radioactive material has been able to ascertain the age of the earth as being something around five thousand million years. The human mind, the Pope continues, enlightened and enriched with modern scientific knowledge with the

same clear and critical look with which it examines and passes judgment on facts, perceives and recognizes the work of creative omnipotence, whose power, set in motion by the mighty 'Fiat' pronounced thousands of millions of years ago by the Creating Spirit, spread out over the universe, calling into existence with a gesture of generous love matter bursting with energy. In fact, it would seem that present-day science, with one sweeping step back across millions of centuries, has succeeded in bearing witness to that primordial 'Fiat lux' uttered at the moment when, along with matter, there burst forth from nothing a sea of light and radiation, while the particles of chemical elements split and formed into millions of galaxies.

Using this same method of measurement of radioactivity approved by the Pope, science has succeeded in estimating with fairly accurate approximation the age of the fossil remains of "pre-historic" man. Man is now known to have inhabited the earth many thousands of years longer than the theologians of old ever dreamed.

Unless I am mistaken, these newly acquired facts on the age of the earth and of man radically change the perspective of the world

from which older theologians reasoned, and remove, perhaps, one of the major props on which they relied in their "fixism."

In his encyclical *Divino Afflante* of September 1943,¹ Pius XII sets forth directives for the correct interpretation of Sacred Scripture. He severely warns those devoted to this work that they must acquaint themselves with and make use of the wealth of information uncovered in modern times. Scientific studies on the monuments of antiquity throw important new light on many passages of Scripture.

The learned scholars of the early Christian ages did not complete the work of exegesis. Not at all. Much remains undone, and the modern student has the opportunity and the means to carry on this work, for "our times have brought to light many things which call for a fresh investigation and a new examination, and which stimulate not a little the practical zeal of the present-day interpreter."

The Pope then calls attention to the difficulties confronting the serious scholar :

Frequently, the literal sense is not so obvious in the words and writings of ancient oriental authors as it is with the writers of to-day. For what they intended to signify by their words is not determined only by the laws of grammar or philology, not merely by the context : it is absolutely necessary for the interpreter to go back in spirit to those remote centuries of the East, and make a proper use of the aids afforded by history, archeology, ethnology and other sciences, in order to discover what literary forms the writers of that early age intended to use, and did in fact employ. For to express what they had in mind, the ancients of the East did not always use the same forms and expressions as we use to-day ; they used those which were current among the people of their own time and place ; and what these were the exegete cannot determine a priori, but only from a careful study of ancient oriental literature. This study has been pursued during the past few decades with greater care and industry than formerly, and has made us better acquainted with the literary forms used in those ancient times, whether in poetical descriptions, or in the formulation of rules and laws of conduct, or in the narration of historical facts and events. . .

No one who has a just conception of Biblical inspiration will be surprised to find that the sacred writers, like the other ancients, employ certain arts of exposition and narrative, certain definite idioms, especially of a kind peculiar to the Semitic tongues . . . , and certain hyperbolic and even paradoxical expressions designed for the sake of emphasis. The Sacred books need not exclude any of the forms of expression which were commonly used in human speech by the ancient peoples, especially of the East, to convey their meaning, so long as they are in no way incompatible with God's sanctity and truth . . .

Ernest Messenger in his recent book, *Theology and Evolution*,² hails this encyclical as "one of the most important ever issued by the Holy See. It is noteworthy, in the first place, because, for the

1. *A.A.S.*, XXXV (1943), pp.297ff.

2. *Theology and Evolution*, The Newman Press, Westminster, Md., 1952, p.183.

first time, we have, so to speak, an official Pontifical approbation of the theory that there are diverse ' literary forms ' in Holy Writ."

In the light of the Pope's warning on the peculiarities in the mode of expression of the writers of Sacred Scripture, I question the value of the arguments against evolution often times found in manuals of Sacred Scripture. Consider a few samples. The first chapter of *Genesis* has : " God created man to His own image ; to the image of God He created him ; male and female He created them." Authors then draw attention to the fact that the Hebrew text has the word *bara* for " created," that *bara* is repeated three times, and that this Hebrew word is employed exclusively for God's activity. Could not one justly answer this kind of argumentation with the saying : " Quod gratis asseritur, gratis negatur " ?

The second chapter of *Genesis* has : " And the Lord formed man of the slime of the earth ; and breathed into his face the breath of life, and man became a living soul." The Hebrew text has *nephesh haja* for " living soul." Authors whose validity of argumentation from Scripture is here questioned point out that in Hebrew usage " *nephesh haja* " always designates sense life. They conclude that the author of *Genesis* affirms that the body formed by God received sense life at the same time that it received truly human or intellectual life, and that he thereby excludes any idea of an evolutionary process. This argument would stand up well if the author of *Genesis* wrote with the precision of language of modern philosophy, but it loses much of its force, when one considers the warnings of the Pope on the difference in the manner of expression between the ancient Semitic writers and writers of our own time.

In order to win the co-operative effort of scholars from many fields, the Pope appeals to the good will of all and to their mutual understanding :

Let all the other sons of the Church bear in mind that the efforts of these resolute laborers in the vineyard of the Lord should be judged not only with equity and justice, but also with the greatest charity ; all, moreover, should abhor that intemperate zeal which imagines that *whatever is new should for that very reason be opposed and suspected.*

Is there not the danger of condemning outright the very suggestion that man's body originated by way of a process of evolution simply because it is new, simply because the frame of mind which we inherited from our Christian past does not include the notion of evolution ?

II. SACRED SCRIPTURE

The Scriptural teaching of the origin of man does not give even the least hint of any evolutionary process. The story of man's first appearance on earth as sketched by Moses suggests no time interval

between "slime of the earth," or inanimate matter and living, human body. The whole question, then, centers on this point: does the account given by Moses tolerate the interpolation of an evolutionary process? Does the author of *Genesis* intend to exclude a stage or stages in which the "slime of the earth" would pass through lower forms of life before it was endowed with the immortal, human soul? In other words, is the meaning of the text which is the *obvious one to us now reading it*, the strictly *literal one intended by Moses*?

The instruction of Pope Pius XII on the interpretation of Scripture and its difficulties ought to put us on guard against deciding glibly and readily. Will we say that we cannot allow a time interval where Moses indicates none? The comments of Cardinal Liénart merit attention here. The events

of the kind met with in the Bible, writes the Cardinal, have this peculiarity that they hardly take into account space and time — matters to which science attaches so much importance. Its way of localizing and of dating is generally vague, more schematic than real, at times even non-existent. The most typical example of this sort of thing is that of the prophecies which project the most diversified perspective of the future on the same plane: in the Old Testament, for example, the return from captivity, the coming of the Messiah and the end of the world; in the New, the destruction of Jerusalem and the second coming of the Saviour. One might say that the word of God coming down from the region where time does not exist wills to disregard it. In any case it can be seen from this that the Bible does not dispense us from pursuing our inquiry in the domain of science, and provides us with meager information on this point.¹

These words of the eminent cardinal are pertinent to the problem at hand. If the divinely inspired writers in other passages of Scripture either entirely ignore or foreshorten intervals of time, we can readily rule out the possibility that the author of *Genesis* is describing the origin of man disregarded the time element?

Some students of history believe that the unfortunate clash between Galileo and some of the members of the Italian clergy was caused more by the friction of personalities than by anything else. Galileo, it appears, talked down to the theologians and haughtily assumed the attitude of teaching them Sacred Scripture. Naturally this aroused the resentment of the theologians and hardly put them in the frame of mind to appraise dispassionately his views on natural science.

If the present dispute presents a similar situation the words of the Holy Father already quoted ought to help to dispel it. He makes a strong appeal for the close and cordial co-operation between students of Sacred Scripture and men of science for progress in the better understanding of the inspired word of God.

1. *Art. cit.*, in *Études*, 255, p.294.

Were it true that there prevails a real disagreement and a genuine contradiction in the teaching of the experts in science and the experts in Scripture interpretation, then this ought to be an occasion for each side to be diffident of its own views and to reexamine its position. The natural sciences and the science of interpretation of Sacred Scripture are each autonomous ; each has its own principles, sources of information, methods and "certitudes." Neither has the right to invade the precincts of the other. Nevertheless each can learn from the other. Above all each can profit from a clash of views to assert as a fact only that for which they have sufficient evidence.

Both sides should read and reread the words of the Vatican Council :

Although faith is above reason, faith and reason can never really oppose each other, for the same God Who reveals the mysteries and infuses the faith has given the light of reason to the human mind. God can neither negate nor contradict Himself. The appearance of a contradiction, therefore, does not rest on a firm foundation, but in general has its origin either from this fact that the dogmata of faith have not been understood and expounded according to the mind of the Church, or, on the other hand, from the fact that a crop of opinions has been taken for the dictates of reason. ¹

Rightly the student of Scripture holds that the divinely inspired word of God is too sacred to be tailored to the style of the whim and the fancy of the day. Lest he be found guilty of imprudence, he demands serious reasons for abandoning the obvious sense of what he reads in Holy Writ.

On the other hand, science in all of its branches can help the Scripture scholar to find these "serious reasons," as the Pope insists. The Pontiff acknowledges that science has already opened up new horizons and perspectives in regard to the age of the earth. I dare not think what St. Jerome or Suarez in their day would have said of the proposal that the earth was about five thousand million years old. What would have been the reaction of St. Augustine who wrote : " They are deceived, too, by those highly mendacious documents which profess to give the history of many thousand years, though, *reckoning by the sacred writings*, we find that not 6,000 years have yet passed." ²

Science, too, using the same methods of time-calculation to which the Pope attaches no little value, has given us new perspectives on the age of man. What must those theologians say to this who have argued *a priori* that the human race could have existed only a few thousand years, since the goodness of God would not make man await more than that for the coming of his Redeemer? Science may

1. Session III, chap.4 (Denz.1797).

2. *De Civitate Dei*, Bk.XII, chap.10.

exert a wholesome influence in stirring some theologians out of other sheer *a priori* reasoning and self-complacent thinking.

While some Scripture scholars may be at fault occasionally in being too slow to discard age-old and habitual ways of understanding certain passages in Holy Writ despite the evidence calling for such a change, some scientists, and some theologians influenced by them, are, perhaps, a little too eager for change. In his encyclical *Humani Generis* the Pope spoke out sharply against those "who hanker too much after novelties and who dread being thought ignorant of the latest scientific findings. Tending to withdraw from the guidance of the sacred Magisterium, they are in danger of gradually losing revealed truth and of drawing others along with them into error."

I do not mean in the least to imply that the theologians who favor evolution are guilty of the extreme love of novelty, harmful to the faith, which the Pope roundly condemns. Yet some of these theologians seem to be overly impatient in their attitude toward the conservative group. The late Ernest Messenger in his recent book, *Theology and Evolution* — a sequel to his *Evolution and Theology* published in 1931 — speaks of the "decidedly intransigent attitude adopted by those American Jesuits who have written on the matter, and the equally ultra-conservative attitude adopted by some theologians nearer home." He speaks with pride of the part he has played in overcoming the opposition. Then he adds, "It must be admitted that, even so, the battle is not entirely won, and there is still some 'mopping up' to be done. There still exist some theologians who are resolutely opposed to the idea of the evolution of man . . ." ¹

In these words there seems to lurk a note of scorn for those theologians who have not yet been won over. He shows evidence of wanting to stampede theologians into the acceptance of man's origin by way of evolution. Theologians are behind the times, outmoded, who do not subscribe to this view. Yet, not even all scientists ardently support evolution.

Yesterday, as part of their contribution to this symposium, professors Ludwig von Bertalanffy and W. R. Thompson not only manifested little enthusiasm for the idea, but said that in their judgment scientists were making entirely too much of the theory of evolution. Professor Thompson criticized severely the very foundations upon which the theory has been made to rest. Granted that these are but a few among a vast number of scientists who hold an entirely divergent view. ² That makes little or no difference here. Is a

1. *Op. cit.*, p.173.

2. RICHARD B. GOLDSCHMIDT wrote recently : " Evolution of the animal and plant world is considered by all those entitled to judgment to be a fact for which no further proof is needed " (Article in *American Scientist*, Vol.40, n.1, p.84). In this he reflects the confidence, it seems to me, of the vast majority of scientists.

theologian to be despised for not joining the crowd, holding himself aloof, wanting a little more evidence?

If the words of the Pope in *Humani Generis* on freedom of discussion mean anything, they teach that neither should the theologian who favors evolution be judged by that fact suspect of heresy, nor should the theologian who for good reasons holds to the older view be judged guilty of sterility in theological thought.

III. THE FATHERS OF THE CHURCH

The Holy Father holds to the mean between the unbridled love of novelty and the blind resistance to new ideas. Remember, he warned that all "should abhor that intemperate zeal which imagines that whatever is new should *for that very reason* be opposed or suspected." Could one oppose the interpretation of *Genesis* according to the theory of evolution not simply because it is new, but for the reason that it stands against the common teaching of the Fathers?

The Vatican Council declared that :

that is to be held as the genuine meaning of Sacred Scripture which Holy Mother Church held and holds. Hers is the office of passing judgment on the true meaning and interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures. It is not permissible, therefore, to interpret the same Sacred Scripture contrary to this meaning, or contrary to the unanimous consent of the Fathers.¹

Now, one can quite easily marshal together a formidable array of texts from the Fathers in which they say that God formed the living human body from "dust" or the "slime of the earth." Most, if not all of the Fathers, express themselves in such a way as to clearly indicate that they thought that the human body was formed immediately from inanimate matter. Do we have here a clear case of the "unanimous consent of the Fathers" so determining the meaning of a given passage of Sacred Scripture that it would not be safe to hold the contrary? The Church in its official stand certainly does not think so, since it permits scholars and experts today to question the true and literal meaning of the passages in Scripture touching on the matter.

If we look now for the reason why the interpretation of these passages has not been definitively established by the writings of the Fathers, in spite of the fact that there appears to be almost unanimity in the manner in which they understood the passages, the following reasons come to mind.

First, the very unanimity of the thought of the Fathers in this matter does not stand with absolute certainty. I do not mean to suggest that the concept of a process of evolution such as is proposed

1. Session III, chap.2 (Denz.1788).

today ever entered the mind of any Father of the Church. But that aside, the Fathers were not in absolute agreement in what actually did take place. No matter what side one may take on the controversy concerning what St. Augustine really meant by his "rationes seminales" and other cognate ideas, or what St. Gregory of Nyssa wanted to say in his account of création and the origin of living things, the probability is there that these two Fathers departed sufficiently from the obvious sense of the Scripture passages as to lay open the way for an interpretation in the modern conceptual pattern of evolution.

Secondly, it is open to question whether the Fathers meant to teach the immediate production of the human body from inanimate matter as the one and only literal sense intended by the divinely inspired writer. Neither Scripture nor the Fathers meant to give a scientific explanation of the innermost structure of the physical world. Closer examination of the texts of the Fathers reveals that they spoke simply in the language of Scripture itself, and quite naturally thought along the lines of the obvious sense of the language employed. None other but the obvious sense occurred to them. All the evidence points to this that they were not inculcating as a matter of faith the obvious meaning of the passage. Furthermore, the objectives for which they were writing would not be hindered at all by our substitution of an evolutionary process in place of an immediate production in their train of thought about the origin of man. As far as the Fathers were concerned, what difference did it make whether man owed his existence to God in one way or the other. In any case man is from the "dust" of the earth, man owes all that he is, and all that he will ever be to the almighty power and love of God.

Even if the Fathers had known and accepted the theory of evolution, they might have ignored it and foreshortened the process, as a Catholic priest might do today in the pulpit notwithstanding the fact that he is an ardent advocate of evolution. As far as the truths necessary for salvation are concerned, what difference does it make?

IV. CATHOLIC THEOLOGIANS

The Angelic Doctor, St. Thomas, whom the Church proposes as the master of all theologians, rejected the view that God used the instrumentality of any created power when He fashioned the body of the first man: "prima formatio humani corporis non potuit esse per aliquam virtutem creatam, sed immediate a Deo."¹

St. Thomas, of course, was not aware of the problem of the possibility of man's body originating by way of a process of evolution as it is proposed today. Nevertheless the positive position that he takes on the action of God in the formation of the human body leaves

1. *Summa theologiae*, I, q.91, a.2, c.

little or no doubt that he excludes evolution.¹ For him the transformation that took place surpassed the order of nature and required the action of the divine power alone: "quae fiunt praeter naturae ordinem, et sola virtute divina, sicut quod mortui resuscitantur, quod caeci illuminantur; quibus est simile, quod homo ex limo terrae formatur."²

One may question the deductive value of the argument of St. Thomas in the matter; one might discuss the relative play of his theological, philosophical and physical concepts in determining his position; one might ask whether he would still maintain that God made use of no creature as an active medium in the formation of the body of the first man, if he had the scientific information we possess today. But there can be little or no doubt that the position he actually took is tantamount to a rejection of evolution.

The Angelic Doctor does admit that the angels could have acted as ministers of God in the formation of the first human body by "pulveres colligendo."³ He fails to clarify his meaning here. But it appears to be beyond his thought, if not contrary to it, to interpret this to mean that an angel or any power within created nature "gathered the dust" by organizing the body, giving it the proximate disposition for the human soul. This is sufficiently evident from the body of the same article where he affirms that it is not fitting for a separated substance to accomplish what the parent does in procreation.

When the modern form of evolution founded on some semblance of scientific evidence was proposed in the last century, theologians almost to a man rejected it insisting with St. Thomas that God immediately formed the body of the first man from inanimate matter. Within recent years there has been a considerable break in the ranks. In 1944, Thomas Motherway, S.J., took a sampling of current theological opinion and concluded that

many very respectable authorities among the theologians consider it allowable to hold that the matter which God used in producing Adam's body may have been living matter, even the body of a brute animal. These authorities in general do not positively maintain that God used the body of an animal, but they do not see that such a stand should be prohibited to scientists.⁴

There is no evidence that the balance of opinions on the matter has changed appreciably since Motherway's survey. It would be safe to say that at least 50 percent of the theologians in this country and abroad remain steadfast in their opposition to the suggestion that the

1. *Ibid.*, c.; ad 1.

2. *Ibid.*, ad 3.

3. *Ibid.*, ad 1.

4. *Theological Studies*, V (1944), 219.

body of the first man had its origin by way of evolution. It would be useless to hazard a guess how much this attitude depends on the weight of the authority of St. Thomas whose reasoning on this question does not appear to be apodictic. No doubt some prefer to follow an opinion of St. Thomas rather than the opinion of someone proposing the contrary view.

But prescindng from this element of filial loyalty to St. Thomas, we can note three different sources from which theologians draw their opposition to evolution : 1) the fear that the barrier against materialism and atheism will be weakened, if it be admitted that man's body originated from a lower animal ; 2) the judgment that the arguments of scientists in favor of evolution are inconclusive and invalid ; 3) the conviction that the analogy of faith cancels out the possibility of evolution, that is, that the theory of evolution is incompatible with certain dogmatic truths.

A brief, critical examination of each of these sources seems necessary.

1) The first source of opposition to evolution has been eloquently expressed by Cardinal Ruffini :

Materialists of all shades have gladly taken hold of the theory of evolution in the hope of explaining the universe without recourse to the power, the wisdom, the goodness of God. Nor have they held back before man who in all that he is — according to them — enters into the endless series of products of the evolving material cosmos. Catholics, naturally, have not given their adherence to claims as radical as these. Nevertheless, a certain one in France — and not one of the less representative — was drawn to this that he was confused about the borderline between matter and spirit, and finally to this extreme that he doubted about the existence of any line of demarcation. See how strong is the logic of things ! Once the beginning is made, it is extremely difficult to limit its consequences, even the least foreseen, even the least desired. To tamper with the origin of man by modifying and changing the ancient belief, is to make an opening that could lead to the weakening of the most important positions of our faith, if not to outright error.¹

With all due respect to his Eminence, this seems to be an appeal more to the emotions than to reason. Abuse does not justify rejection *in toto*. If some use the theory of evolution as a wedge to overthrow the true Faith, that is no proof that the theory itself is false. The enemies of the Church have used and still use truths taught by the Church cleverly twisting them so as to turn men's minds and wills against the Church. The Cardinal would certainly not ask us to deny these truths of faith in order to avoid the embarrassment they may cause us in some quarters. Neither can we deny any truth of fact for the sake of protecting the faith. Ignorance does not serve the life of faith.

1. *L'Osservatore Romano*, 3 Giugno, 1950.

2) The second source from which many theologians draw their opposition to evolution is what they think to be the weakness in the arguments brought forth by scientists in support of it. With comparative ease they demolish to their own satisfaction the so-called evidences of man's evolution from the lower animal which serious and careful experts in the fields of paleontology, comparative anatomy, genetics and the like, accept as establishing a strong probability that this is the way actually man's body originated.

Evidence is always weak to one who has already made up his mind to hold the opposing view. The story is told that a member of the clergy in Italy refused Galileo's invitation to look through his telescope and observe heavenly bodies hitherto unseen by the naked eye. The clergyman — so the story continues — refused to look, saying that heavenly bodies invisible to the naked eye could not exist, since Scripture teaches that God made the earth and the sky for man, and mankind could not have been deprived of the use of these heavenly bodies in order to glorify God through them. This story may lack entirely historical basis, but, as the Italians say, *se non è vero, è ben trovato*. True or false it teaches us a valuable lesson. Our *a priori* reasonings from some passage or other of Scripture may at times be much weaker than we think.

We theologians ought to be very careful in our evaluation of the work done by scientists. The expert in science has a method and an ability to appraise critically his own findings for which many theologians lack competence entirely. The theologian's inept handling of matters that belong properly to the scientists may arouse the contempt of the latter for the whole profession of theology.¹ On the other hand, it is worthy of note that those theologians who are also well trained in science, and particularly those who themselves have pursued some scientific investigations are less prone than others to completely reject the claim of man's origin by way of evolution.

When Pius XII wrote in his encyclical, *Humani Generis*, that it is permissible for the experts to investigate and discuss the problem of evolution, he added the caution that "this must be done so that the reasons for both sides, that is, those favorable and those unfavorable to evolution, be weighed and judged with the necessary gravity, moderation and discretion . . ." There is no indication that this is to be taken as a warning to scientists but not to theologians.

3) The third and major source of the opposition of many theologians to evolution is that it appears to be out of harmony with other known truths, truths of faith. Those theologians who voice strong opposition believe that evolution even in the moderate form which restricts the process of the formation of man's body is incompatible

1. In this connection read ST. THOMAS, *Summa Theol.*, I, q.68, a.1, the opening sentences.

with Scriptural and dogmatic truths. Their arguments, in general, have three chief points of departure : a) the formation of the first woman from the first man ; b) the unity of the human race required for the dogma of Original Sin and Redemption ; c) the singular perfection of the first man created in the state of justice.

A few words of comment on each of these points.

First, it seems absolutely certain theologically that the body of the first woman was immediately formed by God from something taken from the already existing first man. The documents of the Church quoted some time back insist on this.

Further, not only does the immediate context of *Genesis* appear to bar the figurative sense, but other texts of the Old and New Testament lay stress on the obvious and literal meaning of the text. *Genesis* itself draws the conclusion from the obvious sense to the divine institution of marriage : " She shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man. *Wherefore* a man shall leave father and mother and shall cleave to his wife . . ." St. Paul also draws from this the important Christian moral teaching on the authority of husband over wife, and the love he must have for his wife. ¹

The Scripture scholar Ceuppens, O.P., was so impressed by the force of this text on the origin of Eve that he wrote : " It appears to exclude the hypothesis of evolution in any form. " ² This stand is all the more remarkable because mature consideration of this text seems to have influenced Ceuppens to retract a view he had previously held to the effect that Scripture could not solve the problem of evolution one way or other. ³

The direct and immediate intervention of God in forming the body of the first woman from something taken from the first man raises problems of the following nature for the entire hypothesis of the evolution of man. From the point of view of sound Scriptural interpretation : if the obvious and literal meaning of the inspired text is required in the passage on Eve's formation, does not consistency require that the passage of Adam's origin be taken in the obvious and literal meaning of the words used ? One ought to agree, so it seems, that parallel texts in the one same context should be interpreted in the same fashion : either both in the obvious sense, or both in some other sense, unless there were good reason for doing otherwise. But that is the whole question here. Is there good reason for abandoning the obvious sense in the passage on Adam's origin ?

1. A. JONES in his book, *Unless Some Man Show Me*, Sheed and Ward, New York, 1951, p.95, presents an excellent argument from Scripture.

2. F. CEUPPENS, O.P., *Genese I-III*, 1946, p.137.

3. F. CEUPPENS, O.P. : " Whether or not that organic, living matter was a living animal is a question that belongs not to exegesis but rather to anthropology " (*De Historia Primaeva*, 1934, p.133).

But the problem presses from still another angle : if God chose to form the body of the first human female without the instrumentality of lower animals, would not consistency of purpose suggest that He refused the instrumentality of animals in the origin of the first human male? Scripture itself gives the answer why God chose to form the first woman from the first man, namely, to lay the foundation for the spiritual and moral laws of the husband-wife relationship, and for the unity of the human race. St. Augustine put it very well when he wrote :

And human nature has nothing more appropriate, either for the prevention of discord, or for the healing of it, where it exists, than the remembrance of that first parent of us all, whom God was pleased to create alone, that all men might be derived from one, and that they might thus be admonished to preserve unity among their whole multitude. But from the fact that the woman was made for him from his side, it was plainly meant that we should learn how dear the bond between man and wife should be.

Further on, commenting on the text of Matthew, XIX, 4, 5 he says :

It is certain, then, that from the first men were created, as we see and know them to be now, of two sexes, male and female, and that they are called one, either on account of the matrimonial union, or on account of the origin of the woman, who was created from the side of the man.¹

One theologian proposes the following argument : If God immediately intervened in the formation of the body of the first woman, He must have done the same in the formation of the body of the first man, since man is at least the equal of woman in dignity. This sort of reasoning can be the ruination of theology. Arguments from what is "fitting" ought to be used with extreme care in theology. Often they are too subjective to be of any value. Who is to judge whether it is more in keeping with man's dignity that he be immediately formed from the "slime of the earth," than mediately through a process of evolution up from the animal? Scripture nowhere appeals to woman's dignity when it says that God fashioned her body immediately from Adam. The inspired writers give an entirely different reason why God chose the way He actually brought the first woman into the world.

But the account in *Genesis* of the manner in which the first woman originated in this world leaves another difficulty in the path of the theory of evolution. If a process of evolution acting as instrument of the divine creative power succeeded in producing a man, why did it not also succeed in producing a woman? Or, to put it in another way, do the demands of Catholic theology strip so much from the hypothesis of evolution that it is useless to hold on to what is left? It is true that the Sources of theology force us to whittle down the theory

1. *De Civitate Dei*, Bk.XII, chap.27 and Bk.XIV, chap.22.

of evolution and to place radical limits on the potentialities of such a process if it did actually occur. Yet, the same Sources do not entirely wreck the theory. God did not use the instrumentality of animals in fashioning the body of the first woman, but by His immediate action He brought her body into existence out of something taken from the body of Adam, because He willed the human race to have a unity based on its origin from one man. For this reason He would have withheld His divine concurrence to the process of evolution striving to produce a human female, if there was such a process. On the other hand, God could very well have used the instrumentality of the animal in the production of the first man in order to establish a certain unity of man with the rest of earthly creatures.

If we are to believe the experts in Osteology and in Comparative Anatomy the skeletal design and the musculature of man point to his origin from an animal habituated to walking on all fours. These experts indicate certain areas in the spinal column of man, for example, which often cause trouble, and seem to show that it is not perfectly designed for the upright position assumed by man. These "defects" are found, of course, in woman's body as well as in man's. If the observations of these experts are true, do they conflict with the teaching of the Church that the first woman's body was not the immediate result of an evolutionary process? Not necessarily. Whatever it was that God took from Adam's side could have carried the hereditary determinants of bodily structure such as we know to be present in both the male and the female reproductive cells.

The second major theological truth which some theologians believe to be a serious obstacle to the theory of evolution is the genetical unity of the human race. The dogmata of Original Sin and of Redemption absolutely demand Monogenism. Pius XII in his *Humani Generis* voiced the common teaching of theologians when he said that in the light of revelation Monogenism is not open to question. No Catholic can defend Polygenism.

Does this dogmatic truth lessen the possibility or the probability of evolution? Not necessarily, at least for the form of the hypothesis that is theistic and finalistic, and admits God's directive influence in the process.

The demands of theology and the demands of science do not clash head-on here. Science can go no further than to show that nature has the potentialities of producing several first human couples; but never that this actually happened. In the view consonant with Catholic theology God would have withheld His support to all save the one process that actually succeeded in bringing forth the one first man, and, in a way, the first woman.

The third major truth from which many theologians draw their opposition to evolution is the very perfection of the first man. The very first man on earth was certainly not a primitive man in the

ordinary sense of that word. He was more perfect in soul and in body than his descendants, more perfect than men today. At first glance, at least, the first man as represented in the sources of faith seems to be the very reverse of that which the theory of evolution would have him to be. This merits closer scrutiny.

Revelation teaches that God endowed the first man with such grace and holiness that his will was in perfect conformity with the divine will. In addition, the preternatural gifts of immortality and integrity brought about such perfection and harmony in his body that its condition far exceeded that which could be achieved through the powers of natural development.

Faith teaches, moreover, that Adam was not only the first man in time but also the first in the sense of responsible head of the human race. In some mysterious way Adam stood before his Maker as the representative of all mankind, to such an extent that his sin of insubordination to the divine will became the sin of nature and is passed on to all his children, the Immaculate Virgin Mary alone excepted by divine dispensation.

From all of this theologians concur with St. Thomas¹ in affirming that Adam must have had exceptional clarity of knowledge, that, in fact, his mind was perfected through infused knowledge. The first man, Adam, as pictured by St. Thomas, was the perfect, the ideal man.

Theologians argue from the perfections of Adam in the state of Original Justice and from his stature as the representative of the entire human race before the Creator that such must have been the mental and bodily perfections of Adam that they could not have been the adornment of a man who from the point of view of human nature was just a step above the order of the brute animal.

The almost bestial mien, the clouded intelligence commensurate with the primitive human brain at the dawn of its rise out of animality through evolution — so they argue — would ill befit one of the stature and dignity of Adam.

A close scrutiny into the facts of the case seems to force this conclusion: the hypothesis of man's origin by way of a process of evolution is highly improbable unless both the scientists who advocate evolution and the theologians who follow the Thomist ideas on the perfections of the first man yield some ground. Happily, so it seems, each side would have to yield only on unessentials.

Scientific evolution must agree that the first man enjoyed perfections of mind and body above and beyond any of his offspring. These perfections would be due, not to the processes of nature, but to the supernatural intervention of God.

Thomistic theology, on the other hand, would have to modify in some degree the sketch of the first man as drawn by the Angelic

1. *Summa Theol.*, I, q.94, a.3.

Doctor. It could do this by separating what St. Thomas presents as probable from what he establishes as certain by genuine demonstration. As far as the mere external, bodily appearance of the first man is concerned, this need not detain us. Did he resemble the brute animal more than modern man? What difference does it make for the truths of faith and of salvation? Furthermore, on what grounds can theology rely, if it wishes to settle the question, unless it be on what is fitting? But, then, it is pretty much a matter of conjecture. And then, too, does evolution require that the first man have a close bodily resemblance to the brute animal? Certainly, no matter what were the facial features of Adam, the light of supernaturalized intelligence and love shone through his eyes and gave him a mien far removed from a brutish face.

The question of the degree of intelligence of the first man is much more delicate and difficult. Does evolution demand what the sources of theology cannot give? Presumably, if the forces of nature alone were at work in a process of evolution, the intelligence of the first human being emerging from that process would be of a very low grade. But we know for a certainty that God did intervene, and that He enlightened the mind of Adam with supernatural truths, and that He endowed the will of Adam with an activity corresponding to that knowledge.

In the opinion of St. Thomas the first man, Adam, was endowed with such a high degree of knowledge of things on the natural plane that no increase through development was possible :

The first man was established by God in such a manner as to have the knowledge of all those things for which man has a natural aptitude . . . The first man had knowledge of all things by divinely infused species. . . . Adam would have advanced in natural knowledge, not in the number of things known, but in the manner of knowing ; because what he knew speculatively he would subsequently have known by experience . . .¹

St. Thomas thought that the position of Adam as father of all men whom he was to instruct and govern called for this supreme degree of human mental perfection. One might question whether the Angelic Doctor does not stretch to exaggerated limits the riches of intellectual knowledge possessed by our First Parent.

Is it not possible without doing serious harm to the general lines of his thought to restrict that perfection of mind on the natural plane and to allow for some development or evolution of human consciousness and intellection? Do the revealed truths concerning the perfection of the State of Innocence and of Adam's place in it require absolutely that the very first appearance of human intelligence be the highest attainable on earth?

1. *Ibid.*, a.3, c. and ad 1, 3.

It seems safe to say that there cannot be found really convincing reasons that rule out the possibility of development on all levels of human thought and intelligence. Growth seems to be the very law of life. God has willed it so. The very dynamics of human existence on earth seems to oppose the aprioristic view of St. Thomas. At least we have some good reason to suspect that some of the riches of human understanding and human consciousness may have existed only potentially in the mind of Adam to be actualized through the efforts of his offspring throughout the ages that succeeded the First Parent.¹ If this be to the aid and comfort of the theory of man's evolution, so be it.

General conclusion : the sources of information for the theologian touching on the question of the evolution of man urgently call upon the theologian to be cautious and at the same time to have an open mind. Caution is dictated because the question involves the proper interpretation of the sacred word of God which is not to be tied to whims and unfounded opinions, and because the problem affects dogmatic truths such as Original Justice, Original Sin and Redemption. The sources dictate an open mind, too, because the theologian in his search for truth cannot without harm to his own work disdain the help of genuine science.

If scientific research gives solid reason for modifying somewhat the picture of Adam such as Tradition has handed down, and to which we are accustomed in our thinking, let us heed the voice of the Holy Father and not reject the new just because it is new. In such an event science will prove to be the true handmaid of theology helping the queen of the sciences to understand better its own sources.

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1. See the interesting suggestion of RAÏSSA MARITAIN in her *Histoire d'Abraham*, II, *L'état adamique*, Paris Desclée, 1947. She proposes that a considerable degree of mental perfection was left latent in Adam to be brought into actuality through succeeding generations. The Dominican, PÈRE M. LABOURDETTE expresses some sympathy with this view in his article : *Le Péché originel et les origines de l'homme*, in the *Revue Thomiste*, 1952, pp.5ff.

The anthropologist, WILHEM KOPPERS, will not yield to this view. In his recent work, *Primitive Man and his World Picture*, Sheed and Ward, N.Y., 1952, he argues in defence of the traditional view of the Golden Age of man in Adam.